

When does it make sense for a church to produce its own material?

April 13, 2012

Producing study materials for a church is a huge undertaking that diverts staff time, energy and attention away from other assignments. Making that decision, then, should be made carefully. When does it make sense for a church to produce its own material?

When there is a compelling reason to do so. Jayne Davis, minister of spiritual formation at First Baptist Church in Wilmington, N.C., reflects that her church began to produce Sunday school material because they wanted to move through the four Gospels in six months and they wanted to use the same focal Scriptures for the sermons, daily devotionals and Sunday school lessons. Finding published material to do this was impossible.

FindingHope.jpg "Finding Hope: A Field Trip of Faith" is a children's resource originally developed by First Baptist Church in Newport News, Va., and later produced by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

After the six-month study ended, however, they discovered another compelling reason to continue the practice. "It makes a big difference to folks that their fellow members write the material," she said. "It also has significant impact because it is aligned with the text being preached on. Ideally, folks read the devotions and lesson material during the week, hear the text proclaimed in worship, and then talk about the implications of that for their life in Sunday school."

In the case of children's workers at First Baptist Church in Newport News, Va., the compelling reason to undertake writing Vacation Bible School curriculum was their concern that children were learning more about dude ranches and Polynesian island settings than about the Bible and missions. They wanted the Bible lessons and mission application to be central.

For other churches, however, the abundance of existing material on almost any church topic probably will suffice to meet their needs. Reinventing the wheel requires time and energy better spent, perhaps, in other ministry endeavors.

When your church has a specific purpose in mind. Material produced by the church can be tailored to meet specific challenges faced by that congregation or can be aimed at a specific goal of the church. Don Davidson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va., for example, recognized evangelism was a need that had to be addressed with a specifically focused study written by church staff members.

Many other churches produce Advent materials that usually include daily devotional meditations written by people in the congregation. These materials not only accomplish the primary purpose of focusing the attention of church members on the themes of the season, but also enhance the fellowship as church members deepen their appreciation for one another by reading devotionals written by their fellow congregants.

"Know that it is a large undertaking if you are going to be in it for the long haul," Davis suggested. "You need to keep a freshness to the material and a level of quality. Know why you want to do it."

When your church has a pool of talent from which to draw. Almost every church will have a few good writers, but their expertise can quickly become exhausted unless the writer pool deepens and widens as more materials are produced.

"Well over 600 church members have written for Along the Way since we began" Davis said regarding the Sunday school material produce by First Baptist in Wilmington.

"About 40 people have written lessons and I go back to them regularly. But we made a commitment early on to invite as many new folks as possible to write devotions, that it might truly be a work of the people. Often, I will invite folks to write soon after they join the church. It helps foster a sense of belonging."

Publishing study material has never been easier thanks to advances in publishing software and computer technology. For many churches it makes sense to produce curricula designed to meet the specific needs they face. But the drawbacks need to be considered along with the benefits. It won't make sense for every church, but for those who find the benefits worth the cost, producing their own materials has much to commend it, church leaders who have done it agree.