

Christian education and discipleship

The Assemblies of God Executive Presbytery unanimously selected Deborah M. Gill as the national director of the Division of Christian Education and commissioner for the Commission on Discipleship. An ordained Assemblies of God minister, Gill has served as senior pastor of Living Hope (A/G) in North Oaks, Minn., for the past four years. She has taught as a professor for 20 years in New Testament, Greek, homiletics and music. She previously served in missions, teaching at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary. Gill spoke recently with Scott Harrup, associate editor.

EVANGEL: Your office encourages churches to pursue excellence in Christian education and discipleship. What is the connection?

GILL: Christian education deals with acquisition of information; discipleship deals with character transformation. Sunday school is in about 94 percent of A/G churches. Many have excellent programs, but it's imperative that we breathe new life and energy into it wherever possible and encourage fresh delivery systems that meet today's discipleship needs.

Building on the content of the classroom, discipleship applies those lessons in the context of relationships, small groups, cells or one-on-one.

EVANGEL: Having served as a pastor, what lessons have you learned that will help you in your new ministry?

GILL: Our church was small, so we were unable to offer a Sunday school class for every level. We also noted that our families were so busy that kids were not consistent in attendance. So we deployed new delivery systems. Our children's pastor, Monica Grubb, developed "24•7 Kids' Academy," a Christian education program, focused on discipling kids to follow Jesus 24 hours a day, seven days a week. She designed a spiraling curriculum that involved all ages simultaneously and packaged it in short, yet intense activity modules that combine Bible teaching with activity and friendship interaction. Our adults met weekly in cells for relational evangelism, nurture and discipleship and occasionally in seminars for teaching and training. Our society is changing, and we must look for new ways to bring people into relationship with Christ and with each other.

EVANGEL: Talk about the growing diversity within the U.S. Assemblies of God and what that means for our Fellowship.

GILL: After teaching in the Philippines, I was met by a flood of southeast Asians in my hometown, the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul. About 50,000 Hmong had been granted refuge in Minnesota following the Vietnam war. My home church (Summit Assembly) reached out with literacy assistance that soon grew into a whole ministry (which we called New Americans) to the Hmong, Cambodian and Lao people. We need to be aware of our growing diversity and look for ways to minister to all people. Just as important, we must find ways to include this diversity in our churches in positions of leadership.

EVANGEL: What role can our colleges and universities take in Christian education?

GILL: Professors at our Assemblies of God colleges and universities are a treasure trove of educational resources. Many of these instructors are involved not only with their full-time ministry on campus, but serve in their local churches as well. Older believers have a lot to learn from the young disciples in our Masters Commissions and in Chi Alpha groups on secular campuses. I would love to respond to the deep desire for meaningful mentoring relationships expressed by the 15,000 students studying in our colleges.

EVANGEL: How can the traditional Sunday school adapt to meet Christian education needs in the 21st century?

GILL: Sunday school teachers need to be effective and engaging. We need teachers who *prepare*, and then present great content — but they've also got to be good group facilitators. The best Bible studies offer students opportunities to make biblical application to their own lives. I'd also like to bring to greater visibility in the Fellowship the role of models and mentors. A movement of discipleship will never happen until we have a groundswell of dedicated *disciplers* determined to invest themselves intentionally in a lifelong lifestyle. I pray that the Commission on Discipleship will be a hub on the wheel, networking to respond to the needs of our Fellowship. Not only may we be known for collecting and developing resources on discipleship, but even more may each of its members model personally a lifestyle that reproduces friends and followers of Jesus Christ.

