

# How Many Crafts, And Why?

*I do not know the author or source of this article, but it reflects my thoughts on utilizing our class time effectively. Whether you have younger or older students, there is something here for you. I have made a few edits and have bolded what I believe to be important points. Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.*

"Now it's time for our projects," said the teacher to her wiggly class of three-year-olds after telling them the story of Zacchaeus. They scrambled to their feet and headed for three low tables, each spread with a different selection of craft materials.



At the **first table**, the students stuck tree branches into paper cups filled with modeling clay, and used clothespins and fabric scraps to fashion figures of Zacchaeus to perch in the trees. That done, they moved on to the **second table**, where they colored outlines of Jesus looking up at Zacchaeus in the tree. As if that were not enough, the teacher ushered them to the **third table**, where they were to create a design with glue and sprinkled little flecks of multicolored paper. She explained that Zacchaeus was small and so were these flecks of paper!

## Visiting that classroom raised a number of questions.

- Why were there three craft projects in half an hour?
- What happened to the projects after they left the classroom?
- Why do we put so much emphasis on crafts in the Church School?
- What is their proper role?
- How much of our limited Church School budget can we justify spending on craft supplies?

In the class on Zacchaeus, the teacher may have lined up three craft projects. Or perhaps she found the little flecks of paper in the storeroom, and determined to make use of them one way or another. I am sure she meant well, but we need to think about why we do things - especially because teaching time is so limited.

**Craft projects have a limited life span after they leave the classroom.** Tree branches with Zacchaeus in the tree probably sit on a ledge for a while until they are disassembled, while papers get crammed in a drawer. Certainly, projects need not have lasting

value in themselves to be valuable teaching tools. The chances are, though, that students will not learn more from doing three projects than they would from one.

**What is the purpose of craft projects in the Church School?** That question can only be answered in the context of the larger question: what is the purpose of the Church School? As Christian educators, our goal is to introduce the students who come our way to God's way, and guide them in their Christian walk. There are many steps in that walk; from learning that God loves us to absorbing Bible stories; to struggling with the meaning of commitment. At whatever level, everything that happens in the Church School should help the students grow as Christians.

**I believe in giving teachers the support they need to do their job well.** Therefore, I believe not only in supplying good curriculum and helpful resources, but also in keeping the classrooms stocked with scissors and glue and filling the storeroom with a wealth of craft supplies. Still, I am convinced that not everything that goes on in our classrooms is the best use of time and resources.

**Time is short!** The students may only be in the Church School classroom one hour per week, nine months a year. How can we make the most of that precious time? Making the most of the time does not require making students sit quietly for an hour while the teacher pontificates. It is important to choose activities carefully so that they reinforce the lesson of the day.



## For Younger Students

How many projects to do depends on the age of the students. Because preschoolers and young students do not have the attention span for extended discussions, most teachers plan to involve them in at least one craft project per week. In some cases, I think teachers have young students do more craft projects than they need to, at the expense of other valuable learning experiences.

In the case of the lesson on Zacchaeus, the figures in the trees were clever and reinforced the lesson well.

The coloring project was marginal, though it did place a picture of the Bible story in front of them for a few minutes. However, I would rather have seen the students acting out the story with the clothespin puppets. Young and old learn best by doing.

The sprinkling project had no real connection to the lesson. Simply experimenting with a medium is valuable in itself, but given our limited time and money, it is better to do something with the medium that truly supports the lesson. If the lesson was on helping others or healing the sick, perhaps the students could have used the technique to make get-well cards for church members in the hospital.

I suspect that many teachers introduce such activities just "to fill the time" until the parents come. Certainly, no one can judge exactly how long activities will take, and good teachers have some extra ideas ready in case they are needed. However, **there are many ways to expand the lesson.** Students can act out the story, play games, sing songs, or talk with the teacher about their week. And if the goal is nothing more than providing happy experiences in church, there is nothing wrong with letting small students simply play.

What about the major activity for the session, the one that most directly reinforces the lesson? Making something is a fine idea, but there are other activities that can meet the goal and provide a healthy variety in the classroom.

Not long ago I stepped into a class of four-year-olds learning about Paul and Silas in prison. The teacher had them all in paper chains, marching off to a prison of black paper strips slanting from a tabletop up to the wall. There they sat and sang songs, despite their condition. She posted a guard, and asked him how he felt about his job. When the earthquake came, the students got to tear down the "bars," and the guard came to know Jesus.

As the example shows, there are many ways to reinforce a lesson - not all of which involve making things. **Try discussion, music, field trips, drama, and games.** That way, when you do decide to have the students make something, it will not be "old hat."

If crafts appear to be the best alternative, consider having **students work several weeks on a single project** that ties into the lesson. I have seen classes work for a month on a complex project they can take home proudly at the end. One class made books about Paul, adding a page each week illustrating that session's story. Another made mobiles, hanging an ornament each week that represented what they had

learned. None of these activities were merely filling time.

### *For Older Students*

While younger students often do too many crafts, **older students and youth may not do enough crafts.** Since they are capable of reading and discussion, many teachers limit themselves to these modes. I suspect that a majority of teachers who volunteer to teach Junior High Church School feel more comfortable leading a discussion than planning a craft project. However there is a wealth of possibilities for giving youth a creative outlet while reinforcing the lesson.

One teacher had his Junior High students each make a "Red Badge of Christian Courage," telling one way they have stood up for their faith. Another set her fifth graders to the task of drawing a cartoon that retold the day's story. A fourth-grade class made posters urging others to donate to a mission project. In each case, I expect the message sank in while the kids were busy with their hands.

Here again, the class can add more each week to an ongoing project. One Junior High class made a presentation by drawing scenes from the Christmas story, then presented the show to a younger class. As they worked, the teachers engaged them in discussion concerning the characters in the story and what we can learn from them.

### *Guidelines for Teachers*

There is no set rule on how many crafts are enough and how many are too much, or which are always good and which are always bad. **To some extent, the effectiveness of craft projects will depend on how well the teacher explains their purpose and helps the students make the most of them.** But if the connection is too narrow, perhaps the activity is ill chosen for that session.

### *Guidelines for Church School Directors*

**Encourage teachers to stop to ask how a project they are contemplating fits into the goals for the morning.** Provide them with a rich curriculum, with a variety of alternatives for activities. In teachers' meetings, talk with them about making transitions and introducing each activity so that students understand why they are doing it. And challenge them to question the assumption that little students need to take a project home every week, and that youth have outgrown making things in Church School.

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