

Chapter 18

THE ADULT LEARNER

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Until we all reach unity in the faith and in
the knowledge of God's Son,
growing into a mature man with a stature
measured by Christ's fullness.
Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves
and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human
cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit.
(Eph 4:13-14)

Introduction

Early in the 1970s Malcolm Knowles wrote a book titled *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*.¹ The preface suggests that, at the time, the concept of lifelong learning was beginning to dawn on society and affect education as a whole. Almost 40 years down the road, adult learning is in the forefront of education, especially since it has become available online. Institutions such as University of Phoenix offer many opportunities for adult learners. In our churches, however, adult learners are still largely a neglected species.

Adults are necessary to the functioning of the church, we are quick to admit. The church is staffed by adults. They serve on committees, teach Sunday school classes, attend Bible study classes and worship services, and support the church financially. Yet with all those responsibilities, do we approach them as lifelong learners? We quote the Scripture that reminds us that Jesus grew in all aspects of

¹ M. Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Houston, TX: Gulf, 1973).

life, but most often it is associated with the development of children (Luke 2:52). When it comes to growing in wisdom and in favor with God and man, we find that adults are frequently neglected in our churches. Sometimes we fail to encourage them intentionally to grow in their faith, “into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness,” as Paul expresses it in Eph 4:18.

Here are some questions to illustrate my point:

- Do you know any adults who have fallen prey to false doctrine?
- Have you experienced difficulties in maintaining a program of discipleship?
- Is it a problem to find workers for Sunday school or for the nursery?
- Are any of your new members simply “exchanges” from other churches?
- Would it make a difference in your church if every member served faithfully according to their spiritual giftedness?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, it is likely that some adults in your church have a ways to go in their journey toward maturity.

Lest you think I am painting an overly bleak picture of the situation in our churches, let me tell you about my friend Charlene. She and I are both volunteers in a nonprofit organization that raises funds for a hospital. One day each week about six of us work at a resale shop and sort clothes, household items, furniture, jewelry, and countless other items that are donated each week. All the volunteers have some characteristics in common. We are all Christians, though drawn from several denominations. Almost everyone is over the age of 60, and most are retired. Charlene is 74, a retired elementary school teacher, and she teaches a Sunday school class at her church.

The class began with one couple who were new to the church and wanted to know more about the teachings of the church. Each Sunday Charlene addresses one of the doctrines of the church in a class where there are now 75 on the roll, and they range in age from 30 to 80. I asked her why they come each Sunday. We all know that people don’t want to study doctrine because it is “boring.” Charlene’s response was, “They come because I let them talk.”

That may or may not be the reason they would offer, but in a few words Charlene had addressed several characteristics of adult learners. Why do they come, and what are they looking for in Bible study? In an attempt to provide some answers to this question, it is helpful to begin with another question: Who are the adult learners?

A Biblical Perspective

A great deal of the New Testament makes reference to adult education. The accounts of Jesus' teaching His disciples and others in the Gospels all deal with adults. Once in a while He used a child as a "visual aid," but He went to great lengths to make sure adults understood His teaching. His first opportunity to teach in the temple amazed His adult listeners. Each time He dealt with a faith issue, He was talking to adults.

Other New Testament writers, such as the apostle Paul, also make continual reference to teaching the adults in the churches. In letters to the believers in the churches he had visited, he frequently addressed the need for them to mature in their faith and grow up in Christ. Whether he was encouraging, exhorting, or chastising them, he directed his teaching toward the leaders and other adults in the churches. Sometimes he dealt with matters of doctrine or church organization or discipline, and he often reminded them to heed his teaching. He told them that this was the reason he sent Timothy to them: "He will remind you about my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere in every church" (1 Cor 4:17). He also urged Timothy to continue the teaching tradition: "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2). Adults were the target group, and adults were to continue the ministry.

The Adult Challenge for the Church

At one end of the adult population is the young adult generation, at the other is the senior adult group, and somewhere in between are the median adults. Each of these groups has their own particular set of needs, and the church is required to minister to all of them—and most likely all at the same time. Recent research focused on young adults points out that they are falling away from church in alarming

numbers. For example, a recent LifeWay research study shows young adults in the age group of 18–34 are falling away from church, and many are finding church irrelevant to their lives:

In 1980, more than 100,000 young adults were baptized in Southern Baptist churches. In 2005, slightly more than 60,000 young adults were baptized in SBC churches; a number drastically lower with the United States population climbing above 300 million.²

To identify the problem, an eight-month research study was conducted. Churchgoers or not, the study results indicated young adults are nonetheless longing for community and fellowship with peers, looking for ways to reach people in need, and circling the church but not always finding a home in it.³ This discovery raises more questions. Why is it that the thing young adults are looking for is supposed to be characteristic of the church, but they are not finding it? Is this not the place where we want them to experience a sense of connectedness and belonging?

A different study by George Barna states that one-third of the adult population is yet unchurched. Although there have been many changes in American life in the last 10 to 15 years, the proportion of unchurched adults has remained the same. “During that period there have been noteworthy shifts in religious behavior, but the percentage of adults who have steered clear of churches for at least the past six months has remained stable since 1994.”⁴

At the opposite end of the age range is the senior adult population. Another phenomenon confronting the church is the baby boomer generation that is just entering senior adult status. An article in *Time* magazine describes baby boomers this way:

When they were 18 years old, their rites of passage into adulthood—civil rights protest, the war in Vietnam, the counterculture—filled the nation’s front pages. When they finally married and began families—often much later than

² “LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church,” LifeWay Research online, http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0%2C1703%2CA%25253D165949%252526M%25253D200906%2C00.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million in the U.S.,” March 19, 2007 (Ventura, CA) <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=267>.

their own parents—their family issues became the stuff of sitcoms. Throughout their now advancing lives, the baby boomers have always stood at the demographic center of American life. Their concerns have been the dominant concerns, their passions the dominant passions. So it stands to reason that as the baby-boom generation begins its massive sweep into old age, the age-old problems of this transition into seniority are being rediscovered and re-examined as never before.⁵

A cursory Internet search will reveal just how many books, articles, and products are being produced to deal with this shift in the generation. What is the church doing? What preparations have you made for the influx of baby boomers into the realm of senior adulthood? The mind-set they will bring will introduce a completely new focus on the senior age group as it has been conceived until now.

The Church's View of Adult Ministry

Those who work with adults of all ages in the church have a great deal of work to do. We focus on the other age groups in the church and even have a children's minister or youth minister to give special attention to the age group. We know that preschoolers are different from children, and children are not the same as youth. Developmentally they are different so their needs are different. As a result, we minister to them specifically and uniquely.

As soon as learners become adults, however, we often leave them to fend for themselves. Leaders often assume they will work and witness and fellowship and grow on their own. We train them to perform tasks but often neglect their spiritual growth. They make decisions in our churches and our businesses and our government. They teach our children, go to camp with our youth, lead in our worship services, serve on committees, and do ministry. How do we minister to them?

When I make this point in my classes, I always hear some whisper, "I work with youth," or "I work with children," as if this lets them off the hook. Not so fast! Before you move on to another chapter, consider that all those who work with younger age groups must

⁵ Andrea Sachs, "Coming of Age," *Time*, Jan. 18, 1999, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,990009,00.html>.

of necessity encounter adult teachers and workers. And adults also have responsibility for the parents of those age groups. We will all be more effective as ministers in the local church, whatever our specific age group, if we give attention to the importance of educating adults. Just as we emphasize the focus on preschoolers, children, and youth in the church, so we would do well to make a similar emphasis on teaching adult learners, giving attention to what makes them unique and how they can best be taught.

In Phil 3:12–14 Paul urges the believers at the church at Philippi to move forward.

Not that I have already reached the goal or am already fully mature, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. . . . Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

Paul was a lifelong learner and encouraged his readers to be the same. No excuses, no hesitation, no consideration of the cost. Consider the following questions before you read on:

- Is lifelong learning the goal of all the adults in your church today?
- Does your church focus as much attention on developing adults as it does on children and youth?
- Are you personally pressing on toward a goal? Can you look back over a year, over five years, and see progress?

Who Are the Adults We Teach?

When is an adult an adult? When I ask students this question, there is always great variety in the answers. Some would suggest that age 18 is when one achieves adulthood because in America that is when a person can vote. Others say it is when a young person leaves home. Some would consider childbearing as a symbol. Or sometimes marriage defines us as “adult.” Yet another thought is that adulthood occurs when a young person can obtain a driver's license. Culturally and contextually, this definition also varies. One of my Laotian

friends speaks of his “young people’s class” spanning from teenage to age 35. Research in the mid-1990s on Erikson’s “Identity—Role Confusion” stage (teenagers), which he identified as 12–18 in the 1950s, now spans 10–35, which is why so many 20- and 30-some-things act like teenagers.⁶

Webster’s Dictionary defines *adulthood* as “fully developed and mature,” but it does not tell us when this happens.⁷ Coleman says:

No matter what direction it takes, our search for a concrete definition of adulthood keeps bringing us back to the same conclusion. The definition is a moving target. There is no way to fix adulthood chronologically or define it biologically. . . . The Latin participle, *adultus*, to grow up, emphasizes the dynamic of growth, rather than some state of being already attained. An adult is a person who is *growing* up, not *grown* up.⁸

The same perspective is true in Scripture where the *process of maturing* in Christ is described as an ongoing task. And yet we do not arrive at *spiritual maturity* this side of heaven. Paul says, “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14).

A definition I have developed combines several ideas: Adulthood is reached when individuals become personally accountable for themselves and accept adult responsibilities. Adulthood is another stage of life that, in itself, has many more stages. Shakespeare expressed it a long time ago when he said, “All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.”

Our role in ministry is to help adults continue on in their journey toward Christlikeness. In the words of the apostle Paul, “We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. I labor for this, striving with His strength that works powerfully in me” (Col 1:28–29). Paul expressed a compelling sense of urgency, whether he was with

⁶ W. R. Yount, *Created to Learn* (Nashville: B&H, 1996). See notes on Erikson in chapter 3 for this research.

⁷ M. Webster online Dictionary, <http://mw1.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adult>, accessed September 13, 2007.

⁸ L. Coleman, *Understanding Today’s Adults* (Nashville: Convention, 1969), 49.

an individual, with a group, or with a church he had left behind, to encourage them to grow. We would see tangible results in our ministries to adults if we reflected Paul's sense of urgency.

Over the years there have been many approaches to ministry with adults in the church. Grouping, or grading, learners into Bible study classes always presents difficulties when it comes to adults. Should they be categorized according to age? Or perhaps it would be better to divide them into classes by common interests? Some adult leaders simply give up and allow them to go wherever they want to go for Bible study. The truth is that some adults will do that anyway, no matter what approach we use. And yet we have a given number of meeting spaces for however many adults so we must organize them for study in some way. What is the best approach to organize adults into groups for Bible study?

The *simplest* but often the most controversial organizational pattern is grading by age, and in a couples' class it is usually by the wife's age. Age-grading is the *best* approach for long-term stability in learning and growing because adults of similar ages tend to have similar life situations, and teachers can better address life needs in age-graded classes. If my adult members complain about the structure, I suggest we should do it by weight instead, and that seems to subdue the grumbling.

Sometimes classes are organized by ages, such as

- Married Adults, 25–35; 36–55; 55 and above
- Women, 25–35; 36–55; 55 and above
- Men, 25–35; 36–55; 55 and above
- Singles, 25–35; 35 and above

Larger churches may narrow these age brackets, producing more divisions. It has also been found to be successful to grade classes for the younger adults by interest groups:

- Single Adults
- Married Adults
- Formerly Married
- Married, No Children
- Married and Single with Preschoolers

Each church will have to determine for themselves the best plan. Some churches simply suggest that people try several classes to decide where they feel the most comfortable. The possible danger of this *self-choice* pattern of organization is the creation of personality-centered classes, which could hinder the growth of discipline, service, cooperation with leaders and other groups, and the like. Some of the research of educational psychologists will provide guidance in designing a ministry model for adults.

Insights from Developmental Theorists

Adult educators have sometimes used developmental stages provided by educational psychologists to describe adults as learners. It is usual to recognize that wholistic adult development takes place in six major domains: physical, spiritual, cognitive, affective, moral, and social. Theorists have developed each of these and give insight into the needs and characteristics of the lives of individuals at particular phases. The categories usually apply to the entire lifespan and not just adulthood, but they do offer insight into the developmental issues confronting adults.

Regarding senior adults we often hear comments like, "My arms are not long enough to hold the hymnbook where I can see it." Another common one is, "When I bend down to fasten my shoelaces I look around to see if there is anything else I can do while I am down there." If you have reached that stage, you know exactly what I mean. Impairment of hearing or sight, less stamina, and "the battle of the bulge" are frequent allusions to changes that are happening in the maturing individual's body.

Robert J. Havighurst divided adulthood into three phases and outlined a series of developmental tasks for each stage. The noted psychologist Jean Piaget, parallel with Havighurst, recognized stages of cognitive development known as mental maturation. Six stages of moral development were researched by Lawrence Kohlberg. Psychosocial development was identified in eight stages by Erik Erikson. Finally, Robert Fowler attempted to show that faith development was also incremental. Each of these theories has formed the basis of discussion and debate in relation to adult education, and from them theories of teaching and learning have been derived. There is much

literature available on each of these theorists and a study of their results is certainly helpful in ministry to adults in the church.⁹

Another popular approach is to consider adulthood from a generational perspective. A generation is usually defined by the major events that occurred within its time span.

Generations

In recent years there has been an increased emphasis on the concept of generations as a basis for organizing teaching opportunities for adults in the Christian context. The word *generations* is not new. From the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament are references to the effect of one generation on another. Currently generations are used to place adults into categories where they share similar life-defining events. In *One Church, Four Generations*, Gary McIntosh discusses all the generations in one context—the church—and shows the intergenerational challenges.¹⁰ Others have extracted sub groups of adults such as baby boomers or gen-Xers and focused on their characteristics with implications for the church. Unfortunately, this trend toward division has seeped over into the church, and increasingly *segregation* is taking place there too. Churches are usually made up of a combination of generations, and each suggests a unique approach. Gary McIntosh states, “Not only are these generational waves causing turbulence in our society, they are also causing turbulence in our churches.”¹¹ This is our challenge as we determine the best way to organize the adult ministry so that maximum learning will occur. Barna designates the generations in this way:

- Mosaics—those born between 1984 and 2002
- Buster—those born between 1965 and 1983
- Boomer—those born between 1946 and 1964
- Builders—those born between 1927 and 1945
- Senior—those born in 1926 and earlier¹²

⁹ For more information about each of the theorists see Yount, *Created to Learn* (Nashville: B&H, 1996).

¹⁰ G. McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Generational Differences,” <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=22>, accessed September 13, 2007.

Organization of adult learners is just one factor for consideration. It is also important to address the matter of the best way to teach adult learners. Do adults learn the same way as children and youth?

How Do Adults Learn?

Most of us are familiar with Matt 28:18–20, Jesus' Great Commission to His followers. We see its implication for evangelism, for missions, and for discipleship. Often, however, we overlook its significance for teaching. I often ask groups of adults what the thrust of this verse is, and I hear "going" or "disciple-making," and occasionally someone mentions "teaching." What did Jesus say here about teaching? The command is for us to teach those whom we reach for Christ *to obey* everything that He has commanded. Some translations use the word *observe*—to pay attention, to give careful consideration to—everything that Jesus commanded. Sometimes we miss another focus of the passage, and that is to teach them to *obey* all the things Jesus commanded them.

How do we help them practice what they hear in church every week? Perhaps something in the way we teach could be redirected towards this end. For some of us it may be the total rethinking of the way we do adult education. Consider the following as food for thought.

- How do we teach so that adults will experience a change in lifestyle?
- How do we teach so that we know adults are learning?
- How do we teach so that spiritual transformation takes place?
- How do we get our learners to move information from the head to the heart?

Before we answer these questions, think of a *learning* situation you experienced as an adult. What made you enjoy the class? What made the greatest impression on you? Was it the material? Was it the personality or the ability of the teacher? Or was it, perhaps, that you were challenged because you were able to contribute to the class as well as learn from it. Your opinion was valued and your contribution helped others. Now cast your thoughts back to a *teaching* opportunity you have experienced with adults. Maybe you taught a Sunday

school class, or trained teachers, or led a discipleship group. How did you approach that lesson? Did you think of it in terms of what you needed to tell them, or what they needed to learn?

The key to learning for adults is found in shifting the focus from the teacher to the learner. Focusing attention on the adult as a learner in the context of the church, the definition Ford provides is helpful. He defined *learning* simply as “a lasting change in knowledge, understanding, skill, attitudes and values, brought about by experience.”¹³

Malcolm Knowles’s theory of adult learning has influenced adult educators for several decades. His theory is based on the conviction that adults and children learn differently. Therefore, just as *pedagogy*¹⁴ refers to the art and science of teaching children, so Knowles coined the term *andragogy*¹⁵ to refer to the art and science of leading adults to learn.¹⁶ In John 14:25–27, Jesus says, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you.” If the Holy Spirit is indeed the Teacher, and He indwells each adult believer, then each has the ability to discern the truth of the Scripture as it is revealed by the Spirit. Thus, every adult believer is both teacher and learner and should be encouraged to share his or her experiences with others, and so build up the body of Christ. Involving the learner actively in the study experience usually reaps rich dividends.

Andragogy

Andragogy assumes that the point at which an individual achieves a self-concept of essential self-direction is the point at which he psychologically becomes adult. A critical thing happens when this occurs: the individual develops a deep psychological need to be perceived by others as being self-directing. Thus, when he finds himself in a situation in which he is not allowed to be self-directing, he ex-

¹³ L. Ford, *Design for Teaching and Training: A Self-Study Guide to Lesson Planning* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000).

¹⁴ From the Greek word *paid*, meaning “child,” and *agogus* meaning “guide or leader.”

¹⁵ From the Greek *aner*, meaning “adult.”

¹⁶ K. Gangel and J. Wilhoit, *Handbook on Adult Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 96.

periences a tension between that situation and his self-concept. His reaction is bound to be tainted with resentment and resistance.¹⁷

Knowles would suggest that the following points are important for adult learning:

- **The Need to Know.** Adult learners need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it.
- **Learner Self-Concept.** Adults need to be responsible for their own decisions and to be treated as capable of self-direction.
- **Role of Learners' Experience.** Adult learners have a variety of experiences of life, which represent the richest resource for learning.
- **Readiness to Learn.** Adults are ready to learn those things they need to know in order to cope effectively with life situations.
- **Orientation to Learning.** Adults are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks they confront in their life situations.¹⁸

Richard Patterson suggests that andragogy was Knowles's effort to counter a nearly total dependence on pedagogy as a teaching and learning approach for adults. He further suggests that in a pedagogical classroom model, the teacher is the expert in the content area and presents information to the learner who passively absorbs whatever is required.¹⁹ Since what many adult educators had observed about adults and their learning preferences argued against pedagogy, andragogy became the alternative.

Adults do not learn simply because we talk. They learn the most when they feel that their personal needs are being met. And to do this they must feel their own experiences are recognized. Adult learners feel their needs are being met when they are involved in planning the learning experience and when they can contribute in a meaningful way.

Consider some of these questions as you teach adults in the church:

¹⁷ M. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, rev. & updated (Chicago, IL: Follett, 1980), 56.

¹⁸ Adapted from Knowles in *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, 1978, 56.

¹⁹ R. Patterson, "How Adults Learn," in *Handbook on Adult Education*, 125.

- Do you know each learner's spiritual condition?
- Do you know who is lost, growing, or struggling spiritually?
- Do you provide opportunities for learners to make commitments to Christ or other decisions during a Bible study session?
- Do you emphasize further study of the lesson?
- Do you emphasize developing a daily quiet time?
- Do you ask for reports on what God has done based on a previous Bible study lesson?
- Do you provide opportunities for learners to practice a Bible study lesson through ministry and outreach?
- Do you encourage learners to use the lesson as part of a family Bible time?
- Do you vary your teaching method? How could you move out of your comfort range and try something different? For example, teachers who are comfortable explaining a term or phrase in the Bible might share a personal experience and invite others to share theirs.
- Do you pray specifically for each learner before you teach?²⁰

As a volunteer, Charlene is typical of her age group and the volunteer generation. Why did the adult learners choose her class for Bible study? One reason is that she prepares thoroughly and is ready to teach when she enters the classroom. In addition, the learners were able to attend a class of their choice, and they were able to participate in the discussion using personal experiences from the past. New members were also able to put the course material to immediate use as they joined a new congregation. Charlene gave them assignments and asked them to be responsible for portions of the lesson from time to time. Their contributions were affirmed and helpful. As a by-product, Charlene has said to me, "I have learned so much in preparing to teach this class." From the youngest to the oldest, learning presents a challenge, and the reward is satisfaction.

²⁰ Adapted from questions by John McLendon, *Beyond the Walls: Multiply Your Adult Ministry*, LifeWay Christian Resources online download: *Multiply Your Adult Ministry* (PDF) http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page.html, accessed September 13, 2007.