

THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Through Christian education we invite people and communities of faith to be transformed as they are inspired and challenged to:

- Know and experience God through Jesus Christ,
- Claim and live God's promises, and
- Grow and serve as Christian disciples.

***Foundations:** Shaping the Ministry of Christian Education in Your Congregation*

We live in an increasingly digital age. Computers and networks bring us many blessings, but they may impact us negatively. Finding the proper balance between our digital and analog existence is difficult, especially as new digital technologies emerge at a rapid pace. How much time online is too much? Can the church become a leader in blending the digital with the physical to advance the mission of God and to foster the well-being of its people?

During the past year, educators have become concerned about research that indicates a range of negative effects related to "screen time," including the use of social media, on the well-being of children, teens, and even adults. Among the quality of life areas that are affected are sleep, self-esteem, ability to concentrate, and feelings of loneliness. Pediatricians have issued warnings about the impact of screen time on children's brain development and the detrimental effects on social skills, such as recognizing facial expressions and the ability to make conversation. In addition to recommendations to limit screen time, adults are cautioned to be more aware of the emotional responses of children and youth after they have been using devices, computers, and high-tech games.

At the same time, cities are seeing a rise in popularity of gaming cafes and other

venues, where friends and families meet up to enjoy playing board games, eat food, and talk together. Engaging in analog activities, without the distractions of screens, is more satisfying. These shared experiences help people to feel connected and appreciated.

The church is good at providing opportunities for people to gather in person to enjoy friendship and fun, to listen to one another and feel heard. We like to call this old-fashioned approach, fellowship. Times for meaningful conversation strengthen our identity as those who belong to, and contribute to, the community of faith. When we pray for one another and study God's word together, our Christian friendships are nurtured, and we grow in faith.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 13, Jesus describes the excitement of discovering God's kingdom, which is drawing near. He speaks of a wise Bible teacher or scribe who "brings out what is new and what is old" (Mt 13:52). As disciples of Christ, we are called to employ good things that are old and new to tell our congregation and neighbors of God's kingdom.

Of course, the church also draws on technology to carry out its mission. Will we take up the challenge from Jesus to use what is new to lead people to God's kingdom? In this faith formation leaders'

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Matthew 13:44-53 (NRSV)

workshop, Sunday school teachers and others are invited to explore technological resources such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), podcasts, music, and other resources that may be avenues for the church to harness benefits of recent technology.

This resource is designed to help you plan your Christian Education Week/Sunday celebration. Check with your annual conference to determine if a date has been set for this occasion and an offering was received to support educational ministries in your conference. This celebration can be combined with the launch of new opportunities for learning, service, and fellowship. It is a great time to emphasize and celebrate your congregation's settings for discipleship. You're invited to make this celebration a joyful recognition of God's love and Jesus' call to tell your neighbors and friends how they can participate in the kingdom of God drawing near.



Call to Worship

One: We rejoice in you, O Lord! We sing new songs with joyful hearts.

Many: For your word, O God, is upright, and all your work is done in faithfulness.

One: Gracious God, you love righteousness and justice; you bring them to people on earth.

Many: By your word, O Lord, you made the heavens and all the angels who do your will.

One: The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of God's heart to all generations.

All: Let your steadfast love, O God, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Scripture

- Deuteronomy 4:1-20 "...observe [God's statutes] diligently, for this will show your wisdom"
- Psalm 33:1-22 "[God's counsel] stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations."
- Matthew 13:14-53 "Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field..."
- James 1:2-27 "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously..."

Hymns

"God, Whose Love Is Reigning O'er Us," UMH, 100
"I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord," UMH 540

"Lord, You Give the Great Commission," UMH 584

"O God, Our Help in Ages Past," UMH 117

"O Spirit of the Living God," UMH 539

"Rejoice, the Lord Is King," UMH 715

"Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God," UMH 405

"We All Are One in Mission," TFWS, 2243

"We Will Glorify the King of Kings," TFWS 2087

UMH = United Methodist Hymnal TFWS = The Faith We Sing

Prayer for Illumination

Come, divine Interpreter, bring me eyes thy book to read, ears the mystic words to hear, words which did from thee proceed, words that endless bliss impart, kept in an obedient heart. All who read, or hear, are blessed, if thy plain commands we do; of thy kingdom here possessed, thee we shall in glory view when thou comest on earth to abide, reign triumphant at thy side. (Hymn by Charles Wesley, 1762; United Methodist Hymnal, 594)

Offertory Prayer

Gracious God, you are the victorious King! You have revealed your victory over death through Jesus' resurrection. With joyful songs, we rejoice in your marvelous deeds. Let our voices and actions reflect your saving power. Use our gifts and offerings to help our neighbors know your steadfast love in Christ, until the day when you make this world new in your kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. (Based on Psalm 98)

A Litany of Dedication for Christian Educators, Leaders, and Learners

LITANY OF DEDICATION:

One: Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

All: Thank you for guiding us with wisdom so that we may know the way we should go.

One: How sweet are your words of life, O God, sweeter than honey!

All: We praise you for the good news you bring us in Jesus Christ.

One: Thank you for the women and men to whom you have given gifts for teaching and leading.

Teachers: We thank you for calling us to teach, and we dedicate ourselves to this ministry.

One: May you bless them abundantly, O God, and increase their joy as they serve you.

Adults: May we all continue to grow in faith, hope, and love as Christ's disciples.

One: God gathers us together as the church, where each person is loved by the Lord.

Children and Youth: Thank you for teachers and leaders who help us to know Jesus better.

All: Help us to share faithfully the love of Jesus as we participate in your kingdom drawing near.

Sending Forth

Go in peace to love and serve God. Every day, trust our risen Lord Jesus, who is working by his Spirit to bring God's kingdom near. Amen.

Time: Approximately 75 minutes

Purpose:

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- describe Jesus' parables of God's kingdom
- identify and discuss how God led them to respond in faith
- incorporate technological resources into their class preparation.

Materials:

- Name tags
- Markers, crayons, pens, and pencils
- Several colors of Post-It notes
- Newsprint/easel pad or whiteboard and markers
- Three piggy banks or jars labeled "save"
- Copies of handout with information on "New Ways"
- Two sign-up sheets for participants to indicate interest in online course discussion groups
- A laptop computer, power cord, and wifi access
- Refreshments (optional)
- Bibles
- Copies of *The United Methodist Hymnal*

Preparation:

- Publicize the workshop and its purpose.
- Pray for those who will attend.
- Gather the listed materials.
- Make copies of the handout about "New Ways" to learn about God's word and kingdom. Arrange chairs as desired, in a circle or around round tables, for total group time.
- Prepare a table for the piggy banks and art supplies and another table for the laptop computer. If you have a large group, you may want to adjust as needed or prepare two stations for each.
- Place the handouts and supplies on the tables.

Getting Started (About 15 to 20 minutes)

Invite participants to make name tags. If you have provided refreshments, point them out to people as they arrive. Welcome participants and ask them to briefly introduce themselves by telling their names and what class or small group they will lead. (If the group is large, you may need to break into smaller groups to complete the introductions in a timely manner.)

Invite them to sing the opening song as a joyful prayer. It was written by Charles Wesley in 1744.

Opening Song: "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" (UMH, 196)

This song may be accompanied by a pianist. Click here to play the Piano Accompaniment Recording by Discipleship Ministries: www.gbod3.org/sorter/audio/196.mp3. The complete list of recordings is organized by the theme of Advent, then alphabetically for all other songs: www.gbod3.org/sorter/index3.html.

Tell the participants that the church is grateful for their commitment to serve as leaders in faith formation ministries. Through their ongoing participation in worship, Bible study, and prayer, they will continue to grow in faith. This will bless their students and families and enhance the shared experience of their teaching team during their time together.

Introduce the Bible passage. Say that we want to understand more about how Jesus describes the kingdom of God. Listen also for what kind of Bible teachers or scribes Jesus is calling us to be.

Read aloud Matthew 13:44-53. (Say aloud the page number [or have print outs] so that participants may read along.)

⁴⁴ [Jesus said:] "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ⁴⁵ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. ⁴⁷ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁵¹ 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' ⁵² And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' ⁵³ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place."

Encourage participants to consider the meaning of this passage for us in our context. Jesus taught in parables, brief stories that describe something unfamiliar by comparing it to something closer to home. The kingdom of heaven is God's kingdom. It is unlike the kingdoms of this world. God's kingdom is so wonderful that as soon as we discover it, we want to be part of it for our whole life. It's like a farmer who found land with buried treasure. He gladly sold what he had to buy it. It's like

a businessman searching for beautiful pearls who discovered a breath-taking pearl that was more lustrous than all the rest. He hurried to sell everything he had to buy that one.

Jesus said that God's kingdom is like fishers who cast their net into the water. When the net was full, they pulled it in. The net caught all kinds of things, good and bad, fish that were edible and those that were not. So the fishers separated out what was good and threw the rest back in the water. At the end of this age, God's angels will separate the evil from the righteous. Similarly, a scribe or Bible teacher who has been trained for God's kingdom is wise. Like the head of a household, he or she brings out from the treasure closet new and old things.

Once we find God's kingdom, we joyfully give up everything in order to be part of it. Jesus refers to the kingdom of God drawing near in his ministry. Today, God's kingdom comes close to us through the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, who is risen and present with us by his Spirit. What can we bring out of our storehouses to honor God?

Jesus is calling each of us to be wise teachers who bring out the faithful promises of God from the Old Testament and the New Testament. We are to show them to others and talk about them with people. We are meant to help people understand who God is and how the Lord is at work in our midst. Jesus wants us to share the good news of God's kingdom with people in our community and the world God loves.

Let's help others to discover God's grace, this wonderful treasure of God's kingdom. Let's enthusiastically join in God's kingdom, which is drawing near in Christ. Together, let's share God's treasures of wisdom that are new and old in our church as we seek to live by faith.

Reflection Time

Gesture toward the table where you have gathered piggy banks or jars labeled "save." Invite participants to think back to a time when they worked hard to "save up" money to purchase something really special. (Some of us may now be in the process of saving up for something important.)

Ask the following questions. State that people may call out answers casually if they would like to, or they may ponder quietly in their hearts.

- What was a special thing that you "saved up" for?
- What did it represent to you?
- How old were you at that time?
- What were some methods that you used to save and raise money?
- Did anyone assist you in this effort? Who were they? How did they help?
- How did you feel when you finally bought that special item?

Say that each of us can relate to the excitement of saving up for a special purchase. It takes determination and time to carry through on such a plan. We may feel a range of emotions, including eagerness, impatience, and weariness in the midst of perseverance. Then when we finally purchase the item, we may feel relief, gratitude, or pride. It's also possible to feel disappointed when the thing that we thought would make us feel happy or significant does not live up to our expectations.

Sharing Time

Let's consider our stories of responding to God's grace by making a commitment to follow Jesus.

- How did you hear the gospel in a way that reached your heart? When and where were you?
- Who was with you, or who has helped you to live in faith?
- What did you do to respond and make a commitment to Christ?
- How did God draw you to this congregation?
- What do you look forward to the most about leading in faith formation ministries this year?

Ask participants to turn to a neighbor and talk in pairs about that experience. Explain that each pair will have eight minutes to share. They should decide who will speak first and take turns. Set a timer for four minutes and a timer for three minutes. When the three-minute timer sounds, tell the pairs they have one-minute left to talk before switching to listen to the other person. When the four-minute timer sounds, announce that it is time for the person who was listening to tell his/her story. Set the timers again and give the one-minute warning after three minutes. Announce the concluding time when the four-minute timer sounds.

Call everyone together as a group. Invite people to share any insights they gained from listening to their neighbor's story.

Prayers for the Kingdom of God

Imagine the people that God may be calling you to tell the good news of Jesus and God's kingdom this week. Who could you speak with about coming to worship and being part of the faith formation ministries of our church? Invite people to think of specific individuals that the Lord is nudging them to invite to worship and faith formation ministries at your church. Pray aloud for all the people and the hope that they will be drawn to respond to personal invitations from your faith formation leaders. May God's grace lead you all throughout this new year.

Next, we have an opportunity to help participants become more familiar with and share their experiences of some new and recent technological resources. These varied resources may assist and encourage them as they prepare and lead faith formation ministries.

New Ways: Online Courses

An exciting way to learn more about the Bible is through online classes or Massive Open Online Courses called MOOCs (pronounced mooks). You may want to take a Bible class and invite faith formation leaders who are interested to take the class as well. Participants may watch the video lectures at home and then meet for discussion with other learners as a church group each week.

Have a laptop computer set up on a table with wifi for a brief demonstration of how to register for the edX course "Christianity Through Its Scriptures" at this link: www.edx.org/course/christianity-through-its-scriptures. This course is taught by Professor Karen L. King at Harvard University Divinity School.

The course is free for those who simply want to audit it. This self-paced online course may be completed in four weeks. Participants may watch the video lectures at home and discuss them with other learners when the church group gathers each week. Course content, including video lectures, is available to those who audit the course.

To get the most out of the course, a learner could spend an estimated five hours per week. Auditors may participate in online discussion forums through edX. Those who would like to take graded assignments and receive a certificate of completion may pay a fee.

View together the introductory video, which lasts slightly longer than six minutes. Once you have registered for the course, you will be able to view the video on screen.

Another excellent resource is the series of eLearning courses for Christian spiritual formation available through The Upper Room at the website www.elearning.upperroom.org. You may want to view the schedule of upcoming courses and talk about what would be of interest to your faith formation leaders.

Invite participants to talk about their experiences with online courses through any platform.

Provide two sign-up sheets: one for participants to indicate their interest in joining a four-week discussion group based on the edX course "Christianity Through Its Scriptures," and another for a course in eLearning through The Upper Room that members of your group could take together later in the year.

New Ways: Podcasts

Another relatively new medium is a podcast, a recording or series of recordings that may be used for education or inspiration. Podcasts may vary in length from a five-minute devotion, to a 30-minute interview, to a 45-minute discussion of a specific topic. Frequently, people listen to podcasts during

their commute. Another time to enjoy a podcast is while preparing a meal.

"Small Groups in the Wesleyan Way" is a podcast hosted by Scott Hughes, Director of Adult Discipleship at Discipleship Ministries. This resource offers new episodes twice a month. Interviews with leaders focus on reflections and advice to assist you in developing small-group ministries in meaningful ways that honor our Wesleyan heritage.

Check out the latest episode here: www.blog.umcdiscipleship.org/category/leadership/wesleyan-way.

Your faith formation leaders may have favorite podcasts to share with one another. Invite them to use colorful Post-It notes and write the names of podcasts they recommend. Ask them to place the Post-It notes on the easel paper or board. Tell them that you will compile a list and send it to them later in the week.

New Ways: Downloadable Curriculum Resources

The United Methodist Publishing House, through Abingdon Press and Cokesbury, offers many new Bible studies for adults and parent ministries. Its website features Deep Blue Kids resources for Sunday school ministries for nursery through tweens at www.deepbluekids.com. A page on the site includes "Free Stuff for Teachers," www.deepbluekids.com/free-stuff/free-stuff-for-teachers.

Faith formation leaders who teach middle school and high school youth will benefit from checking into the publishing house's site for youth resources, Youth Ministry Partners, www.youthministrypartners.com.

Closing (About 5 minutes)

Invite participants to sing a closing song, standing if they are able and would like to stand. Select one of the following songs, or choose another piece that your faith formation leaders may enjoy.

"The Kingdom of God" by Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, F-71250 Taizé-Communauté

"The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Come, Lord, and open in us the gates of your kingdom."

This prayer song is meant to be repeated five or six times.

To read more about learning the songs, see www.taize.fr/en_article10308.html?letter=T. The music with harmony is found here, www.taize.fr/spip.php?page=chant&song=499&lang=en.

"Go, My Children, with My Blessing." This song may be accompanied by a pianist. Click on the link to play the Piano Accompaniment Recording by Discipleship Ministries: www.gbod3.org/sorter/audio/688.mp3.

“Go, my children, with my blessing, never alone. Waking, sleeping, I am with you. You are my own. In my love’s baptismal river I have made you mine forever. Go, my children, with my blessing. You are my own.”

Three additional verses are available. The piano accompaniment recording features a brief introduction and plays for three verses.

“Walk in Peace” by Adam M. L. Tice and Sally Ann Morris. You may buy the song for \$1.29 at GIA Publications, www.giamusic.com/store/resource/walk-in-peace-recording-cd908.

“Walk in peace, walk in beauty. Walk in the spirit of God. And when you walk, Christ is there. And when you walk, Christ is there. Before you, behind you, beneath you, above you, beside you, within you, Christ is there.” The song continues with similar verses. “Rest in peace.... Rise in peace.... Sing in peace.... Walk in peace....”

Close with a prayer of thanks to God for the reflections on Scripture and the experiences that were shared today. Express gratitude for all that the Lord is doing and will continue to do to bless the children, youth, and adults in your community through worship, faith formation, and mission ministries as, together, you grow as disciples of Jesus Christ this year.

Leadership resources are available for download here at www.UMCdiscipleship.org

- Educational Ministry, www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/educational-ministry
- Children, www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/children
- Intergenerational and Family Ministries, www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries
- Youth and Young Adults, www.umcyoungpeople.org
- Adult Ministries, www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/adults
- Older Adult Ministries, www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/older-adults

You may order the following resources from the Upper Room online bookstore, Cokesbury, or Amazon:

- *A World Worth Saving: Lenten Spiritual Practices for Action* by George Hovaness Donigan
- *Against the Grain: Unconventional Wisdom from Ecclesiastes* by Ray Waddle
- *Finding Your Voice in the Psalms: An Invitation to Honest Prayer* by Elizabeth J. Canham
- *Made to Move: Knowing and Loving God Through Our Bodies* by Wendy R. LeBolt
- *One Day, I Wrote Back: Interacting with Scripture Through Creative Writing* by Jane Herring
- *Passing It On: How to Nurture Your Children's Faith Season by Season* by Kara Lassen Oliver
- *Pauses for Pentecost: 50 Words for Easter People* by Trevor Hudson
- *Scrambled Starts: Family Prayers for Morning, Bedtime, and Everything in Between* by Jenny Youngman
- *Which Way, Lord? Exploring Your Life's Purpose in the Journeys of Paul* by Rob Fuquay

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION WEEK is authorized by the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, but its observance is set by each annual conference. Check with your annual conference office to determine if your annual conference has set a specific date.

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Funded through World Service apportionment giving by United Methodist congregations.