

The Key To a Healthy Christian Education Ministry

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I'll waste no time employing the literary technique of suspense in the lead of this article. The key to a healthy Christian education ministry in your local church is the pastor. Without ongoing pastoral support, CE agencies and events rarely fulfill their potential.

Is such a bold statement valid? Without hesitancy, many experts in Christian education nod, "Yes!" Dr. L. Ted Johnson, Executive Secretary of our Baptist General Conference Board of Christian Education, puts "pastoral support" first on his list of seven vital signs of Sunday school health. Joe Bayly, renowned author and publishing executive, asserts, "Members of a congregation perceive as important whatever the pastor perceives as important."

Why is the pastor's support so crucial? First, he is the primary educator in the church. He is the most public of teachers; the most highly-observed model of Christian lifestyle, and by virtue of his God-given job description in Ephesians 4:11-12, he is the equipper/trainer of others in the congregation. (For a more detailed treatment of the pastor's role as educator, see the article "Our Pastor Is a D.C.E." in the Fall 1982 issue of Professional Perspectives.)

Second, the pastor's support of CE ministries is necessary because he usually has more "source credibility" than anyone else in the congregation. Credible sources are visible persons in the congregation who, by virtue of position, personality and/or reputation, wield a lot of influence. When such a person speaks, the majority perks up and listens. For instance, when promoting a new idea or creating interest in a particular ministry event, communication experts insist that source credibility is much more important than how logically or creatively the idea or event is presented. Put simply, who speaks for or against an idea is more crucial than what is publicly said about it.

Due to the nature of, and respect due, his office, the pastor automatically has source credibility. A strong pulpit ministry and caring attitudes toward his flock enhance credibility. Only poor stewardship of his responsibilities can destroy it.

Now let's shift the spotlight from theory to its practical implications. What should a busy pastor know about the Church's educational ministries and agencies? How can he lend support without usurping weekly priorities such as sermon preparation, prayer, planning, visitation and counseling?

What follows are three categories of questions, to help a pastor evaluate his involvement in the church's CE ministries.

I. Awareness

- A. Do I know what curriculum is being used in the Sunday school and other teaching agencies? Do I know why these materials were selected over others?
- B. Do I know and agree with the teaching/learning styles being used by the volunteer staff?
- C. Can I name the educational leaders in the church? Members of the CE Board and all sub-committees? Sunday school department heads? Teaching staff? (Of course, the larger your church, the more difficult this keeping-up task becomes!)
- D. Do I, or an associate pastoral staff member, have frequent interaction with the Sunday school superintendent?
- E. Am I aware of special CE events and emphases slated for the future?
- F. Does someone keep me informed with agendas and decisions of the CE Board and its sub-committees?
- G. Am I aware of attendance patterns in the Sunday school? In youth ministries? Do I know how these figures compare to a year ago?
- H. Do I pass along information about resources, conferences and trends to youth sponsors, S.S. leaders and board

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members? (They probably aren't aware of the periodicals and newsletters that you are privileged to receive.) 1. Am I aware of specific needs of personnel and ministries, so I can pray intelligently for them on a regular basis?

II. Affirmation

- A. Do I promote the Sunday school and other educational ministries from the pulpit?
- B. Do I periodically give volunteer leaders public visibility to explain the objectives and vision of their spheres of service?
- C. Does the church schedule special services annually to recognize the contributions of teachers, sponsors, and other servants?
- D. Do I occasionally teach a Sunday school class? Do I often drop in on a class to mingle with people and encourage the teacher?
- E. Do I occasionally make a phone call or write a note to thank a worker who has "gone the second mile" in his or her service to the body?

III. Leadership Development

- A. Do I periodically preach a series of sermons for the purpose of conveying a biblical philosophy of ministry? (Important areas to cover include the nature of the church, spiritual gifts, job description of a pastor, role of the layman and implications of the term "priest" when applied to believers. Such teaching fosters a climate for mobilizing people to serve, and chips away at the traditional dependency on the pastoral staff to do all the work of the ministry.)
- B. Do I help recruiters identify potential teachers and leaders within the church
- C. Is it my habit to encourage persons in leadership. to plan training opportunities? Do I nudge the teaching staff to tap such opportunities?
- D. Do I encourage adequate provision in the-church budget for leadership training, resources, etc.? (A church's budget reflects its priorities!)

These evaluative criteria aren't exhaustive. And since every local church situation is unique, you aren't necessarily obligated to apply the precise methods other pastors do to support their CE ministries. But use these questions as food for thought, Try _to digest at least a couple of them this week.

If you believe that your body's educational efforts are essential to fulfilling God's goals for the total church, then your support of CE is integral to your pastoral calling.

(The evaluating questions I used in this article are adapted from the BGC Board of Christian Education's PROCESS '80 notebook. This 102-page loose-leaf notebook has separate chapters on seven vital signs of Sunday school health: pastoral support; congregational commitment, -caring personnel; intentional planning; learner-focused teaching; growth goals, and planned outreach. Each chapter contains several diagnostic tools that a task force could employ in a comprehensive evaluation of your church's Sunday school ministry. To get this valuable tool. send \$7.95 to Harvest Publications, 2002 S. Arlington Heights Road, Arlington Heights, Illinois, 60005.)

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