

PREPARE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH STUDY

Community engagement requires action, but does it require study as well? Standing on the verge of a new project, study may seem a waste of precious time. Why not just roll up those sleeves and get to work? The immediate problem with this scenario is that unexpected misfires can result. Bad outcomes might be avoided—and time saved—by putting study first and action second.

The Need for Adult Education

Most US churches think Christian education is for children and youth. While a majority have at least one study or prayer group, less than half (40 percent) of them hold any classes during “prime time” on Sunday morning before or after worship. Both Conservative white and African American churches are more likely than Mainline Protestants to schedule classes during this time so that it will coincide with children’s Sunday School classes and set stronger expectations for adult attendance. In addition, only 14 percent of Mainline churches offer regular classes for new members, even though half of their members grew up in other denominations. By paying so little attention to adult education, less than any other American faith group, “white Mainline Protestants seem to be putting all their eggs in the basket of morning worship and children’s Sunday school.” Why? Unlike other groups, such as Catholics or Jews, Mainline Protestants do not see themselves as outsiders to American culture, sociologist Nancy Ammerman notes. For much of American history, they were the leaders in education, government, and business, so they have felt less need to reinforce the basics of the faith.¹

Bible Study as Foundation

For Christians, adult education begins with Bible study. The Bible’s importance to Christian social ethics is not widely understood, yet Bruce Birch and Richard Bauckham highlight the Bible’s ethical significance for personal and public life while Norman Wirzba argues

for the ethical relevance of the doctrine of creation for responding to the ecological crisis.² The link between the Bible and social ethics can be made explicit by the preacher in a sermon, as long as special care is taken to include dialogue with church members before or after the sermon if the topic is controversial.³

Adult education resources on social ethics include a number of downloadable resources, including Faith-link, a United Methodist Church curriculum; The Thoughtful Christian, a similar curriculum of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation; and Dialogues On . . . by Sparkhouse, a publication resource of the Evangelical Church in America. The downloads typically cover a single topic per session, though The Thoughtful Christian offers seasonal studies with a social ethics emphasis and Dialogues on . . . offers six- or seven-week studies on a single social topic.⁴

Church leaders can also integrate a time for study with an “immersion experience” to learn more about a particular community. Journey to Justice, a weekend retreat designed for Roman Catholic parishes, combines study



“MY CHURCH HAS MOVED FROM STUDY TO ACTION...
I NEED ENOUGH FISH TO FEED 5,000 PEOPLE.”

of the Bible and Catholic social teaching with a community tour guided by local leaders. On Friday evening, participants learn about “the preferential option for the poor” and the concept of social sin (unjust systems that oppress the poor). On Saturday morning, the group studies the parable of the good Samaritan, with its focus on serving neighbors who are radically different from us. In the afternoon, the group visits a social agency, hearing from one of “the empowered poor” in the community, who serves as their guide. In debriefing that evening, participants share what they experienced and felt during the visit, revisit church teachings, and examine the root causes of poverty. The retreat ends on Sunday morning with a guided imagery exercise and later with a Mass in which participants are invited to commit to follow-up action. In this example, study of the Bible and social teachings provides a theological context for the immersion experience.⁵

Study as a Catalyst for Action

Study can serve as a catalyst for action. The town of Comanche, Oklahoma, experienced economic hardship after the closing of two factories. In a school system serving five towns and one thousand students, a majority of children were eligible for a federal free-meal program twice per day. First Church, a small church with only fifty members, began studying Matthew 25:31–46, the Great Judgment in which Christ’s followers are separated into sheep and goats based on how they treat others. Church leaders asked, “How can a church find Christ in a town that has lost hope?” They also read the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16–20, with its commandment to make disciples, baptize, and teach the gospel. Church leaders asked, “How do we ‘go into the world’ of Comanche, Oklahoma?” In response, church leaders started a free breakfast program on the last Saturday of each month, placing newspaper ads and posting signs that read, “Free Breakfast.” After a few months, they drew fifty or sixty persons. After this, the breakfast committee decided to remove the word “free” and simply call it a “community breakfast” because younger families who came to breakfast had told them they felt singled out as persons who needed a handout. After the name change, attendance grew to 125. The church had moved from study to action.⁶

Study as a Way out of Poverty

Study beyond the Bible can also be incorporated into an overall strategy of leadership development for low-

income persons. Circles USA relies on a combination of personal goal setting and group support to lift the poor out of poverty. Participants offer a twelve-week class for those living in poverty called “Getting Ahead,” which combines personal financial management with lessons about the causes of social causes of poverty. Upon graduation, participants make a commitment, usually for eighteen months to five years, to get out of poverty permanently. The graduate, now known as a “Circle Leader,” is assigned a person known as an Ally. “Allies are not mentors. They are intentional friends,” according to Rebecca Lewis, the Circles Coach at First United Methodist Church in McPherson, Kansas. Participants are invited to attend monthly training sessions alongside others who are committed to similar goals. This group-centered approach makes the task of study so much more enjoyable than it would be in isolation.⁷

To the more actively oriented, study may seem like a classic waste of time. Its benefits may be intangible, but they are long lasting, opening up new visions for what needs to be done, serving as a catalyst to action, and making it more likely that the action we do undertake will achieve its desired effect.

1. Nancy Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 272–73.

2. Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991); Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011); Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

3. See Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019) for a sermon-dialogue-sermon approach to preaching on controversial social issues.

4. From The Thoughtful Christian: Dana Horrell and Paul Stroble, “Faithful Citizenship: An Adult Lenten Study.” From Sparkhouse: Dialogues on . . . The Refugee Crisis, Dialogues on . . . Sexuality, Dialogues on . . . Race. See also a book resource, Katie Dawson, *All Earth Is Waiting: Good News for God’s Creation at Advent* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017).

5. Jeffrey Odell Korgen, *My Lord and My God: Engaging Catholics in Social Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 55–71; *Journey to Justice Guidebook* (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/y9wnbjgt>.

6. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, *Prelude to Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 13–17.

7. “Dots Start to Connect,” YouTube video, 6:00, uploaded September 21, 2006 by Dana Horrell, <https://tinyurl.com/yaulc2s4>.