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# The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

 Brought to you this month  
by David Woody


## Something New for Something Old

Our church hosts an event called PBC 101. This is a time for new or prospective members to hear the story of Providence, ask questions about our mission and ministries, and decide if this is a place they want to plant some roots. Recently, we held PBC 101 with a group that included folks who had grown up Baptist, some who were thinking about switching denominations and a few who had never officially been a part of a church.

After dinner we began talking about the church. At one point, one of our charter members made the statement that during the beginning stages of our church we had many Damascus Road experiences. We continued talking about the other areas of church and finally concluded the evening.

As folks were preparing to leave, I asked one of the couples if they had any questions about the night. They said, "We are fascinated by the history of the church. We used to live near the Seventh-Day Adventist church where you met before moving to this building. But, we aren't familiar with Damascus Road. How long did the church meet there, and what is it close to?"

Little did I realize that one simple question would reshape the way I approach Christian education and spiritual formation.

Years ago everyone who went to church knew the church language. Church members and ministers used words such as salvation, repentance, Damascus Road and atonement without fear of being misunderstood or not understood at all. Recently, however, common religious language and stories have taken a back seat to culture, business and other parts of life. We cannot assume everyone is on the same page — or even in the same book!

Back then, Baptists remained Baptist and Presbyterians remained Presbyterian. When a family moved from First Methodist Church of Town A, they immediately joined First Methodist Church of Town B. Today, the denominational line is almost gone. Former Methodists attend Presbyterian churches, former Episcopalians attend Methodist churches and even former Catholics are joining Baptist churches. Some new church members are finding a home in a church for the very first time.

This "melting pot" of people is a new challenge for Christian educators and volunteer teachers.

The challenge we have is simply difficult: How do we share the Bible, the language and the stories in a way that is relevant and makes sense? After that brief conversation at PBC 101 regarding the Damascus Road, I have given a lot of thought to meeting people where they are on the "church journey." Let me offer five suggestions to help bridge the gap to a new level of understanding.

1. *Assume everyone is "in the book" for the first time.* Many people carry a Bible to church, but not many actually open it. We began a new Sunday School class using the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's *Christianity for Beginners*. Many people in the class did not know why the Bible had different books inside the book and could not make sense of all the chapter and verse numbers. We started out using page numbers as reference points. Gradually, we worked toward using chapters and verses. Now, the group is more comfortable using the "traditional" method of locating scripture.

2. *Take time to share the stories.* The Bible is full of wonderful characters and incredible stories. Go back and read the stories again. Build a Bible study or Sunday school class around stories of the Bible. Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark, Abraham and Sarah, King Solomon, Jonah, Jesus and Mary might be familiar names, but many of their stories are unfamiliar to the average church member. Even some of the most familiar stories are unfamiliar to different sets of ears. Do not assume everyone knows the stories. Refresh everyone's memory and read the stories.

3. *Explain the words and definitions.* Those of us who have taught Sunday school or Bible studies for years have forgotten what "religious speak" sounds like. We are comfortable using the word repentance. When we teach a lesson about it, everyone in the class nods their head like they know what we are talking about. What *are* we talking about? Take the time to define words or terms others might not understand. Do not wait for them to ask; take the initiative. When the teacher explains a "basic" word, the learners not only understand better, but also realize the teacher cares about their learning.

### Resources

#### Sharing the story

- *The Beginner's Bible: Timeless Children's Stories* (Mountain City Press, 1989)
- *Upper Room Children's Bible Stories and Fascinating Facts* by Stephanie Jeffs and Derek Williams (Upper Room Books, 2000)
- *Christianity for Beginners* by Bob Setzer, Jr. (Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 2004)

#### Learning a New Language

- *Mercer's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson Mills (Mercer University Press, 1990)
- *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* by Kathleen Norris (Riverhead Books, 1998)
- *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* by Frederick Buechner (Harper Collins, 1973)

4. *Encourage questions.* Too many teachers fear questions. Questions challenge what we have prepared. They challenge what we know. They challenge the truth we want to teach in the lesson. Your class might have a question that brings new life into the story. The question might reveal a truth you never saw before. The question might require you to make a note and look it up during the next week. Many times I have had to admit that I am not a walking Bible encyclopedia. "That's a great question," I have responded. "Let me look that up this week and let you know next time we meet." If you do promise to look up something, make sure to bring the answer back to the class.

5. *Emphasize that no question is a bad question.* Learning about religion, the Bible and Christianity evokes many questions. We are all searchers on the faith journey. All questions should be allowed to be asked. I have had questions ranging from "What is the scientific explanation of the creation of the world?" to "How can there be 66 books in one book?" People's questions are important because their understanding of God and God's word is important.

I encourage you to teach again for the first time. Approach your lessons and your learners with a new set of eyes and a new attitude. Incorporate these five suggestions into your class, and you will be amazed at what your class — and you — will learn. **BT**

**THE RESOURCE PAGE** is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by David Woody, minister of faith development at Providence Baptist Church in Charleston, S.C.