

## Three Ways to Organize an Adult Bible Department

There are, in my experience, three ways to organize a church's adult Bible class program. Perhaps the most common is **the "Brother Smith" system**. In this approach, Brother Smith teaches a class for as long as he wishes—which means until he dies.

Churches that follow this method typically have two or three Brother Smiths. Each one has a classroom and a loyal following. Some of these classes run, quite literally, for decades.

This approach has its advantages. It's no problem to find a teacher each quarter—it's the same men who were teaching last quarter! And these classes often become very close to one another, visiting in the hospital and otherwise caring for each other. In fact, these classes often become virtual sub-congregations.

There are disadvantages as well. There may be other men gifted to teach who never get the chance. Worse yet, the various Brother Smiths likely don't entirely agree on their approaches to the scripture. Typically, the more conservative members attend the class taught by the more conservative Brother Smith. The more progressive members find a Brother Smith who teaches what they already believe, as well. No one is ever challenged to change. Rather, they are accommodated in whatever their preexisting biases may be.

When Brother Smith churches split, they split along the fault lines defined by their Sunday School classes.

When a new preacher is hired and the elders want to pursue a new scriptural perspective, if the Brother Smiths are unpersuaded, the entire congregation is unpersuaded because the leadership's efforts are thwarted by the adult education faculty. And it's just impossible to move Brother Smith out of his classroom.

Another approach is **the college system**. In this structure, different teachers teach different subjects, and the students pick where to attend and learn the subjects that interest them. This approach is more popular in larger congregations that may have several capable teachers.

The advantage is that teachers are likely teaching what they are best at. Moreover, the marketplace prevails. If a teacher is weak, the students leave and go elsewhere, so only the strongest teachers survive. In this sense, this is a rather Darwinian model!

The disadvantage is that the classes are focused entirely on the subject matter. Unlike the Brother Smith system, no one in the class looks out for other members. They'll only be together for a quarter, after all, and if the teacher isn't very good, not even that long. Hence, the college system is academically excellent but pastorally very weak.

Worse yet, once again, no one is ever forced to learn something that makes them uncomfortable. There is no way for the eldership to instruct the entire congregation on any one topic through the class system, because no one has to attend any given class.

Finally, there's what my church has done for over 25 years—age group classes with **rotating teachers**. Each class has a host who does not change from week to week. He makes sure roll is checked, that missing class members are followed up, that the class has occasional social events, that visitors are invited to a small group, and otherwise manages the class pastorally.

Each quarter, the class has a different teacher. Teachers are moved from class to class, and teachers teach on topics they are skilled in.

Flexibility is the hallmark of this system. In the younger classes, we sometimes have three or four teachers who are trainees. Some classes divide topics up between team teachers, accommodating travel schedules of many of our more mobile members.

The advantage of this system is that, as is true in the Brother Smith system, the classes stay together for years, even decades, and can become very close to one another. Class becomes a great place to make friends and build relationships. Classes don't have to suffer a weak teacher for long, but we have the chance to experiment and see who has the gift to teach. No one is ever denied the opportunity to teach just because there are no openings.

We have, on occasion, tried out the college system, and we often get a boost in attendance as each member gets to pick a topic of interest. But every time, near the end of the quarter, attendance will have dropped very low and students will be begging to return to the old system. You see, they miss their friends. Academic excellence is just not enough to build an adult education program.

One disadvantage is that this system requires more work than the Brother Smith system. Every quarter, the program leader has to find a new slate of teachers, and the teachers have to find material they are capable of teaching.

On the other hand, doctrinal teaching can be very uniform. Over the course of a few quarters, a master teacher can rotate through all the classes and teach mission-critical material: grace, the Holy Spirit, the Sermon on the Mount, and such.

Also, the entire church has the opportunity to see many different men in action. Over time, this system allows potential elders to be in front of the entire congregation. It's good exposure and good testing. There's nothing quite so direct as having to interact with an adult Sunday School class to prove your mettle.

This is not to say the system is flawless. It has its weaknesses. It's hard to assemble a consistent curriculum, to be sure each class has a good teacher each quarter, and to find capable hosts who aren't having to rotate because they also teach. But it's a system that builds unity, and that seems to me to be worth some considerable trouble.