

How often do you hear a student say, “Bible is my favorite class! It is the most interesting subject I’m taking. It’s the only class I know I will really use in every part of my life”? Or are they more likely to say, “I hate Bible class! It’s boring and has nothing to do with real life.”

How about parents? Recently, a parent admonished me: “The only reason I am sending my child to this school is because of the Bible classes, so make them good.” Another parent’s reaction was different: “I don’t see why my child is failing your class. I really would appreciate you not giving so much homework. Besides, it’s



Students from the author’s junior class discuss theological issues while role-playing members of various religions.

Getting Back to the Three R’s in High School Bible Class

BY STEPHEN HERR

Bible class. You act like it is an important class like math or science.”

These sentiments have been repeated to me many times in many ways throughout the past four-and-a-half years of teaching Bible classes to grades 9–12. They help explain the dilemma of Seventh-day Adventist high schools today. To put it plainly, we don’t know what to do with the subject of religion, usually referred to as Bible class. We know it is important—indeed, probably the most important subject. Without it, our schools would have little reason to exist. However, we also know students will either seem to already know almost everything about what



Several of the author’s students visit a nursing home as part of their religion class work.

we teach—or know nothing about the subject whatsoever. In addition, a significant number of students don't seem to care whether or not they take a Bible class, and we aren't sure what to do about it.

I want to offer a ray of hope and guidance to those of you who are teaching secondary-level Bible classes. I especially want to help the ones who find themselves assigned at the last minute to teach religion courses. Many of you have no formal training or education in this area beyond the general-ed religion classes you took in college. For those of you who have been teaching a while, I hope to re-inspire your love for the Bible and for your students.

Finding the ideas, resources, and time to teach Bible classes effectively is not an easy task. In addition to Bible, many of us teach in other disciplines, do administration, or serve as dormitory deans. Even a full-time Bible teacher has numerous other tasks: preparing chapels, vespers, weeks of prayer, Bible retreats, Sabbath schools, mission trips, and anything else relating to religion on campus. Unfortunately, we often fail to balance the time spent on classroom teaching and that devoted to programming and events. The events are public and seem to highlight what we do more than classroom teaching does. So, if we're not careful, we



Two of the author's students pose with statues of Buddha during a visit to a Cambodian temple in Silver Spring, Maryland.

spend most of our time on that area.

I have struggled with finding that balance during my time at Highland View Academy, a boarding academy in Hagerstown, Maryland. As with most teachers, I have many responsibilities other than classroom teaching. So how do I create an effective learning experience for my students? I have gone back to the three R's. In teaching Bible, these are *responsibility*, *relevance*, and *role-play*. Understanding and utilizing these can help your classes to become life-changing events.

Responsibility

As teachers, we have a responsibility to know what we are doing. It's often tempting, when we're busy with weeks of prayer and mission trips, to get up front in class and try to "wing it." We think that because we know the Bible stories so well—from growing up with them—that we should be able to teach students how to be better Christians. I've noticed that when my students get excited about what is happening in class, it's after I have studied, planned, and had my own experience with God prior to stepping foot in the classroom. Careful planning includes setting goals and including in class things that will bring about those goals.

Good preparation does not imply slavishly adhering to a lesson plan,

even though having one is very important. It includes being open to "teachable moments" when students ask questions about moral issues that are of profound concern to them.

Relevance

Do you see the meaning for your own life in each lesson you teach? If not, you will have a hard time making the class relevant to your students' lives. Do you understand the needs and interests of your students? By getting to know each of them, you can craft lessons that relate the Bible and class assignments to their lives.

Each year, during the Adventist history unit, I assign my sophomore class a research paper. They are asked to choose a pioneer and tell why he or she had a lasting effect on the Adventist Church. Several of my students are now defenders of people such as Joseph Bates because they can see how their work has actually affected the church and society today. If I mention Joseph Bates in class, those students cheer. If someone makes a negative remark about Bates, they get very defensive. For them, the early history of the church is a living document, not just a list of facts and dates.

Another activity I use in class to make the Bible relevant to students is schedule issue days. Each student writes down questions, problems, or a topic that is on his or her mind



Members of the author's junior Bible class enjoyed visiting with leaders of a Hindu temple in Silver Spring, Maryland.

relating to the Bible, God, religion, Christianity, or Adventism and each slip of paper is put in a box, and we choose several to discuss, while offering biblical guidelines and applications to that situation. It's helpful to pull out the topic a day or week in advance to give yourself and the students time to prepare for the discussion.

When you schedule a time for sharing and testimonies, don't be afraid to share your own experiences. Students watch their teachers, principals, deans, and every other staff member to see if these adults really live what they claim to believe. To help students feel more comfortable, schedule a sharing day or set aside a segment of each class. Start off with your own testimony. If we as teachers do not share our faith openly with our students, how can expect them to share?

Role-Play

Every teenager needs a chance to get up and act on what he or she knows. This is one of the ways you can make the Bible class relevant to students' lives.

The North American Division secondary Bible curriculum includes both world religions and Bible doctrines. For these units, instead of teaching lots of facts, let your students experience what they are studying. Make the whole unit a witnessing unit. Practice role-play scenarios in class to prepare your students to answer tough questions about their faith. Assign one student to be a Buddhist, one a Muslim, and another an Adventist. Then based on those beliefs, have the students answer questions like these: "What happens after a person dies?"; "Why do bad things happen to good people?"; or "What's the point of life?" Getting students to think in the shoes of someone else enables them to understand a different point of view, and helps solidify what we believe as Christians.

However, don't just talk about the various religions. Go to an Islamic mosque, a Jewish synagogue, a Cath-

olic church, a Hindu or Buddhist temple, a Quaker meeting house, or any other place where students can see, hear, and experience a service of that religion. Then discuss issues and beliefs with the monk, imam, priest, rabbi, or pastor. I recently took a group of students to a Buddhist temple and a Hindu temple. We all remember more from that one trip than from hours of lectures in a classroom.

Role-playing is more than just visiting places of worship. Get students out in the streets of your neighborhood or town sharing the news about Jesus. Have them knock on doors all over town and ask to pray with those they meet. Once a month, I take a group of students to a local nursing home. We sing and talk to the residents. It doesn't require a lot of preparation. But the impact on students and residents is immeasurable. Jesus understood that real learning happens when people teach, so give students plenty of solid contact with hungry souls all over town.

I use another role-playing strategy when I teach the doctrine of salvation to the junior class. I could just explain all the terms, texts, and ideas, and move on. But then I remember that I learned twice as much in my first four years of teaching than I did in my four years in college. So I have created a Bible study for each student to give to another person. If you prefer, you can spend some class time on how to prepare a Bible study. The past couple of years, I have assigned my students to give the study to their parents or to a school staff member. This requires them to do more in-depth preparation, and communicates to the parents and/or deans what the students are studying in class. It also gives the nervous first-time Bible study giver an adult listener who doesn't criticize, as another teenager might. By doing this activity, you can achieve multiple goals: Help students understand the various doctrines and teach them to give a Bible study. Whenever a student takes ownership of information and tries to convince

someone else of the merit and value of that information, he or she will understand it better as well.

The three R's, responsibility, relevance, and role-play, are not the only important concepts in religious instruction, but they have given my teaching new focus and direction. ✍

Resources I have found helpful:

Books

Help! I'm a Small Group Leader by Laurie Polich

Mission to OZ: Reaching Postmoderns Without Losing Your Way by Mark Tabb

God Cares (Daniel and Revelation) by Mervyn Maxwell

Secrets of Revelation by Jacques Doukhan

Studying Together by Mark Finley

I Kissed Dating Goodbye by Joshua Harris

Guys and Girls Curriculum from Youth Specialties

CD-ROMs

The Ideas Library CD-ROM v.3.0 by Youth Specialties

DVDs

Matthew by The Visual Bible

Acts by The Visual Bible

Religions of the World by Schlesinger Media

Websites

Youthspecialties.com

Circle.adventist.org

Religioustolerance.org

Lordsday.org

Journals

Youthworker Journal

Christianity Today

Signs of the Times



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