



CHOOSING CURRICULUM RESOURCES

WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

In its broadest sense, curriculum is the whole of the plan for education and formation. The overarching educational and nurturing plan of all that you intend to do to inform, form, and transform people of all ages as Christian disciples is your curriculum. The particular books, study materials, videos, activities, and so forth that you choose to use as tools to accomplish your plan are the curriculum resources. We often use the shorthand term *curriculum* to refer to the specific resources. These resources are basic tools for Christian education and formation, and we encourage you to use them.

While these tools are important, if not essential, to the task, we do well to remember that the teacher is more important. Even poor resources, in the hands of a dedicated and gifted teacher or leader, can be used effectively to help form, shape, and nurture people in their Christian growth. On the other hand, the most sophisticated curriculum resources available are not going to achieve that same goal in the hands of a teacher or leader who is unprepared, unsuited, or uninterested in the ministry of Christian education and formation. In other words, you (as teacher or classroom leader) are the most important “curriculum resource.” What you model is what will be most remembered and influential.

Do you know what resources are currently being used in the education and formation settings in your congregation? Call the teachers or talk to church staff to help you find out what curriculum resources are being used.

RESOURCES MAY...

Be dated or undated

Dated resources are planned for a particular date or season. Many curriculum resources are published quarterly, and the date of the lesson is published in the lesson. Others may be dated for weekly, monthly, seasonal, or annual use. Those lessons can be used on dates different from the one published, but may fit better for the intended date, especially when that date is a significant one in the church year. Some dates in the church year are not fixed themselves (such as the beginnings of Advent and Lent, Easter Day, and Pentecost Sunday). Undated resources, sometimes referred to as *electives*, can be used whenever the group wishes, although some may be well suited to a particular time of the church year.

Have more than one component

By “component,” we mean one of several integrated pieces, such as a teacher book, a student book or magazine, and a poster or picture pack.

Not be in book form

They could be online content (and thus printable); games or teaching toys; or a CD or DVD. These items might be stand-alone materials or components in a larger resource.

Have leader and participant materials in one book or package

Many adult resources, for example, are self-contained study materials, with the leader helps in the margin around the main text that

is intended for all participants or perhaps in a separate section at the end of each session or the end of the book. Some children's or youth resources will be aimed primarily at the teacher/leader, with reproducible pages and activities for the children. Some other resources are prepared with basic materials in book or other published form, while added helps for the teacher or leader are available online.

Use different names for leader helps

They may be called *leader guide*, *teacher book*, *study guide*, or *study helps*, for example. Different publishers, or different age-grouped resources, may use these designations in their own unique way, so be sure to ask if the ordering information is not clear enough for you.

Resources may be dated or undated, have more than one component, have leader and participant material in one book or package, and use different names for leader helps

CHOOSING RESOURCES

There are plenty of resources on the market, and your most difficult task may be in deciding what to use among many choices of varying quality. United Methodist curriculum materials (often referred to as Cokesbury resources) are published for all ages and must conform to the biblical and theological beliefs that are stated in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (see pages 41–86 in the *2008 Discipline* for the “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task”). In addition, these resources are written and edited to be sensitive to and respectful of all people and cultures and social characteristics such as economic status, gender, and so forth. The United Methodist Church requires that curriculum resources be published for the use of the local churches and, by implication, expects that the local churches will use these resources (see ¶1110, ¶1637, and ¶340.2.c).(1).(b) in *The Book of Discipline*).

There is, however, a broad range of theological and cultural diversity within the church, and the resources as they are published will

never be able to completely satisfy every person who uses them. This means that United Methodist resources, like resources from any other denomination or publisher, will need to be adapted to a group's own situation. As you and the other leaders in your congregation make decisions about curriculum and curriculum resources, there are a number of things to keep in mind that will help you determine your specific needs.

1. This Group and Its Leaders

Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the age group? Are several ages or grades together in one group? Are multiple generations of adults together? Will their age-level differences matter in the curriculum selected, in the way it will be taught, or in the way participants relate to each other? Will adults' life situations be compatible (such as having young marrieds with older adults)? Is the resource relevant to the age group? Does it use age-appropriate activities?
- What is the attention level? Do all participants have the same ability to concentrate? Must there be a mix of active and passive activities in the curriculum?
- What is the reading level of participants? What is the first language? Are non-readers grouped with readers? Are any group members not native English speakers? Does the material use images and vocabulary understandable to participants?
- What is the level of physical ability of group members? Can children cut, paste, or otherwise manipulate what the learning activities suggest? Is the study book too thick or heavy for arthritic hands to hold? Is the print large enough?
- What experience does the teacher/leader have? Does the resource expect too much or too little preparation or challenge for those who will be leading? Is the leader matched well enough with the group members to relate to and establish trust with them? Is the leader (or those who select the resource) familiar enough with the age group of participants to select something that is relevant to them?

- What is the level of familiarity of participants with the Bible? Does the resource presume a certain level of knowledge of the leader or participant? Does the Bible study resource encourage participants to read and use the Bible? Is the resource biblically and theologically sound?
- What level of experience do participants have with the church as an institution? Will there be newcomers to the faith or to the church in the group? Does the resource presume “insider” knowledge of church language and terminology (such as knowing definitions of doctrinal words like *grace* and *salvation* or knowing the names of parts of the church building like *nave* and *chancel*)?
- What is the level of spiritual maturity of group members? Is the resource appropriate and understandable? Can it help participants grow and stretch?
- What is the cultural makeup of the group? Is the resource inclusive? Can participants “find themselves” there? Does it use cultural images and references that are understandable, familiar, and relevant? Is the content of the curriculum representative of the group that will use it? Does it also depict, in culturally accurate ways, people and situations of other cultures?
- What is the time frame for the class or group? Is the material “doable” for the setting in which it will be used? (This doesn’t mean that one group meeting should necessarily equal one session or chapter. You can probably take your time.)
- What input can participants offer in the choice? Youth and adults, especially, can indicate their interests and needs. Have they had a chance to at least know what their options are?
- What are the learning preferences of the participants? Does the resource use a variety of learning activities to appeal to a broad range of learning styles? (You may also need to ensure that the group leader understands

these preferences well enough to use them and not to rely only on one or two teaching/learning techniques.) Does the resource allow for “head” activities (knowing and understanding), for personal experience and application (feeling and applying), for the possibility of transformation (introspecting, analyzing, evaluating, committing), and for devotional time (seeing/being in the presence of God)?

2. The Focus of Each Class or Group

You must know where you’re going in order to plan a route to get there. One primary goal of any group in Christian education and formation is to help participants understand that they are valued members of the body of Christ. In age-appropriate ways, each person is there to understand him- or herself as someone of value—growing in love, being formed in faith to be a disciple in the world. Whatever the

In your class...

- What is the age group?*
- What is their attention level?*
- What is their reading level?*
- What is their level of physical ability?*
- How experienced are you as a teacher?*
- How familiar are students with the Bible?*
- How well do they know the church?*
- What is their spiritual development?*
- What is the cultural make up?*
- What is the time frame?*
- What input do they have in choosing the resources?*
- What are their learning preferences?*

class or group, it is part of the whole church, not just the local church, and it exists to equip God’s people for work in the world.

Within this context, each class or group may have its own focus. Your education and formation offerings may have classes that span the life cycle and that are grouped according to age or grade, or perhaps according to various interests. Usually, the main content is material about the Bible, the Christian faith, and the church. Curriculum resources support those goals in various ways and with various studies.

3. The Faith Maturity of Group Members

The level of faith development deserves another word. United Methodist curriculum resources recognize that people of all ages are at different places in their faith development. Some do “God stuff” only at church, when they can come; others have well-developed study and devotional practices. Others may currently participate or have participated in the past in a *Way of the Child* group, a Covenant Discipleship group, a DISCIPLE Bible study group (for youth or adults), or other faith-forming study or experience outside the normal (and often haphazard) pattern of attendance at education and formation opportunities offered during prime time on Sunday morning.

DISCIPLE “grads” and others who have more familiarity with both formal and informal opportunities for faith development will want resources that go further and deeper. They will probably be ready for resources that require more of them than an entry-level study or experience would.

People who are new to the church, new to the faith, or new to the English language may need something entirely different. (We must not, however, assume that someone with rudimentary English skills also has rudimentary Bible skills.) These people may be less familiar (or unfamiliar) with theological terms, church terms, and faith images. Curriculum resources and teaching/learning leaders will need to be careful to introduce and define terms and not to make assumptions about “what everybody knows.”

Whether for beginners, seekers, or mature participants, the resource should offer opportunities for commitment to Jesus Christ, for personal and group devotional time, and for nourishment and enrichment of the teacher or leader.

4. Theological and Biblical Foundations

As mentioned before, United Methodist curriculum resources for all ages must conform to the doctrine and theology contained in “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task” in the *Discipline*. People who use those resources differ, however, on how much Bible is

in those resources. How much is determined in large part by one’s doctrine of Scripture—that is, what we think about the Bible and its purpose. There are many theologically grounded ways to think about the Bible, including these (which are stated simplistically):

- The Bible is a history of God’s activity among the people of faith.
- The Bible is a record of the saving activity of the Son of God.
- The Bible shows the fulfillment of God’s promises made to humankind.
- The Bible is a record of God’s ongoing revelation.
- The Bible is the unerring, infallible Word given directly by God.
- The Bible is a book compiled by the faith community over several centuries but is not inerrant or infallible.

Again, let it be said that these explanations are not the whole word on any doctrine of Scripture. They do, however, identify some filters through which we examine and evaluate Bible-based resources. They should help give some insight to what you may look for, find, or not find in any given resource, even if you don’t consciously realize what your own Bible-interpretation filter is.

Your own doctrine of Scripture will influence how you evaluate “how much Bible” is in the curriculum.

In assessing the biblical/theological “fit” of curriculum resources, then, consider these suggestions:

- Look for an overall balance of references to both Old and New Testaments in materials that span several weeks, quarters, or volumes.
- A corollary to “how much Bible” may be how much Scripture is actually printed in the curriculum resource. Do you need to see numerous references to Scripture actually cited or quoted? Can you recognize the biblical/theological basis of the content even if the Scripture is not always printed or quoted?

- Reflect on your own doctrine of Scripture. Is it broad enough to allow for varying understandings of Scripture by participants? Does the resource imply or employ a suitable range of understanding as well?

5. Ease of Use for Teachers or Leaders

“Ease of use” is, like “how much Bible,” in the mind of the beholder. Because the teaching skill level, familiarity with the Bible, and comfort with the students’ age group will vary among teachers, there will also be a broad range of opinion on how easy resources are to use. The amount of time that feels right for one teacher will seem too long or too superficial for others. In short, only you can decide if a resource is easy to prepare for and to teach. Consider these pointers and questions:

- Is there any training or orientation to curriculum resources and to the teaching/leading task for leaders?
- Is the list of supplies or other “stuff” needed obvious?
- Does the introduction to the session give any indication of what advance preparation is required?
- How much of the preparation, if any, must be done before the session (such as assembling magazine pictures or cutting out story-book figures)?
- How long is a session and how much of it must be covered in one meeting time? How flexible can the leader be with the lesson?
- Is there a step-by-step teaching plan or a menu of teaching/learning options to choose from? How comfortable is the leader with selecting options in a less formal lesson plan?
- How many components are there (for example, a teacher book, student book, CD, poster pack, and so on), and do you have them all? If not, can the lesson be successful without all the available components? Can the leader use all the necessary pieces comfortably? (If not, the need may be for a second teacher or helper, not for different resources.)
- Is there any indicator of which teaching/learning activities may be team led?

WHO SELECTS THE RESOURCES?

Who in the education/formation ministry selects the curriculum resources? This may be a literature secretary, church secretary, pastor, director of Christian education, church school coordinator, class members, someone else, or any combination. Consider these questions in determining who selects resources and how it is done:

- Is there any coordinated effort in the entire education and formation program that keeps an eye on the whole picture?
- Is there a mission statement and/or vision of what the education and formation ministry will include and some sense of who needs what and when it is needed?
- Are teachers and group leaders members of this ministry team or do they have access to the decision makers? Do participants have any input into what their own group will use?
- Is any help, training, or orientation given to the person(s) who select curriculum?
- Is the person or team aware of the various catalogs and consultants for all the education and formation age-level resources?
- Is there a calendar to record when materials need to be ordered or purchased? Timely, consolidated ordering of curriculum saves on shipping costs and ensures that you have materials when you need them.

PAYING FOR RESOURCES

Churches with small membership (or small budgets) may find it difficult to pay for all the curriculum resources they want. These tips may help.

- Cokesbury offers one quarter (thirteen weeks) of free resources for churches that are not current purchasers. (Call 800-672-1789 for the full details.)
- Order materials for the whole charge and swap around resources. (This works best with undated resources, of course, but is not impossible for dated materials.) Or, order materials with a neighboring church and swap.

- Calculate the cost per session, and receive an offering each week from those who can contribute. (Give left over funds to missions or save it as seed money for the next order.)
- Choose materials that have reproducible pages when they are suitable. The unit cost for an original purchase may be higher than for a quarterly teacher book, for example, but it can be used many more times. Remember, though, that if you have large groups or classes, the costs of making copies may soon be more than the cost of the nonreproducible resources. (Curriculum resources without reproducible pages should never be photocopied without obtaining permission in writing. It is against the law and contrary to our faith.)
- Consider having a fundraiser at the same time you have a teacher/leader appreciation event as a tangible way to demonstrate a commitment to the education and formation ministry of the church. Individual people or families, including those who do not participate in the education and formation ministry programs, could sponsor a class by providing curriculum resources and supplies, and their commitment could also be celebrated.
- Check out the website of the publisher (www.cokesbury.com for United Methodists) to see if there are any free helps online or by phone.
- Use your imagination! And pray!



This pamphlet is prepared by the Faith Formation and Discipleship Groups at the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church.

For more information about the needs and requirements in specific ministry areas, see the leadership series *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation*, which includes

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|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| * Christian Education | * Children's Ministries | * Youth Ministries |
| * Adult Ministries | * Family Ministries | * Small Group Ministry |

Go to www.cokesbury.com or call 1-800-672-1789. Please also visit our website www.gbod.org

Evaluating a Curriculum Resource

Title of Resource: _____

Dated

Undated

Number of Sessions _____

Components

Single book that contains leader's guide or other study helps

Student Book and Teacher Book only

Multiple components in addition to student and teacher piece:

Class pak

CD

video

posters

resource kit

audio cassette

Video

with leader guide

CD

with leader helps

Audio cassette

with leader helps

Content

Use a rating system of 1 to 4: 1 (poor) 2 (fair) 3 (good) 4 (excellent)

Age-level appropriateness	1	2	3	4
Biblical/theological explanation appropriateness	1	2	3	4
Biblical/theological depth appropriateness	1	2	3	4
Balance of Old and New Testament (overall)	1	2	3	4
Level of challenge to audience	1	2	3	4
Ease of use of teaching plan for the specific teacher	1	2	3	4
Variety of learning activities for audience	1	2	3	4
Cultural relevance to audience	1	2	3	4
Sensitivity to/inclusion of variety of race and cultures	1	2	3	4
Art and graphics appropriate to lesson and audience	1	2	3	4

Preparation

Satisfaction with time required for preparing lesson	1	2	3	4
Satisfaction with time required for preparing crafts	1	2	3	4
Instructions for preparation clear and timely	1	2	3	4