

The Academy of Faith

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

“What is written in the law? What do you read there?” said Jesus.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

“You have given the right answer; Jesus said. “do this, and you will live.”

Mission Statement and Mission Limit

Adult Education on Sunday mornings is on the mission of making disciples. It gladly bears much of the burden of forming disciples, but not the whole burden. The opportunities to practice the Faith and share the Faith with others, missional opportunities of service, living life in a family, and the disciple alone with her Savior require contexts other than Sunday morning classrooms. Indeed other opportunities for adults to study are still required – covenant group Bible studies, book clubs and discussion groups, public lecture series, officer training, and more. Nonetheless, one prior task – Study of Scripture - and four broad missions – Knowing the Faith, Owning the Faith, Thinking the Faith, Living the Faith, together comprise the making of disciples through an adult educational context that largely can be met on Sunday mornings. What is the Faith? It is the life long discipline of the followers of Jesus to obey what he commands: ***You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbor as yourself.***

The Prior Task

Hearing the Faith. Adult Education as a part of the whole mission of making disciples presumes being called by the Master to follow, and being forever after in conversation with him as he leads us. In the conversation with the lawyer, Jesus asks the lawyer what is written and what he has read in the law. The lawyer answers correctly because he read what had been written in the Scriptures. Reading the Scriptures, which is listening to the Master Teacher, is the prior task of becoming the faithful and effective disciple. The Prior Track is the careful reading of the Word - simple yet rigorous study of the Bible. All else follows from it. We follow best when we attend to this first. Jesus said, ***“Do this, and you will live.”***

The Four Missions

The four missions – the first two thought of as core both in the sense as central and first, and in the sense of being shared by all; the second two thought of as elective, not in the sense as optional, but as having a nearly inexhaustible range of options for all based on interests, passions, experiences and callings – have porous membranes between them, with much that overlaps and are best seen as inseparable and reinforcing to each other, seldom perfectly consecutive having no perfect beginning point and not having any ending at all. The four missions are present most obviously in the four tracks of classes in addition to the study of Scripture, being offered simultaneously each Sunday. They teach how to ***love God and neighbor.***

Knowing the Faith. ***With all your soul.*** A core curriculum of teaching the essentials of Christian thought through the Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments, and Lord's Prayer. These three Biblical and historic documents along with some instruction about the church and her sacraments have, from the first disciples on, formed the core of catechumenal instruction for youth and adults preparing for baptism and membership, and for those exploring the Faith and beginning their formal instruction in the Faith of the Church. Among the Reformed, the Heidelberg Catechism has long been a favorite and effective tool in teaching the Faith. It is divided into 52 weeks for the purpose of Sabbath instruction. The sequence teaches the doctrinal essentials of the Faith by the Apostles' Creed, the relational essentials of the Faith by study of the Ten Commandments, the affectional essentials of the Faith through study of the sacraments and the Lord's Prayer. Additional materials can supplement the Catechism allowing for presentations that are more personal and less formal – member testimonies of conversion and God's faithfulness, "My Heart, Christ's Home", other devotional literature and studies of the core of Christian Faith.

Owning the Faith. ***With all your heart.*** A core curriculum of teaching the essentials of Christian living by teaching the spiritual disciplines – Bible reading (for devotion and for instruction), prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication), worship (private and public), fellowship (within the church visible and invisible), and sacrificial service (to the church and the world by discovery of spiritual gifts and the giving of time, talent and treasure). Much of this track requires self examination and the adoption and adaptation of habits that form the disciple into a devoted and able disciple. This track is designed to form the interior practice of the Faith in the disciple. The curriculum will be repeated each year.

Thinking the Faith. ***With all your mind.*** An endless series of electives that explore the implications of a Christian worldview in every facet of human endeavor – the arts and sciences, law and politics, justice and mercy, education and business, the natural environment and the city, human culture and the human being, literature and language and philosophy and history, the family and the state, crime and punishment, why California's governor is a weight lifter, Minnesota's senator is a comedian and the former governor a wrestler, and Illinois' governors are all in jail and Chicago's mayors are fascists that are universally loved and politically invulnerable, and who shot JFK and J.R.

Living the Faith. ***With all your strength.*** An endless series of electives that inspire and teach the skills and their development for living the missional Christian life – evangelism, disciple making, mission support and mission trips, serving the city and building the City of God, raising a family, being a neighbor, exercising citizenship as a Christian, and being a global Christian, ministering to the young, the elderly, the poor, the oppressed, the homeless and hopeless, the alien and stranger, those in the military, those shut in or shut out, the sick, the lonely, those new to faith and those losing their faith, and those who wear scant clothing and are in need of visits on the beaches in our county, not to mention the filthy rich who are looking for a church to put in their will. This track is designed to form the exterior practice of the Faith of the disciple.

A Typical Sunday Morning

Five courses are being taught in five different rooms. Each class begins at 10:00 (the preacher is frequently not helpful in this regard) with a soft beginning. An appointed host who has taken responsibility for setting up the classroom and providing the teacher with whatever is necessary, welcomes each one and gives special attention to those that are new, thus exercising hospitality and providing for some moments of fellowship as they gather. Coffee and other refreshments may be served. The teacher holds forth with final prayers said at 10:45. Lecture, discussion, and question and answer, or all three can characterize the hour.

In the class in the Hearing the Faith track, the students are a mixture of the newest and the most established members, including seekers and advanced bible students; the teacher is an excellent teacher of the Bible – whether from within or without the membership; the Scripture is studied most often Book by Book.

In the class in the Knowing the Faith track, most of the students are new to the church, many new to the Faith altogether. In the first years, the whole membership will be encouraged to take this track thus connecting with new members and themselves learning what is offered to all new members. Those considering membership may join the class at anytime. After attending this track of classes regularly for sometime (say twelve weeks or two terms), time with the pastors and elders is scheduled (perhaps three or four times a year) at which time they are invited into membership. It is expected that after joining with the church they will continue in this track for a full year. The Congregational Life Ministry Team, which has responsibility for preparing candidates for membership helps design, lead and teach this track with the pastors and some staff members. The ninth grade class, which is the confirmation year, and any older teen students wishing to join the church, also attends this track, perhaps all year.

In the class in the Owning the Faith track, most of the students are new to the Faith or new to particular spiritual disciplines. The teachers are mostly drawn from among the established members who have shown an excellence in a particular discipline and a passion to reproduce it others. Occasionally teachers from outside the church are recruited to teach for a term or for a class session. Again, all of the members are invited to participate term by term at their choice, for the sake of renewing disciplines and learning disciplines new to them.

In the class in the Thinking the Faith track, most of the students are established members, but many visitors join in as their interests direct them. The teacher is either one of our own members who is part of a growing faculty of those with teaching gifts and experiences or the teacher is an expert in the field from another church or teaching institution. With each term a new subject is offered, though occasionally a subject may cover more than one term. Variety is intentionally part of the scheduling. This may very well be the consistently best attended class.

In the class in the Living the Faith track, most of the students are members and visitors with a particular calling or curiosity about the mission being considered and are interested in gaining the particular knowledge and skills to engage in that mission. The teachers are those members currently engaged in those missions and special experts from outside the church that have a reputation for leading and sending others out on these missions. The mission and subject changes each term.

Hopes

1. First Presbyterian Church exercises a greater faithfulness to and effectiveness on the mission of making disciples by an intentional curriculum for adults in an educational environment on Sunday mornings using these five tracks to deepen the disciples' appropriation of the Faith and widen the disciples' application of the Faith.
2. First Presbyterian Church itself becomes a deeper and wider expression of the Church.
3. The adult education hour gains a reputation in the community and thus becomes an early entry and assimilation point for the unchurched into the faith and life of the congregation.
4. Consistency of quality in the classroom becomes consistency of attendance for adults, resulting in improved attendance in the children and teen classes and in Sunday morning worship.
5. The teaching gifts of our members are called forth and deployed on the mission of making disciples.
6. Candidates for membership are given a full exposure and winsome invitation to the Faith of the church, and gain the habit of every week attendance in worship and consistent participation in adult education.
7. The fellowship of the congregation is enhanced by being and learning and interacting together.
8. The Reformed habit and emphasis of unashamedly being on the mission of "loving the Lord our God with all our mind" is gladly ordered in our common life.
9. The evangelical passion to be found faithful to the Faith is fully expressed in a meaningful and accessible way.
10. The Scripture's command to love the Lord and our neighbor is obeyed.
11. The Savior's commission to make disciples is fulfilled.