

encourage the church to engage in serious efforts with regard to this important issue of selecting materials. Let's take a closer look at one way we might shape such a process.

Curriculum Resource Selection Process

Like Iris Cully, I do not believe that there is "one easy way"¹³ to go about selecting curriculum resources. However, I do believe we can take some steps that will help us engage in this important work with some intentionality, giving it the kind of thought and effort it deserves. As I have worked with seminary students and churches, a set of five important steps has emerged as basic to the selection process. I name them as follows:

- Prepare the ground
- Describe the particular situation
- Select the resources
- Use the resources
- Evaluate the resources

1. *Prepare the ground.* When I talk about the process beginning with a "preparing of the ground," I am drawing on the image of gardening. My husband is a dedicated gardener, and one of the important things I have learned from him is the necessity of preparing the ground, adding nutrients and working the soil so it is ready to receive and grow the plants. The result of such preparation is a beautiful flower garden in bloom throughout the season.

When selecting curriculum resources in the church, we also need to prepare the ground, to help the church get ready to select the kinds of materials it will use. The discussion about content that we have been engaging in throughout this chapter is a preparing of the ground. It is helping people remove some of the myths and false perceptions (like removing rocks and weeds from the soil) that can inhibit a broader understanding of content. It is helping them gain a new vision, looking at what it is that we need to know as Christians and how we need to know it. It is helping to prepare the way for the selection of resources appropriate to the task.

This working of the ground is an ongoing task. Like the good gardener whose efforts in preparing the soil are never complete, we need to regularly discuss issues of content and look at who we are as Christians and what it is that we need to know. We need to keep new myths and false perceptions from sprouting or the old ones from returning. We need to return again and again to prepare the ground.

2. *Describe the particular situation.* Before looking at specific resources, we need to describe the current situation. Again, it is like a physician making a diagnosis. She would not write out a prescription before taking the time to know who we are and to listen to us describe our symptoms. I believe that the same is true when selecting curriculum resources for use in the church. We risk making the wrong selection when we have not taken the time to describe the setting, the church, the people involved, what we need and want to learn and how, and so on.

We need to do two kinds of description in this phase of the selection process. The first is a description of the congregation and context in general. This includes describing who the people are, their needs and interests, where they are in their Christian journeys, what kinds of Christian education experiences they have had, how they seem to learn best, and so on. This also includes a description of the ways in which the congregation responds to the questions raised earlier in this chapter about what Christians need to know and how.

The second kind of description is a more focused one related to the curriculum resources themselves. In this descriptive task, we need to name the qualities that we look for in a resource, qualities that would help it be a fit for our particular congregation and its educational work. For example, there are churches that demonstrate a strong preference for a particular Bible translation. To use a Bible study resource that did not use that translation at all would probably not be a good fit and could quickly lead to dissatisfaction with that resource.

Besides the choice of Bible translation, other factors important to consider are ways in which your church likes to study the Bible (topical, lectionary, verse-by-verse, etc.), the educational approaches your teachers seem to prefer (lecture,

discussion, projects, lots of hands-on crafts, etc.), the actual conditions under which the resources will be used (length of time for the study sessions or classes, number and age range of students in a given group, etc.), the role that denominational heritage, mission, and values should play in the resources, and the kinds of aids for teaching that your teachers and students expect (teacher's book, student book, craft materials, take-home papers, etc.). Although certainly not exhaustive of the factors that we need to explore, this list gives an idea of what we need to consider and describe as we prepare to select the resources we will use.

3. *Select the resources.* Obviously, the steps already mentioned are a part of the selection process, but there comes a point when we have to choose, to actually decide on particular resources. This process begins with the gathering of a variety of possible resources. There are several sources for discovering what is available: church resource centers, denominational publishing houses, religious bookstores, other churches, and so on. My recommendation is that a church have more than one set of resources for review. This provides the opportunity to examine different approaches and offers some comparison for evaluation purposes.

After the materials are assembled, those responsible for the decision need to evaluate them. I encourage people to use the descriptions developed above as they do an initial screening of the materials. How well do the descriptions and the materials seem to match up? Following this overview, I suggest a checklist, like the following that I have developed for use with seminary students and congregations, for a more detailed analysis of the materials.

*An Evaluation Checklist for Selecting Curriculum Materials*¹⁴

OVERALL DESIGN OF MATERIALS:

1. What are the stated goals of this curriculum material? How appropriate are these goals for your church's approach to Christian education? Are they similar to the goals that you have set for teaching/learning?

2. Content:
 - a. Is the material what you want to study?
 - b. Does the biblical material reflect an acceptable approach to biblical interpretation?
 - c. How appropriate is the material in terms of its interpretation of the meaning of the Christian life?
 - d. Is the content appropriate for the students in terms of age level, developmental issues, learning abilities, and life experiences?
3. Arrangement of the material:
 - a. How is the biblical material used? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to the scriptures?
 - b. What is the structure of each session? How are the sessions related to each other? Is this an appropriate structure for your setting?
 - c. Is there space for additions and substitutions where appropriate? Are there suggestions for such additions and substitutions?
4. How would you rate the material in terms of its physical appearance? Its usefulness in terms of the skills and preferences of your teachers? Its overall appropriateness for your particular students?
5. Can your congregation afford this material? Can it be used again?

TEACHER MATERIALS:

1. Is the format of the material attractive?
2. Are the sessions clearly outlined so that a teacher can easily understand the movements of teaching? Are there particular features that help the teacher understand the outline and its progress?
3. What kinds of teacher helps are provided? Are these appropriate and useful?
4. How well does this material match your teachers' skills?

5. What approaches to teaching are used? Are these appropriate? Are instructions for activities clear and easy to follow?
6. What resources are suggested for use beyond those provided? Which of these are essential? Which ones could be easily obtained?
7. Is helpful material about the ages, learning levels, needs, and interests of the students provided? Is there background material about the content so that the teacher's knowledge and understanding will be enriched?

STUDENT MATERIALS:

1. From the student's perspective, is the material attractive? Is the printed material easy to read? Does the style and language attract the student's interest? Is the material within the student's understanding?
2. How are the students engaged in the learning process? Are they engaged in ways appropriate to their ages, learning abilities, needs, and interests?
3. What kinds of activities are used? Will the activities attract their interest? Will the students find these activities useful? Are these activities appropriate to the content?

CONCLUDING QUESTION:

Weighing the advantages and disadvantages, would this be the most appropriate and useful curriculum material for your church? State your reasons.

After having used a checklist such as this, the decision is finally made about the actual resources that are to be used in teaching the content we have determined is foundational to the Christian faith.

4. *Use the resources.* Too often in the church we think that our task of selecting resources is completed when we have made the decision about what materials we will use. Because of this,

churches end up repeating the step of actual selection over and over again because it is not understood that this is only part of the process. After materials are selected, we need to see that they are used and to provide the appropriate support and assistance for this to occur.

But this does not always happen in the church. I recall a comment made by a teacher I interviewed in my doctoral research. She said, "They just hand you a book and say 'Here's your material. Go teach.'"¹⁵ She was voicing the concern of many of her colleagues in teaching that little help was given in using the resources. As was said before, it is not the resources that teach; it is teachers who teach. And we need to give them assistance in using the tools we provide.

Helping teachers to use the materials can be addressed in a variety of ways. A novice can be paired with an experienced teacher who is able to offer insight and provide some mentoring in the use of the curriculum materials. Churches can conduct a workshop that focuses on helping teachers become familiar with, and learn to use, the resources selected. I know we hear all the time that teachers don't have extra time to give, but my own experience says that teachers will come to a one-time, focused event when they see that it will benefit the actual work they are called to do.

At issue here is not the way in which we provide help in using the materials. At issue here is the realization that we have not successfully selected curriculum resources until those resources are being used. I believe that careful and deliberate attention to this step will go a long way toward eliminating those piles of unused curriculum materials found in many church supply closets.

5. *Evaluate the resources.* The curriculum resource selection process is brought to conclusion with an evaluation of the resources as they are being used. Evaluation occurs any time we ask the question, How are things working? We may do this through informal conversations with teachers, students, parents, and anyone involved in the educational endeavor. We may do this through the use of surveys to see how people are responding to materials, what they like and don't like. We may do this by asking students questions to see what they are

learning. The point is not the method used but the need to engage in some type of evaluation of the resources and their usefulness.

I believe that the selection process is not complete until we do this evaluation. Yet it is a step that can be overlooked. My observation is that evaluation often happens at a point when problems have already developed, and it is then more difficult to make wise choices about what to do. If we wait until a teacher complains or students stop coming, we may have waited too long to address the question, How is it working? By that time the answer can quickly become that it isn't working, and pressure develops to cast these materials aside and find others. Checking at an earlier point and on a regular basis offers greater flexibility in making whatever adjustments may need to be made to help a resource be useful. It can help to prevent the costly replacement of resources.

This cycle—preparing the ground, describing the particular setting, selecting the resources, using the resources, and evaluating the resources—is not a process we do once and for all in the church. It is one that we need to visit again and again. It may not always result in choosing new resources; in fact, I would hope that it would not. However, it will result in the presence and use of appropriate resources that assist the congregation in teaching the content to which it is committed.

Summary

If the reader approached this chapter looking for a discussion of *the* particular content that needs to be taught in the church, I am sure he or she is disappointed. As I have already said, the purpose of this discussion about the foundational building block of content is not to name a normative curriculum for the church or to dictate the specific things that people need to know. I believe that this falls into the trap of the one-size-fits-all mentality. I have not tried to outline a general, all-purpose curriculum for the church.

Instead, my purpose here, as it has been throughout this book, is to raise an *awareness* about the issues a church needs to address when it is making decisions regarding what it will teach.