Mapping Out Curriculum in Your Church

Cartography for Christian Pilgrims

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CONTENT SAMPLER

UNEDITED MANUSCRIPT

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CHAPTER 1

Wherever You Go, There You Are: The Need for Educational Maps in the Church

James Riley Estep Jr.

we going to stop?" No parent escapes these perennial questions. Family trips are taken with intentionality, not merely wandering around directionless or without purpose. They usually have a destination, a desired location to reach at an optimal time with arrangements made for the trip. We are typically not pioneers, boldly going into untamed territory, blazing new trails, charting a course to an unknown destination. Rather, we check atlases and our GPS, map out travel routes, or go online to AAA or another travel service to make sure we are going in the right direction and will reach our destination. We don't want to lose time wandering around aimlessly and getting lost. We need maps.

We are travelers in the Christian faith, not wanderers. The Bible speaks of people wandering in the wilderness as a chastisement (Num. 32:13; 2 Kgs. 21:8), rather than moving intentionally toward the land God had promised them. While it may seem that wandering isn't bad, for a short time, but wandering for a lengthy time or throughout life is indeed perilous. In the Bible, wandering is typically associated with unfaithfulness, like the lone sheep in Jesus' parable (Mt. 18:12-14), there is implicit danger in choosing to wander from the wisdom of God,1 usually with disastrous consequences.2 Jude 13 even describes false teachers as "... wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever." The apostle Paul went on journeys, intentional travels, and was indeed more productive (Acts 13-14, 15:36-21:8, esp. 15:36); just as Jesus had early demonstrated intentionality in his traveling through Palestine, moving the disciples through northern Galilee (Jewish), into the Decapolis region (Greek) and into Samaria before entering Judea and Jerusalem as preparation to send his disciples as apostles on a global mission. In short, wandering isn't for Christians. We want to be travelers through the Christian life, not wanderers. Exploring and discovery learning have their place, but they supplement the main journey, they don't replace it.

Curriculum is the Church's map to spiritual maturity. It is the intentional direction given by more mature believers to those who are new to the Christian faith. It is the lessons learned from 2000 years of the Christian faith given to the

contemporary church as a means of guiding and directing us into a faithful walk and work with Christ. God gave the Church as a means of directing people toward Himself, and curriculum is the means by which the church maps the travel path toward Christ-like maturity. Educational "maps" are simply the intentional plans made by the church for carrying out the task. The plans and their implementation are known as *curriculum*.

WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

Defining curriculum is a daunting task. The word itself comes from the Latin *currere*, literally meaning "to run," and came to mean the components of a course of study, the direction of one's race in life, such as in preparing a curriculum vita to demonstrate the path one has traveled through life in preparation for a career. Educationally, definitions are varied, ranging from curriculum as a packet of materials purchased from a publishing company to all the experiences one encounters in life or the congregation. Arthur Ellis describes curriculum as prescription, i.e. what you have to know, knowledge-content focused, and experience, i.e. everything from which you learn, learner-child focused.³ Figure 1.1 expands on this spectrum of curriculum's definitions, primarily based on the nature of its content and upon what it is centered.⁴

Concrete Content	Curriculum as Product	Church/School- Centered
	Curriculum as Program	
	Curriculum as Intended Learnings	
Abstract Content	Curriculum as Experiences of the Learner	Learner- Centered

FIGURE 1.1: SPECTRUM OF CURRICULUM

So, how can one define *curriculum*? In fact, it almost defies definition. Perhaps the most common facet to understanding curriculum is *content*. "What did you teach today?" "Oh, Joshua and the battle of Jericho," or perhaps worse, "Pages 45-61 of the teacher's guide." Content is an inescapable element in understanding curriculum, but it is not the only one. *Objectives* are also another way to grasp the meaning of the curriculum. Rather than focusing on what is taught, this dimension emphasizes *why* it is being taught. When someone asks, "What will I get out of this class?" or "If I participate in small groups for two years, what is the take-away from it?", they are asking about objectives. Whereas the previous dimension focused on content, this one focuses on the learner's learning, what they get out of it.

These two dimensions, the what and the why, are perhaps the two most influential in understanding curriculum. James E. Pluddemann's seminal question "Do we teach the Bible or do we teach students?"5 reflects these two primary depictions of curriculum. As a matter of fact, we do both. Curriculum is both what we teach, and the desired objectives we have in the lives of our learners. For example, take the subject of spiritual disciplines. A *cognitive* objective might be stated, "The student will understand the spiritual disciples," requiring the content to teach them about the spiritual disciples, such as their history, theology, and definition. An affective objective, one that is more experiential or internal, may say, "The student will experience the benefits of the spiritual disciplines," requiring them to practice them for a time and perhaps journal their experience, which becomes the content relevant to this objective. Of course, all this assumes they know how to practice the spiritual disciplines, so a more volitional objective, an ability or skill, which means the content would have focus on the how-to, the step-by-step process, rather than just information about spiritual disciplines. Hence, the three basic forms of objectives (cognitive, affective, and volitional) interact with one another to provide a comprehensive approach to learning through the curriculum. If the curriculum is to serve as a roadmap for discipleship, then "the curriculum, as a key or instrument of education, must guide the learner to be and become 'response-able' disciple of Jesus Christ." This requires

the objectives and content to be more than the recitation of head knowledge, but a deeper level of cognitive ascent, capable of reasoning through life from a Christian perspective, as well as concern for the affective and volitional domains of learning.

However, curriculum is more than just an alignment of content with the intended learning objectives. For example, the definition of curriculum is also impacted by the assumed relationship shared by the teacher and learners, as well as the preferred or required teaching methods. The who and how dimensions of understanding curriculum are likewise critical to conceptualizing a definition. The what and why somewhat determine the who and how. For example, if a congregation wants to equip its members to do evangelism, lecturing them about the necessity of evangelism is probably not the best method, especially since the teachers' relationship to the participants are very limited given the lecture method being used. However, if the curriculum dictates a more hands-on approach, the teacher is required to assume the role of a mentor (relationship) more than a lecturer, and actually asks the participants one at a time to participate with them in the process of evangelism. Curriculum has implications for the teacher's place in the educational process and the most advantageous instructional methodology.

So, what is curriculum? In short, the answer is *yes*. Curriculum is all of this. It is a collectively cumulative matter. It is not any one of these dimension, but all of them. Curriculum is essentially the plan for how all the lessons,

experiences, relationships collectively nurture, equip, and mentor a learner toward a desired set of objectives; all of which dictates how we do education in the church. It is the tangible representation and incarnation of our educational philosophy. It is the *roadmap* that the educational ministry of the congregation follows. It enables them an assessment of the congregation's progress along the faith journey, as well as informing the education ministry's decision making process for future direction and development of the teaching ministry of the church. Education without curriculum is like biblical interpretation without hermeneutics. Without a roadmap, an articulated recognizable curriculum, the education ministry lacks intentionality and creates bewildered wanderers in the faith rather than faithful pilgrims. Curriculum is the capstone of education in the church, the expression of the ideal result of the education ministry.

A Tale of Three Curricula

"What we need is a comprehensive curriculum!" A congregation's curriculum is expressed in three ways, and hence a comprehensive curriculum is in fact comprised of three simultaneously interacting layers of curriculum (Figure 1.2). The *explicit* curriculum is the most readily recognized layer of the curriculum. It is what is openly espoused by the congregation. When a congregation articulates its intended learning objectives for a class, program, or even the congregation

as a whole; this is the explicit curriculum. It is perhaps best represented by the content of instruction and the programs comprising the education ministry. For example, if a congregation explicitly states, "We want our members to know biblical doctrine." Then we would expect an adult Bible fellowship or classroom studies on Bible content, theology, or history of their theological tradition. One would expect to see classes on Romans or Galatians, studies on justification and sanctification, and perhaps even a survey of the church's articles of faith. Unfortunately, most individuals see the explicit curriculum as the only curriculum; perceiving curriculum to be mono-layered, failing to identify the other two layers and their impact on the congregation.

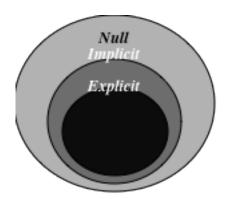


FIGURE 1.2: THREE CURRICULA

The *implicit* curriculum is perhaps best described by what we learn from our experience of the congregation. It is some-

times referred to as the *hidden* curriculum. It may not be explicit, but it is what we learn from our experience within the class, program or congregation. For example, in a higher education classroom, a syllabus has stated learning objectives (explicit), but if a professor won't accept late homework, or counts a tardy as an absence, while it is not part of the explicit curriculum, the implicit curriculum wants to teach the learner to be on time.

Perhaps the best way to express this difference is the difference between what we want them to learn at church (explicit) and what they actually learn at church (implicit), what they are supposed to learn beyond the explicit curriculum. If a young boy is walking into the church building on a Sunday morning wearing a ball cap and someone in the lobby chastises him for wearing it, and then the boy walks down the hall to his Sunday school class and hears a lesson about the unconditional love and acceptance of Jesus . . . which lesson did he learn most? If anything, the distinction between explicit and implicit compels the congregation to embody what it espouses, to have individuals experience what the church explicitly teaches, to match word with deed. The explicit and implicit curriculum layers work together to help participants learn what they are supposed to overtly and covertly learn.

However, one more curricular layer dwarfs the first two. The *null* is what is absent from the curriculum. It is what the congregation has chosen not to teach, nor is it an experience exemplified by the congregation. In terms of learning, there is

more that we don't know than what we can possibly know; so the null curriculum is always the largest of the curricular layers. For example, if a congregation is not part of the charismatic or Pentecostal tradition, believers in that congregation may never really hear about tongues or be encouraged to experience it, and hence it becomes part of the null curriculum; whereas congregations within those traditions would make it part of the explicit and implicit curriculum. Sometimes prepackaged or published curriculums reflect a particular theological tradition, doctrinal distinction, or take a particular posture toward a social or moral issue that does not fit the congregation's convictions and views, and hence must be used intentionally, or they become part of the null curriculum.⁷

A comprehensive curriculum is comprised of three layers: explicit, implicit, and the null curriculum. However, as one may have concluded, often times the determination of these layers may be very intentional or quite unintentional. For example, is the content of the null curriculum determined intentionally or due to ignorance? This is the planned vs. unplanned aspect of the comprehensive curriculum. 8 Collateral learning will always occur, meaning we will learn beyond the explicitly planned objectives and content. Likewise, the implicit and null curriculums may both be planned, but can also be unplanned; but are typically unintentional. Perhaps the call of the Christian educator in this respect is to insure that the three layers coalesce rather than conflict, that the individual's experience in classroom or small group matches its expressed learning objectives.

THE CHURCH, EDUCATION, AND CURRICULUM

Without exception, *every* congregation has a curriculum. It may not be explicit or intentional, but every classroom, program, worship service, and congregation is a learning environment. This learning may be unplanned, unintentional, and may even be implicit or null, but to suggest that churches don't teach something to those comprising it is simply false. The real question is not whether the church has a curriculum, but rather what is the church teaching its participants, what is the congregational curriculum?

Perhaps more critically, the Church as God's people, the community of faith, must have a curriculum, a planned, explicit curriculum! The church is not an inert institution, one that exists simply to exist; but rather it is commissioned to fulfill God's mission within the world. The Church must be the people of God so as to fulfill God's commission to the Church.9 Matthew records in his Gospel, "Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20). Decades after Jesus' ministry, Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus about his own ministry, "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:14-15). For the church to fulfill its transformative mission, it must *be* the church, "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth," as well as *do* church, "Go and make disciples . . . teaching them" (Matt. 28:19, 20). Intentional discipleship (individual) and becoming the people of God (corporate) do not happen automatically. Tasks like these are neither implicit nor null, but rather call the congregation's education ministry to a planned, intentional explicit curriculum.

Figure 1.3 depicts the transformative mission of the church. The mission of the church is indeed to transform the people of the world into the people of God, to build a community of faith of the faithful from the faithless people of the world.



FIGURE 1.3: CHURCH ON MISSION

This transformation is not instantaneous, and it is not accomplished wholly through evangelism. Maturing in faith, becoming Christ-like, no longer being conformed "to the pattern of this world," but "transformed by the renewing of your mind" is not an automatic or natural occurrence; but a life-long process of engagement with God through Scripture, by the Holy Spirit, and participation within the community of faith, the Church. This should not be a haphazard process; it requires an intentional, overt explicit curriculum that purposely leads the individual step-by-step toward becoming increasingly Christ-like, and forming the community that God desires the Church to become. The church not only has a curriculum, but the church *is* God's curriculum to transform the world. Perhaps D. Campbell Wyckoff said it most succinctly,

The task of Christian education is the nurture of the Christian life. In order that such nurture may be effective in accomplishing its purpose, the church as a rule rejects reliance upon haphazard means and adopts a reasoned and planned teaching-learning process for its education work. A curriculum is a plan by which the teaching learning process may be systematically undertaken.¹¹

Sometimes the idea of curriculum sounds boring and extraneous at best. Classes, lesson plans, materials, content, teaching methods, learning assessments may appear at first to be at least a step removed from doing ministry. But all this misses the point. That's like describing a family trip with words like car, tires, gas stations, and road signs. If that is all a family vacation was, it would indeed be a boring and undesirable experience. It's the destination that makes the journey worth it. It's knowing where we are heading, what awaits us upon arrival, and knowing how to get there without getting lost. Then, all the preparation and travel is even enjoyable. *That's curriculum*. It is the roadmap that leads the Christian toward a life-long journey of faith in the community of the Church.

Intentionality in Disciple-making

Discipleship requires curriculum. Disciples are not born, but born again. They are formed by God through the Church. Once again, if we are to be faithful pilgrims rather than wayward wanderers in the faith, then curriculum is essential. Disciples are not cookie-cutter images of one another, and curriculum does not imply this, but discipleship has core essential elements for a healthy, growing relationship with Jesus Christ. A map does not dictate to the traveler where to go, but identifies possible destinations and paths to travel; so as to prevent someone from becoming a wayward wanderer rather than a diligent pilgrim. New believers need direction and paths toward maturity . . . they need a curriculum. For congregations engaged intentionally in fulfilling the Great Commission, disciple-making, it needs benchmarks for maturity (objectives), core subject matter and experiences (content), as well as more

mature others (teachers) to instruct and methods to match. Discipleship requires curriculum.

This is perhaps the most daunting task of the Christian educator. The *roadmap* that curriculum becomes in the church is not to a generic destination. The curriculum of the Church defines what it actually means to be *Christian*. What does it mean to be Christ-like? To have a mature faith? What does it mean to be the Church? The answers to these simple yet profound questions become the goals for the congregation's education ministry, for the Sunday school's learning objectives, and the foundation for the map that describes the path believers take along the journey of their faith.

When Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy, he exhorted him to appropriately use Scripture in forming and growing the Christian's faith. In contrast to the false teachers in Ephesus, he instructs Timothy as follows,

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:14-17, NIV).

Notice how Paul urges Timothy to continue in what he has been instructed. There is indeed a content, a what, that has been taught to him. Likewise, there is even a who, since he well aware "from whom you learned it". We may not know the instructional methodology, but the passage certainly emphasizes the objectives. Elsewhere Paul affirms the instructional intention of Scripture as God's Word, ¹² but what are the objectives? How does it intentionally make disciples? First, it aids in the formation of the Christian mind. Scripture makes us wise unto salvation, they lead us to Jesus Christ (vv. 14-15). Scriptural instruction likewise is designed to form Christian piety, living "in righteousness" (v. 16). Scripture forms our values, priorities, and relationship with God. Thirdly, Paul tells Timothy that Scripture equips us to serve in the Church, "equipped for every good work" (v. 17). All this doesn't happen naturally or without a plan. Discipleship is holistic, transforming the mind, life, and vocation; i.e. the reorientation of our entire existence toward God. Anyone familiar with the domains of learning will readily recognize that that these are the cognitive, affective, and volitional domains. Intentional discipleship requires an intentional curriculum.

Curriculum for Becoming the Church

The plural of *Christian* is *Church*. What God desires for the individual believer, he likewise expects of the collective experience of believers. We do not "go" to church, we are the church. We do not serve *at* the church, we serve *as* the church.

Like individual discipleship, becoming the people of God does not happen automatically or accidentally. God desires his Church to be a distinctive people, different from the world. Reminding the churches of Asia Minor, Peter writes, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God*; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:9-10, NIV *emphasis added*). While instantaneous transformation is indeed made by God, through receiving His mercy, learning to live in accordance with these re-orientations is not so instantaneous.

Though still in this world, the church is God's new society, and it must be distinct from it. The church is not to mirror the socio-cultural segregation of this world, but present to the world a new kind of community. This unity that Jesus desires among his followers is further explained by the apostle Paul, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11-12). Likewise, Paul exhorted the Christians in Rome, a church with an obvious Jewish-Gentile division, to "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Rom. 15:7). As Edmund Clowney wrote, "The way in which the people of God are joined together by this assembly and presence produces their distinctive fellowship." How does one learn to live in such a new society,

the Church? How does the church instruct itself on Kingdom citizenship? As emphasized before, it cannot simply be left to occur on its own, but requires the people of God to intentionally engage one another, to articulate expectations and plan accordingly. In short, Christian community formation requires a curriculum; a roadmap not only to the community of faith, but through it as well.

What is the rationale for the programs comprising the education ministry within a congregation? Far too often it is couched in fad based resources, or popular recognizable figures. Neither of these approaches produce a desirable cumulative effect on the congregation. Curricular intentionality, i.e. explicit and planned, makes a tangible cumulative impact on the community-life of the congregation, as well as contributing to Kingdom growth. The Church is not only God's curriculum for disciple-making, but each congregation needs a curriculum to form a distinctive people.

Conclusion

In concluding his treatment of the rise of civilization, H. G. Wells wrote, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe," noting that the greatest travesties of contemporary Western culture have been a result of the failure to appropriately educate populations and generations.¹⁵ The same could be said for the Church. Discipleship and community formation in the congregation requires a curriculum, an orchestrated, intentional, concerted endeavor

to fulfill God's vision for what the Church should be and do in the world. Without this curriculum, we abandon new Christians into a spiritual jungle without so much as a map to warn them of dead ends or inform them of well traveled paths. In the journey of faith, the education ministry's curriculum is the congregation's roadmap to becoming the people of God. It is the congregation's roadmap for us to journey as faith-filled pilgrims rather than mere wanderers.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Curriculum Null Curriculum

Explicit Curriculum Planned vs. Unplanned Curriculum

Implicit Curriculum Discipleship and Community Formation

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1. How did this chapter change or challenge your understanding of *curriculum*?
- 2. When you think of curriculum as a map, the path for intentional traveling, how was it present in your congregation? Or not?
- 3. What is your congregation's explicit curriculum? Implicit? Null (which you could only know by becoming aware of something not taught or experienced at your congregation)?
- 4. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being low/5 being high), how *overtly intentional* is the curriculum of your congregation? Why do you give it this rating?

CHAPTER I ENDNOTES

- 1. Cf. Pr. 17:24; Jer. 14:10; 31:22; Is. 63:17; Am. 8:12; Zec. 10:2, Jas. 5:19.
- 2. Cf. Ex. 14:13; Job 12:44, 15:23, 18:8; Ps. 109:10; Lam. 1:7, 3:19.
- 3. Arthur K. Ellis, Exemplars of Curriculum Theory (Larchmont, New York: Eyes on Education, 2004), 4-7.
- 4. Adapted from Burt D. Braunius, "Orientations to Curriculum Development for Church Education," *Journal of Christian Education*, 6(1), 52-61. Used with permission.
- 5. James E. Plueddemann, "Do We Teach the Bible or Do We Teach Students?" *Christian Education Journal*, 10(1): 73-81; same published in African Journal of Evangelical Theology, 13(1): 44-53.
- 6. Johannes Van der Walt, "The Third Curriculum—From a Christian Perspective," *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 9(2): 163.
- 7. Cf. Joseph Baily, "Evangelical Curriculum Development," *Religious Education*, 75(5), 539-545.
 - 8. Cf. Ellis, Exemplars of Curriculum Theory, 11-12.
- 9. Cf. James Riley Estep, Jr., "Ecclesiology and Christian Education," *A Theology for Christian Education*, James Riley Estep, Gregg Allison, and Michael Anthony eds. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2008), 232-263.
 - 10. Romans 12:2a.
- 11. D. Campbell Wyckoff, Theory and Design of Christian Education Curriculum (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 17.
 - 12. Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11.
- 13. Cf. David. S. Dockery, "A Theology for the Church," *Midwestern Journal of Theology*, 1 (1-2): 13.
- 14. Edmund Clowney, "Toward a Biblical Doctrine of the Church," Millard J. Erickson eds. *Readings in Christian Theology, Volume 3: The New Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 24.
- 15. H. G. Wells, The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind, Volume 2 (New York: MacMillian Company, 1920), 594.