

Struggling with Sunday School?

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Many congregations report that they struggle with Sunday school now and then. The struggle sounds like this:

- From the teachers: “I don’t have a lot of time to put into preparation.”
“I don’t know enough about the Bible.”
- From the parents: “Sunday is our only day to do family things.”
“The kids don’t want to come.”
- From the ministers: “It’s so hard to find volunteers who are committed.”
“I think we need new blood or new ideas.”
- From the children: “I’ve heard this story so many times already.”
“It’s boring. I want to do more crafts.”

If this sounds familiar, take heart. There *are* things you can do, but have patience. “Quick fix” solutions—the snappy, new, active program, or the latest fad—are usually not helpful in the long run. When you are struggling with Sunday school, it is best to back up and take some time to think through philosophical and practical issues which, when resolved, will inject new life into your Christian education program.

Is Sunday school important?

I’ve heard people ask, “Is Sunday school really important in the 21st century?” Sunday school can be incredibly important in the spiritual growth of children, youth and adults. It is intentional time, set aside to learn about the Christian faith and how we are to follow Christ.

I did a survey in 2004 of 240 young adults who had grown up in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. I asked a wide range of questions about their religious experiences and was quite interested to hear what they had to say about Sunday school. In brief, over half of them were positive about Sunday school. Sunday school was among their favourite memories. And the other half? Well... they liked Sunday school, too, but, they said, “Please, please, please improve it.” They asked for better training for the teachers, more engaging and active learning, and more aesthetically pleasing learning environments.

Is the “rotation model” or “mentoring” the secret ingredient?

You may have heard this: “We’ve started the rotation model (or mentoring) in our Christian education program, and it has made all the difference in the world.”

Of course, the rotation model (a modified learning centre approach) and mentoring are wonderful because they intentionally focus on two important elements in faith formation—active engagement in the learning process and long-term adult support.

But, before you rush into changing to a new program or approach, ask yourself, “What does this approach offer that we currently do not have? Do the gains outweigh the disadvantages? For instance, you *will* gain more active learning engagement and added enthusiasm with the rotation model, but you also lose the long-term adult support that is needed for faith formation. It *is*

entirely possible to modify any approach to make it work better. Just reflect on the gains and disadvantages before jumping into a new model.

What you can do with this paper...over a period of time

Step 1: Gather around you *a few concerned, interested and positive people*. It does not take a lot of people to generate new growth, but it does take people who see possibilities instead of problems and people who are willing to do some hard thinking. You may have an existing committee that is willing to do this.

Step 2: Spend some time *dreaming*. What would an ideal Sunday school look like? Read the paragraphs above (Is Sunday school important? Is the “rotation model” or “mentoring” the secret ingredient?). In what way can Sunday school be spiritual growth for teachers, children, the whole congregation?

Step 3: Ask your group, “*Are we thinking too small?*”

a. **Think about multiple generations.** When you hear the term “Sunday school” or “church school” or “Christian education,” do you automatically think “children”? Try to think in broader terms by reminding yourself that you probably have five generations in your congregation:

- people born before 1945 (sometimes called *Builders*)
- people born between 1945 and 1964 (sometimes called *Boomers*)
- people born between 1964 and 1983 (sometimes called *Busters* or *Gen X*)
- people born between 1983 and 2002 (sometimes called *Bridgers* or *Gen Y*)
- people born after 2002 (mercifully not “labeled” yet!)

To remind yourself that Christian education is for *all* generations, jot down the names of some people in your congregation from each of the generations. Keep this list in front of you as you talk and plan. It will help you to remember that sometimes learning can happen for all generations together and sometimes it is more effective in generational groups.

b. **Think about worship/study patterns.** Just because you have always had church at 11 a.m. and Sunday school at 11:15 a.m., it does not mean that you need to continue this pattern if it no longer suits your goals. In 1975, William Abernethy (Abingdon Press) wrote a wonderful little book called *A New Look for Sunday Morning*. Although this book is out of print—a book before it’s time—its message is still timely. Abernethy advocates an integrated Sunday morning with three acts—worship, education and celebration. Everyone gathers for worship, then take coffee and juice to age-divided education classes, then re-group for a short celebration based on the morning’s theme. It’s worth thinking through.

c. **Think about how all events can become more educational.** Many on-going church activities can become more educational just by being more intentional about what is to be learned. For instance, choir practice can include a mini-study of a Bible passage about which choristers are singing. The church’s annual meeting can host a fun ‘here’s-how-we-do-annual-meetings’ directed at the children...but the teens and adults will learn too. The Finance and Maintenance Committee can include in its agenda a brief time to learn about stewardship or ecology.

Step 4: Explore this question: *Why are we doing Sunday school? What is our goal?*

It is important to decide why you are continuing to do Sunday school, how it should look or how it might change because the context has changed.

In his book *Mapping Christian Education*, Jack Seymour (Abingdon Press, 1997) outlines four main goals for providing Sunday school:

- Transformation of self and society
- Faith community
- Spiritual growth
- Religious instruction

Most churches, because they grew up with it, tend to say that they want “religious instruction” (focus on the Bible stories) for the children, but may want “transformation education” (focus on the Christian’s role in social justice concerns) for their youth and/or “spiritual growth” for the adults. Or, in some cases, the whole congregation decides that they really are about forming a faithful community of faith. There is no “right” or “wrong” goal. It is just a norm that develops within the church. (Note, too, that when conflict occurs, it is often because there are different “camps” who think that their way is the best or right way. Note, too, there is often great unhappiness if the minister is a “transformation” type of person but the congregation is a “religious instruction” type of congregation.)

Explore the goals for your Sunday school

1. Buy and read (or have someone read and give a synopsis) of the four main goals of Sunday school found in Jack Seymour’s *Mapping Christian Education*.
2. Brainstorm how each of the four models might look.

The **transformation** type of church tends to have characteristics like these:

- has teens and adults who study things like ecology, government health policies, cloning, stem cell research
- puts a strong emphasis on using the *Partners* resources for children (AIDS and/or water issues)
- has a strong focus on service—mission trips, local food grain bank initiatives, community service initiatives, Habitat for Humanity, Amnesty International, refugee support
- incorporates children with their families into serving projects

The **community of faith** type of church might have some of these characteristics:

- loves pot luck dinners and eating together after worship
- uses and loves a curriculum that promotes intergenerational and all-congregation learning events
- works hard at integrating children and teens into worship, communion and the whole life of the church
- tends to have good hospitality practices

The **spiritual growth** type of church tends to have characteristics like these:

- values gifts of Bibles and devotional reading for children and youth
- uses curriculum like *Young Children and Worship* by Stewart and Berryman or Jerome Berryman’s *Godly Play*
- has prayer chains and prayer partners
- tends toward mentors for children and youth

The **religious education** type of church might have some of these characteristics:

- uses a curriculum that focuses on story
- hosts contests where families might sign up to memorize or read together key things like the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments

- emphasizes its church library
- uses adult study resources like *Kerygma*

On four sheets of chart paper, write a title of each of the above models, then list all the activities your congregation currently does under each of these models. It is likely that you will find, as many congregations do, that you do a bit of each, but you really tend to do much more of one of them with the children. This has, over the years, become the accepted way of “being church” in your congregation.

3. When you have completed the above task, ask yourselves, “Is one model more prominent in our congregation? Is this the model we want to continue to follow and strengthen...or are we just doing it because we’ve grown up with it and/or have always done things this way?”

It is usually best for people to agree, by consensus, on which model the congregation wants for the children, the youth and the adults. (Remember that the goals or models might be the same or they might be different for each group.)

My favourite way to work by consensus is to use an adapted Quaker method:

“I vote A” which means that I can fully endorse this decision OR

“I vote B” which means that I have some reservations, but because others seem to feel strongly about it, I will step aside and let others proceed and not criticize or stand in the way OR

“I vote C” which means that I have such strong reservations that I think we need to take more time to think this thing through.

Having used this consensus model many times, I find that a balance of mostly A’s and a few B’s work. But if the A’s and B’s are equally balanced, it is not wise to proceed with action. More time, talk and negotiation is needed since there is too much resistance or passivity. C’s, of course, just send everyone back to the drawing board. I have, on occasion, had someone use a C like a “veto” so now I always pre-warn the group, “If you feel so strongly that you *must* use a C, you must also take more responsibility than the others for finding a solution that will work.”

Step 5: Explore this question: “*How do children come to faith?*”

It is important to think through how children become people of faith as they grow into teens and adulthood. In a 1998 major research by the Search Institute in Minneapolis, MN, thousands of American Grade 7 to 12 students were interviewed. When asked, “Who was the major influence for you being a person of faith?” the answers were (for Grade 7):

- mother(87%)
- father (64%)
- minister (60%)

Then, there was a cluster of “lesser important factors”:

- grandparents (36%)
- church school teacher (29%)
- youth group at church (25%)
- the Bible (25%)
- church camp (23%)
- Sunday school (23%)
- siblings (22%)
- friends (22%)

And further down the list of influences:

- youth group leader at my church (13%)
- choir or music at church (11%)
- prayer or meditation (9%)
- retreats (7%)
- movie/music star (3%)
- youth group outside my church (3%)
- school teachers (3%)
- youth group leader outside my church (2%)
- other books I have read (2%)
- coach (2%)

What does this tell us? On chart paper, jot down the insights of your group. What does this survey say to your group members?

If it helps to expand the thinking, share my musings on this data:

- Parents and ministers are really important to the faith development of children and youth. Perhaps the task, then, for churches and CE committees is to figure out how to help parents. (It has been my experience that parents *want* to help their children grow in faith; they just need a little guidance in figuring out *how* to do it.)
- Because there are so many things listed, this suggests to me that we need to provide a variety of activities for children and youth, not just Sunday school. In other words, I think that we have been too hung up on “regular Sunday school” with books and papers. It may now be time to have a more “club like” morning where the children do active things around a theme—something like this: September = group-building month; October = Fun Bible skills month, November = learn about AIDS month, etc. Although this takes more digging out of resources and activities, it is also engaging for children and children alike. Some churches tell me that they do not use the term “Sunday school” any more, but use a descriptor like “Adventure Club” or “Discovery Days.”
- It is really interesting that the minister is so important to faith development. This probably indicates that the minister can/should do some intentional activity with the children/youth: organize a retreat, invite older children/youth to help him/her write a sermon, have a BBQ at his/her home, watch a soccer or t-ball game, etc.

Following up on these ideas

It is possible that you want to follow up on some of these ideas.

a) Brainstorm ways you can **help parents** on a regular basis such as.

- Provide a weekly family resource table (resources available from the national office)
- Provide a family-based program that people can do at home (we’re currently reprinting an attractive version of the old “Presbyterian Home Memory Course”)
- Provide a family support course. (The STEP program is excellent and has a Christian supplement. The videos and training manual are available for rent through the national office, 800-619-7301.)
- Give *The Family Story Bible* by Ralph Milton (Northstone Books, 1996) as a gift to families
- Do a family camp

b) You will want to think through the variety of activities your church offers for the faith development of children, youth and adults. Use these four components which everyone should have in their faith life:

Worship Learning Serving Fun/fellowship

Under each category, jot down what you have done in the past for the children. (Make three more lists for youth, adults and intergenerational groups.) Ask, “Are there areas where we have been neglectful?” It is entirely possible, for instance, that, like many congregations, you have focused almost exclusively on learning opportunities and neglected the other aspects. Or, it is possible you will notice that some activities should be discontinued.

This is a time to ask, “Can we add one thing in the other areas? How will we do this?” What should we drop?

c) You will want to think hard about the role of the minister. After all, in our tradition, the minister is referred to as the “teaching elder.” Although the role of the minister is important, it does not mean that the minister should take this on as an extra burden, but it can become an integrated part of regular pastoral care simply by making a few small changes like these:

- When the minister arranges a pastoral call, he/she can ask that the children and youth be there, too
- Elders can work with the minister to have some fun events with the children like a popcorn and movie night, a sugar-cookie bake-off, a mystery meal, etc.
- Ministers need to keep good notes on the younger members of the congregation—grades, interests, skills.

d) You will want to think hard about incorporating children and youth into worship. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we have raised/are continuing to raise a whole generation of children who never learn to worship because they are always sent out of the worship service. There are simply oodles of resources to help children learn how to worship and to learn to love worship. I can help you track those down if you decide to do some work in this area.

e) You will want to consider how you create community. Community is a strong Christian value. It is possible to build strong bonds within the learning community by structuring at least one retreat, lock-in or day apart. This is preferably done at the beginning of the learning year—September for Canadians. Rodger Nishioka, professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary, says that it takes 17 contact hours to “form a group.” If we have only 30 minutes together each Sunday morning, it could conceivably take six months before your Sunday school class creates a bond! Ideally, it is wonderful for group dynamics to begin the learning year with a retreat and, half way through the learning year, host another. (This would be around January for Canadians.) In my home congregation, we go to a winter lodge for a parent-child winter spirituality retreat in February. It is a little shot in the arm and creates lasting community.

Step 6: Look at curriculum

Curriculum is a tool and a wonderful resource to help you accomplish your goal. Curriculum should always be chosen after the work in Step 4 is done and after you have answered the questions: What are we trying to accomplish? Which model of Christian education will we follow? Religious education? Community-based? Spiritual formation? Transformative learning?

(Remember that you may decide to have one focus for the children, another for the youth and a third for adults.)

Once you have clarified which model you will follow, you must ask, “What curriculum will help us achieve that end?” For instance, if you want to provide community-based Christian education for your children, there are curricula that will help you do that. You can also see how frustrating it might be to want to do transformative learning with the tools that help you do faith-community education. It would be like building a table without the correct tools.

Curriculum can be borrowed from the national office of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. (Contact Matthew Donnelly or Dorothy Henderson at 800-619-7301.) Many Regional Staff also have curriculum samples.

Best wishes as you work with others to strengthen Christian education in your congregation.

Let me know if I can be of help in the future.

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