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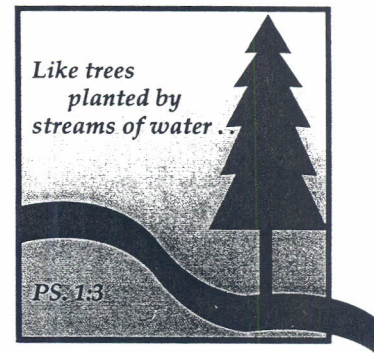
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# Are Adults *the Neglected Species?*

BY ELEANOR A. DANIEL

Malcolm Knowles, often called the father of adult education in this country, some years ago wrote a book entitled *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*.<sup>1</sup> The title states in perhaps the clearest terms the reason for adult education in the church.

The Sunday school movement was in the beginning an educational movement directed to children. Robert Raikes, founder of the Sunday school in England, began the first Sunday school to teach street urchins who worked long hours every week in English sweat shops and who had no other opportunity for education. Those first schools taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, along with religion. Though the Wesleys understood the value of the Sunday school as a tool of education for all ages in the church, the established church in England scoffed at the idea and called it “a tool of the devil,” leaving little possibility for it to become a place of study for adults, at least proper religious adults.

Even when the Sunday school immigrated to America, where it found its most fertile field, the earliest schools were directed to children—often, to the children of plantation owners in the South and the children of slaves who would otherwise have had little exposure to education. In the northern section of the country as well, Sunday schools were for children. The greatest expansion of the Sunday school came on the frontier, largely the result of the work of the American Sunday School Union, based in Philadelphia. But those Sunday schools, too, were for children.

The American Sunday School Union made some ef-

fort at adult education by developing training programs, for the most part through Sunday school conventions. But back in the Sunday schools, Christian education was primarily for children. To this day many mainline denominations do not expect adults to be involved in Christian education activity. Sunday school is often conducted for children during adult worship services, neatly serving the needs of the entire family in a short amount of time.

Churches committed to a conservative theology have more often offered Christian education opportunities for adults, especially adult Sunday school classes and, more recently, small groups. Early in this century, churches often had one or more very large adult classes. It was not uncommon for Sunday school attendance to exceed worship attendance, often because adults, with their children, attended Sunday school but not worship until after they had made a commitment to the church.

The adult classes were frequently structured much like a worship service. The Sunday school period began with a worship assembly; the class itself was a lecture experience. And for many years this structure met certain needs for those who participated. However, through the years the formal educational achievement of the average adult in the church has risen considerably. Adults have been educated in a system that has encouraged participation in the learning process. Meanwhile, back at the church, classes have proceeded as largely lecture experiences.

In the early years, adult classes were strong fellowship centers that cared for the needs of class members. As

important as Bible teaching was, the appropriate organization of the class to achieve fellowship was equally essential. While the world has become an increasingly anonymous place to live—and fellowship is needed more than ever before—adult classes have frequently ignored this characteristic.

Initially, adult classes existed to produce new leaders, especially those who would contribute to the Sunday school. Classes were organized in a way that allowed people to take on leadership tasks and develop in them in preparation for even larger leadership responsibility. Only rarely is that the case now—and organized classes have sometimes lost sight of the purpose of their organization.

Although some form of adult education has usually been present in the church, no well-defined philosophy has permeated the planning and practice of adult classes. When all is said and done, then, the need for adult education is present in every congregation. No congregation dare ignore the value or immensity of this task.

### **The Purposes for Adult Education in the Church**

Simply stated, adult education should help adults progress toward maturity in Jesus Christ. Adults should be taught to understand and articulate their faith. They should be guided to mature Christian behavior. They should be motivated for service. Christian growth is a day-by-day, week-by-week, year-by-year experience that occurs only as a person interacts with God's word.

#### **Assumptions About Adult Learners**

It is important for anyone who teaches adults to come to grips with the basic assumptions about adult learners that should direct classroom practice.

*Adults can learn.* The old adage "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" simply isn't so. A quick look at contemporary society refutes that adage, with millions of adults involved in some kind of adult education experience. (Many aren't in the church, of course, but adults are learning.) Allen Tough found in his research that adults engage in an average of eight learning projects each year, many of them in natural ways rather than through formal schooling.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament assumes that adults do learn and change. To deny that is to deny the New Testament doctrine of sanctification—Christian growth toward maturity.

*Unlike children, adults are experienced when they enter the classroom.* Children bring very little experience to a class; adults bring years of life experience, along with

all of their attitudes and biases. This makes adult learners more knowledgeable and able to contribute a great deal more to the learning process. It may also create some resistance to learning.

*Adults come to learning groups for a variety of reasons.* Cyril Houle did a study of twenty-two learners. He found that his subjects fell into three different categories:

The first . . . , the *goal-oriented*, are those who use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives. The second, the *activity-oriented*, are those who take part because they find in the circumstances of the learning a meaning which has no necessary connection, and often no connection at all, with the content or announced purposes of the activity. The third, the *learning-oriented*, seek knowledge for its own sake. These are not pure types; the best way to represent them pictorially would be by three circles which overlap their edges. But the central emphasis of each subgroup is clearly discernible.<sup>3</sup>

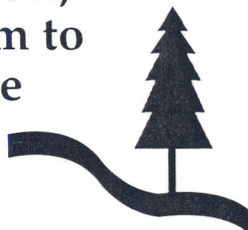
Houle's work has definite implications for Christian adult educators. A class may well be about evenly divided with respect to types of learners. Yet teachers often teach as if the members of the group were all of one type—usually, the same type as the teacher. Teachers must understand the learning styles of group members in order to plan sessions that will appeal to each type of learner.

*Adult learners want to be respected.* They do not tolerate ridicule, condescension, embarrassment, or irrelevancy if they are in a learning group for goal-oriented or learning-oriented reasons. Activity-oriented learners may tolerate irrelevancy if the activity is social in nature or if they feel that they *must* be involved in a Bible class regardless of its value.

*Adult learners expect comfort in the classroom.* They first of all want physical comfort. (All learners may desire it, but children will tolerate less comfort than adults.) But more than that, they want to be psychologically comfortable in the classroom. (Children may need psychological comfort in the classroom, but they often have very little choice about whether or not they attend.)

*Adults may not always attend*—sometimes with good reason. Some adults have to work on some Sundays (or during weekday Bible studies). Some need to make trips to see their parents or other family members. Some simply do not feel the need to attend every week. Whatever the cause, many adults will not be present every week. Yet these same adults need to know that their absence is noticed, that people care when they are gone, even if they

**Adults of any age will respond to instruction led by teachers who respect them, create in them a need to know, and stimulate them to involvement in the session.**



are absent for some predictable reason.

*Adults sometimes resist change.* Because of their accumulation of experience, because of the discomfort of changing, because of their basic personality sets, some adults do not want to change or to be challenged to change. Many teachers of adults try to force change. They make changes too quickly. They give insufficient rationale for change. And the adults dig in their heels and dare the teacher to change them. Yet it has been estimated that 90 percent of adults can change. Some will change more rapidly than others. Some will find change more comfortable than others. But most adults can change and will change if they are respected and given enough time and reason to do so.

*Adults learn best when they are involved.* Involvement need not necessarily mean doing physical activity, or even talking. But it does mean that teachers help the learners to discover the relevancy of what is to be learned and engage them in at least an active mental process.

### **Conditions For Adult Learning**

Malcolm Knowles has proposed a theory of adult education that he calls *andragogy*. Building on the concept of pedagogy as the science of teaching children, he makes the point that adults are more than grown-up children and therefore require a different approach to the teaching/learning encounter. He describes this approach as *andragogy*, that is, the science of teaching adults.<sup>4</sup>

Knowles asserts that the process of maturation involves a movement from dependency toward increasing self-directedness, but at different rates for different people

and in different dimensions of life. Children are dependent learners; teachers of adults must encourage and nurture self-directedness. Good *andragogy* seeks to help learners accept a share of the responsibility for planning and facilitating a learning experience. Teachers of adults need not do everything in the classroom; learners can take on various responsibilities themselves.

As individuals grow and develop, they accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning—for themselves and for others. Humans attach more meaning to learning gained from experience than that acquired passively. Teachers, therefore, seek student involvement in the learning process. The primary mode of teaching in *andragogy* is inquiry. Effective teachers rarely tell students what they ought to know. Rather, they more often use questions, critique, and evaluation. Furthermore, good teachers do not accept a single statement as an answer to a question, unless, of course, the Bible text clearly specifies it. Good teachers encourage student-student interaction as opposed to student-teacher interaction. And good teachers are flexible, depending on the response of the group.<sup>5</sup>

Students become ready to learn something when they experience a need to learn it. Teachers must create conditions and provide tools and procedures that will help learners discover their “need to know.” Students want to be able to apply what they learn. Effective teachers must then relate learning to specific needs. Finally, students must have a sense of progress toward their goals. Teachers accomplish this by providing for times of application and reflection.

### **Teaching Adults in the Church**

Anyone can teach any adult, young or old, by observing the principles and conditions of adult education. Many are intimidated by trying to teach their peers, believing that they have nothing to contribute. And that may be true if the purpose of Christian education is merely the transmission of facts and information. But the purpose of Christian education is to use facts and information in a learning environment that will encourage and help individuals to grow toward maturity in the Christian faith. Adults of any age will respond to instruction led by teachers who respect them, create in them a need to know, and stimulate them to involvement in the session.

### This Issue of *Leaven*

This issue of *Leaven* is designed to help churches explore the foundations and practice of adult education. PAUL LEARNED, a Christian educator with long experience both in the local church and as a curriculum consultant, begins by establishing biblical foundations for adult education and expanding our thinking to extend far beyond the traditional Sunday school. CHUCK LEE, minister of adult education at the rapidly growing Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, explores a sound philosophy of adult education that guides the ministry of that great church. MARK LOVE and RICK GROVER examine the important areas of evangelism and discipleship and how they relate to adult education. DAVID WRAY, a veteran Christian educator, explores development of teachers and leaders for adult classes. A case study on the development of an adult class led by this author gives insight into how to begin a class. Another veteran adult educator, TAMSEN MURRAY, reflects on her experiences teaching adults.

#### Conclusion

Adults can and do learn. Churches must take notice of the principles of adult education that will work in any

setting in which they are applied. Adults may be the most underdeveloped resource the church has. Good adult education can reverse that trend.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Houston: Gulf, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Allen Tough's work is reported in *Learning Without a Teacher* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1967) and *The Adult's Learning Projects*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Cyril O. Houle, *The Inquiring Mind* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 15–16.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Follett, 1980), 40–62. The material in this section is adapted from this chapter in Knowles.

<sup>5</sup> Knowles, *The Adult Learner*, 74–79.