

How to Make the Church School Hour...
the most interesting hour of the week

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Theology Talks

Overview

As mainline denominations experience steady declines in membership,¹ the pews feel roomier and there are countless open seats in Sunday school. With a retention rate of only 45%, mainline protestant churches across the U.S. are experiencing a year-by-year graying of members. Young adults are scarce and each successive high school graduation moves the next generation out into the world and, often, away from a church home.

In 2015, CBS news reported on these drops in church attendance.² Among those interviewed was 27-year old account executive who is shown seated in a modern office filled with sleek desks and laptops. A minute later, the reporter cut to a church education director seated in her office. Her desk overflowed with paperwork and her bookshelves were filled to the brim with books. It is impossible to miss the contrast. The millennial's office place and the church education director's office dramatically display the wide technological gap felt between the church and modern society.

To what extent should the church reflect modern life? In many ways, the church stands outside of culture. The church preserves a particular teaching and value system that sets it apart. Yes, the church *is* the body of Christ, but it is a body composed of human beings who live in a

¹Pew center cites a drop from 18.1% to 14.7% of US adults identifying with a mainline denomination between the years 2007 and 2014. "Mainline Protestants make up shrinking number of U.S. adults," Pew Research Center, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/>.

² See account executive at 0:54 and church director at 1:34. "Study: More Americans than ever spurning religion," CBS News, accessed: April 13, 2017 <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/study-number-of-americans-who-spurn-religion-hits-record-high/>

particular time and place. Human beings who operate in a particular world. While churches must always take care not to adopt cultural norms in a way that obscures or compromises its teachings, there is much the church *can* do to embrace the advances of modern times and of modern technology. In particular, I believe the church has had a failure of imagination around technology and its ability to enhance and deliver the gospel message to modern Christians.

One church area where technology could be better integrated is in church school. This paper explores one model of how the church school hour could better reflect cultural realities. By integrating technology into the church school hour and delivering content in a more accessible and culturally relevant way, we can create space for church school to be: *the most interesting hour of the week*.

Church-time vs. Screen-time

Although church attendance and membership is flagging across mainline denominations, Americans are not simply “too busy” to attend services. While denominational norms vary, Presbyterian churchgoers can spend up to 3 hours in worship or church school on Sundays. According to a 2016 Nielsen report, the average American spends 1.5 hours per day on their smart phones and 4.5 hours per day watching television.³ A person unable to find 3 hours for church on Sunday might well be spending that time in front of the television. Though the average congregation size is dwindling, our use of technology is growing.

Not only are Americans increasingly consuming media, they are also making room for new forms of media. TED Talks was launched in 2006 with a series of six, 18-minute talks on

³ “American devote more than 10 hours a day to screen time,” CNN, accessed: April 12, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/30/health/americans-screen-time-nielsen/>.

the topics of technology, entertainment, and design. By the end of 2012, TED Talks had reached one billion viewers.⁴ In an article advertising this milestone, the TED Talks staff writes:

“none of us could possibly have predicted the way in which TED Talks would take off over the next few years. What does this tell us? That people *want* to learn. That people *want* be inspired. That people are hungry for ideas, and that there’s a bubbling desire not to let the unfortunate truths of our world remain the status quo, but to look for creative solutions.”

The church has long been a place of inspiration and education,⁵ yet these new forms of media pose competition to the spiritual formation found at church. For some in modern society, TED Talks – not the church – is the place where hungry hearts are fed.

The allure of TED Talks is not solely its content. Every speaker is delivering a highly polished and abbreviated version of their work. Authors present a snapshot of their ideas. Scientists offer a high-level synopsis of their research and findings. Business leaders outline their projects in broad sweeping descriptions dotted with catchy nuggets of wisdom. The information underlying TED Talks is available. The content is not restricted or inaccessible. Anyone willing to search their local and university libraries can locate the underlying publications written by these experts. It is not the content alone, but the combination of content, format and availability that makes TED Talks so popular.

Typical Church School for Adults

How does the church offer meaningful spiritual formation to adults? In most churches, adult education is allowed to “run itself.” Leadership teams exert little oversight and

⁴ “TED reaches its billionth video view!” TED Blog, accessed: April 12, 2017, <http://blog.ted.com/ted-reaches-its-billionth-video-view/>.

⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 35.

programming is determined by each individual class within broad parameters. In my years of teaching adult church school, I have not once seen church leadership override or redirect any programming ideas that my class proposed. Teachers are nearly always volunteers. Adult curriculums that offer truly deep theological learning and reflection are few and far between. While one can easily locate adult Bible study curriculum – and this is an important part of adult church school – knowing what the Bible says and learning how to think about what the Bible says are two separate endeavors.

Countless Americans feed their minds and hearts on inspiring TED Talks. Yet when these same technologically sophisticated Americans enter a church school classroom, they often receive significant emotional support and very little intellectual stimulation. While deep connections within a church school class are profoundly meaningful and essential for spiritual formation, I have experienced adults in my classes thirsty for quality learning. They wonder: what is the historical context of a particular passage? What is the bias of this writer and how is it expressed? How might we think differently about scripture as a whole? They wrestle with: how do we understand our scripture in light of comparative texts from other ancient religions? How counter-cultural are Christians called to be? What are modern equivalents to Jesus' ethical teachings? These adults are often unprepared to engage in complex discussions like: what is a theologically-sound Christian response to the ongoing war in Syria? Or, what are the theological implications of ecological abuse or destruction? And how might the church respond?

Modern adult congregants thirst for these conversations. I believe the complexity of modern life demands that the church respond with diligence to equip its members more fully in their faith walks. How might this be done during the church school hour?

Imagine...

Imagine a different approach to adult church school. Imagine that we walk into a class – perhaps even a church-wide, combined class – and watch a short video on a meaningful theological question of our modern times. Imagine if we could explore how theology intersects our lives with various experts from across religious, academic and non-profit sectors. Imagine then that we could split into smaller groups and have an open and vibrant discussion on what we had just learned. What if this was our church school model? What if we could come to church and expect not just relational support but also intellectual stimulation? Could church – once again – become a place of intellectual inspiration and education?

The Proposal

I currently serve in the Theological Education ministry of a large, urban church. My team is developing a new program designed to deliver theological education in a technologically integrated manner. The program, called “TheoEd Talks,” is modeled on the format and delivery of TED Talks. The first round of these “TheoEd Talks” will be recorded this fall during our program launch event. Three speakers will each present a twenty-minute talk on the theological topic of their choice. We have asked them to choose a message about which they are passionate and which addresses a burning theological question of our times. We hope these talks will deliver the gospel message in a more accessible and relevant way to modern Christians.

This launch is only the beginning. Our program is funded by an endowment that was given to enhance adult theological education for our church and for the wider community. These initial talks and all future talks will be housed on a dedicated website and made available to any and all who would like to watch. Individuals can watch these videos for their own personal

enrichment – just as many people already watch TED Talks for inspiration and learning.

However, our deeper hope is that church groups – small groups, Bible studies, Sunday School classes – will use these videos as a jumping off point to enrich and enhance their discussions.

These videos are offered freely as a means of bridging the technological gap between church and culture. In these videos, solid theological teaching and reflection is delivered through a medium that is familiar and comfortable to modern Christians. These videos will be as easy to access as a TED Talk, and they will highlight the inspiring faith journeys of leaders within our churches, our academies, and our non-profits. The library of “TheoEd” talks will introduce a diversity of experience and expertise beyond what a single class or church group could gather on its own.

Conclusion

The goal of such an educational program is not to quell the many questions that arise in adult church school classes. While some questions may receive answers, we ultimately hope to encourage theological discourse and to raise new and deeper questions. It is our prayer that these talks are generative – that they challenge, inspire, and motivate modern Christians to more profound expressions of faith – personally and communally. “TheoEd Talks” leverages the format that TED Talks has so successfully defined. Yet, it also inserts a decidedly Christian voice and perspective into the conversation. It offers Christians a platform for learning that is familiar, accessible, and relevant and feeds their intellectual curiosity on matters of faith.

I believe that by meeting this need, “TheoEd Talks” can powerfully enhance the typical church school experience. While I am convinced that careful, line-by-line Bible studies and open dialogue on emotional struggles are both valuable components of adult spiritual formation, I am

also convinced that the church faces a significant need to feed the aching intellectual hunger of its adults. The format and content of “TheoEd Talks” has the potential to inject new life into church school conversations and can be used alongside (or in the breaks between) regular curriculum to energize adult learners. I believe and expect that these “TheoEd Talks” will have the power to transform the church school hour into *the most interesting hour of the week*.

Bibliography

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