

AHA! LEARNING METHODS MATTER

By Brian Gammill

This paper summarizes the learning principles that led to the formulation of the methodologies incorporated in Harvest teaching materials.

Think about the best teacher you ever had. What distinguished that teacher from the rest? Was it what they taught, how they helped you learn, or simply who they were in the way they related to you that made a life-changing impact? There are many dynamics that contribute to effective learning experiences, and many of these dynamics change with age. In fact, the kind of teaching that may have been very effective in your youth may not be the same kind of teaching that would impact you today.

There are many reasons for this but, simply put, adults learn much differently than children and typically have very different learning objectives. Adults are more interested in learning things that are immediately relevant to their lives. They want more than just facts; they want insight on issues that relate to their personal experiences. When it comes to learning about and living out our faith, this distinction becomes even more critical.

Effective adult education in the Christian arena is more of a process than an event, one where the learner takes center stage, rather than the teacher. The Holy Spirit is the real teacher, using God's Word and learners' life experiences to reinforce Kingdom principles.

Teaching Techniques

Harvest's teaching materials employ many techniques that help learners become active participants in the learning process. Each lesson begins with an introductory exercise. This could be a role-play, visual, song, demonstration, game, group discussion, or another creative way to draw participants into a dynamic learning experience. Once the topic is introduced, the group looks to Scripture to see what God's Word says about the issue, often in smaller groups of three or four people. Participants learn through a process of discovery. Facilitators know they have succeeded when participants experience an "Aha!" moment and respond enthusiastically to what the Holy Spirit has taught them.

Learning Goal: Life Application

Harvest's teaching materials have been designed with the end goal of helping followers of Christ to live under God's direction—putting into action what they learn from Scripture. For this goal, how people learn is almost as important as what they learn, because how they learn influences what they do with their newly acquired knowledge.

Remember Jesus' words after giving perhaps his most significant teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand." (Matthew 7: 24, 26 NIV) Jesus was not trying to give a lesson in civil engineering! He was speaking about the purpose of teaching: providing practical wisdom for victorious living. Putting Christ's teachings into action gives us insight into God's truth, transforms our inner being, and offers us hope for a better future. Merely hearing His teachings—without action—leads to pride,

arrogance, and isolation from a world that desperately needs God's healing touch.

Leading People to Action

If local churches are going to demonstrate God's love to their neighbors, they must be given more than head knowledge. Their training should lead people to loving works of service. Most church leaders would agree with this objective. However, many do not fully understand the limitations of lecture-style teaching. Large group settings are wonderful for corporate worship, but small group settings are far more effective for giving people the chance to wrestle with biblical ideas and how they apply personally. Small groups are the ideal context for interactive teaching materials.

The Dynamics of Community

We have seen that as small groups learn and discover together in this way, they begin to develop a common set of values, based on what the Holy Spirit is teaching them. As they study Scripture together and challenge one another to put what they learn into action, the Kingdom of God begins to take shape. Iron sharpens iron. The yeast begins to spread through the dough. Wounded hearts make peace with their adversaries. Receivers become givers. Pew-sitters move into service. Individuals as well as entire communities begin to experience God's love and discover His redemptive purposes.

Focus on the Heart, Not Behavior

As an organization that began its history by facilitating relief and development projects, Harvest cares deeply about the conditions that cause hardship and suffering, especially for the poor in needy areas. However, our experience has taught us that long-term change does not happen by simply providing poor communities with useful resources like technology or investment capital. Likewise, we have seen that we cannot focus only on changing the outward behavior.

For example, caste discrimination is a major problem in India, bringing humiliation to nearly 250 million people. When India achieved independence in 1947, caste discrimination was made illegal. Unfortunately, the hearts of the people were not changed, and caste discrimination continues to this day.

Long-term change must be values-based, changing the hearts and minds of individuals. Jesus said that the fruit that we bear in our lives is the overflow of our hearts. Paul challenged the early church to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. Both Jesus and Paul suggest that inward changes must take place before there are lasting outward changes in behavior.

People who have experienced such internal life changes are contagious! As individual lives are transformed, so are families, communities, and—ultimately—societies.

This is the aim of Christ-centered teaching, giving salt to a world that needs flavor. This kind of learning is a process of discovery, leading people to a personal knowledge of God Himself. Discovery learning requires intentional steps and patient endurance, but the result—seeing God's Kingdom advance—is certainly worth the effort.

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