

FOR LEADERS OF

CHILDREN AND YOUTH MINISTRY

Sunday school in 2007:

Does it still work?

Our yearly statistics for The Presbyterian Church in Canada report that approximately 200 of our 961 congregations (one in five) no longer have a Sunday school. The Sunday school is 227 years old. That is more than two centuries! It makes us ask, "What is the future of the Sunday school? Is it still viable?" Is the Sunday school as we know it adequate for our day?

Despite these bleak statistics, some Sunday schools in our denomination *are* growing and thriving. Why is that? Before we look at characteristics of *growing* Sunday schools, let us consider what may be making some Sunday schools fail.

Why do some Sunday schools flounder?

There are at least six main reasons why Sunday schools struggle.

1. **We are an aging denomination.** Presbyterians have the oldest median age (46 years) among Canadian Protestants. There are fewer and fewer young families in most congregations and many grandparents are too far away from grandchildren to bring them.
2. **Sunday school is unconnected from the congregation, out on a limb.** Historically, Sunday school has been separated from the congregation and run by lay people. There are long roots of suspicion by clergy and an equally strong desire by lay people to keep Sunday school out of the control of clergy. In North America, for instance, when the Uniform Lesson system was adopted in 1872, clergy were banned from the committee. While this is a long lost memory, this history is still in our DNA. Many Sunday schools still have their own treasurer and operate as an independent sidebar to the church.

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3. The Sunday school has been afraid to change.

Listen to this description of a typical Sunday school:

There is first an opening period of worship, with emphasis upon singing. The children then divide into classes for 20 or 25 minutes. This is followed by a closing time when the superintendent gives a few remarks, papers are distributed and a prayer is offered.

This could be a Sunday school in any town, any city, any side road...in Canada. When was this written? It comes from a description of Sunday school in 1899—108 years ago! (James D. Smart citing Realencyklopädie für Protestantische Theologie und Kirche, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, p. 51.)

4. The Sunday school has not taken seriously its changing context.

Many “Boomers” and their offspring opted not to raise children in a religious faith and consequently only 1 of 3 children in Canada are affiliated in any way with a faith community. In addition, our society now provides hundreds of options for interesting activities, and this keeps people very busy.

There is a strong allegiance to sports. Many parents say, for instance, that coaches do not allow children to miss one practice or they are out of the game, and it is a curious thing that the parents obey the coaches. The public education system and churches have become more estranged and separated. We live in a time of incredible social change. To say that information is exploding is an understatement. Ten years ago none of us would have believed that we would become almost totally dependent—in our banking, our buying, our work and our personal life—on the World Wide Web. Knowledge has become a commodity. We no longer think of ourselves as merely “Canadians.” We know we are part of a global village. Consumerism has become a driving energy in our communities and world.

This is a totally different context from the “Ragged Schools” of 1780—the first Sunday school founded in Gloucester, England. These first schools were designed to provide literacy and social skills to poor boys (ragamuffins) who worked long hours six days a week in cold, poorly lit factories.

5. Sunday school is equated with children.

Despite our efforts to emphasize that Christian education is for *all* ages, most congregations still associate “Sunday school” with children. When children disappear, so does the Christian education focus of the congregation.

6. Sunday school and worship compete.

Canadians are rather unique in that, for the majority of congregations, children must choose between Sunday school or worship since they happen at the same time. The result? Children never learn to love and appreciate worship. By the time they are 12, most “vote with their feet.” They have graduated!

It is obvious that despite rapid change in social context, the Sunday school has remained stuck, rigid and inflexible. By refusing to think “outside the box” Sunday schools, in general, have declined and disintegrated.

Some congregations who find themselves in the position of having no children still have creative ministries that reach out to children. For instance, the congregation of Calvin Presbyterian in Toronto has gathered together the names of children who are connected to older members of the congregation—grandchildren, neighbours, nieces and nephews. Several times a year a group from the congregation puts together a “care package” of books, bookmarks, pencils, messages which are sent to the children as a way to help them grow in the Christian faith.

What makes some Sunday schools grow?

Despite the gradual national decline in Sunday school numbers, there are people deeply committed to excellent Sunday school and there are pockets of growth. By consulting the Acts and Proceedings of the 2005 General Assembly, we note that 80 of our churches experienced moderate or considerable growth in the Sunday school last year. Our national Christian Education Advisory Committee set out to try to discover what made these Sunday schools grow. We interviewed 24 of the 80 churches hoping to see some patterns. How did they explain their growth? What seems to help them retain their vitality? It was interesting to note that, while some congregations had parallel growth in membership, most of the growing Sunday schools grew in spite of the fact that the congregation was declining. This led us to believe that, if we pay attention to the factors below, a Sunday school program can grow and prosper.

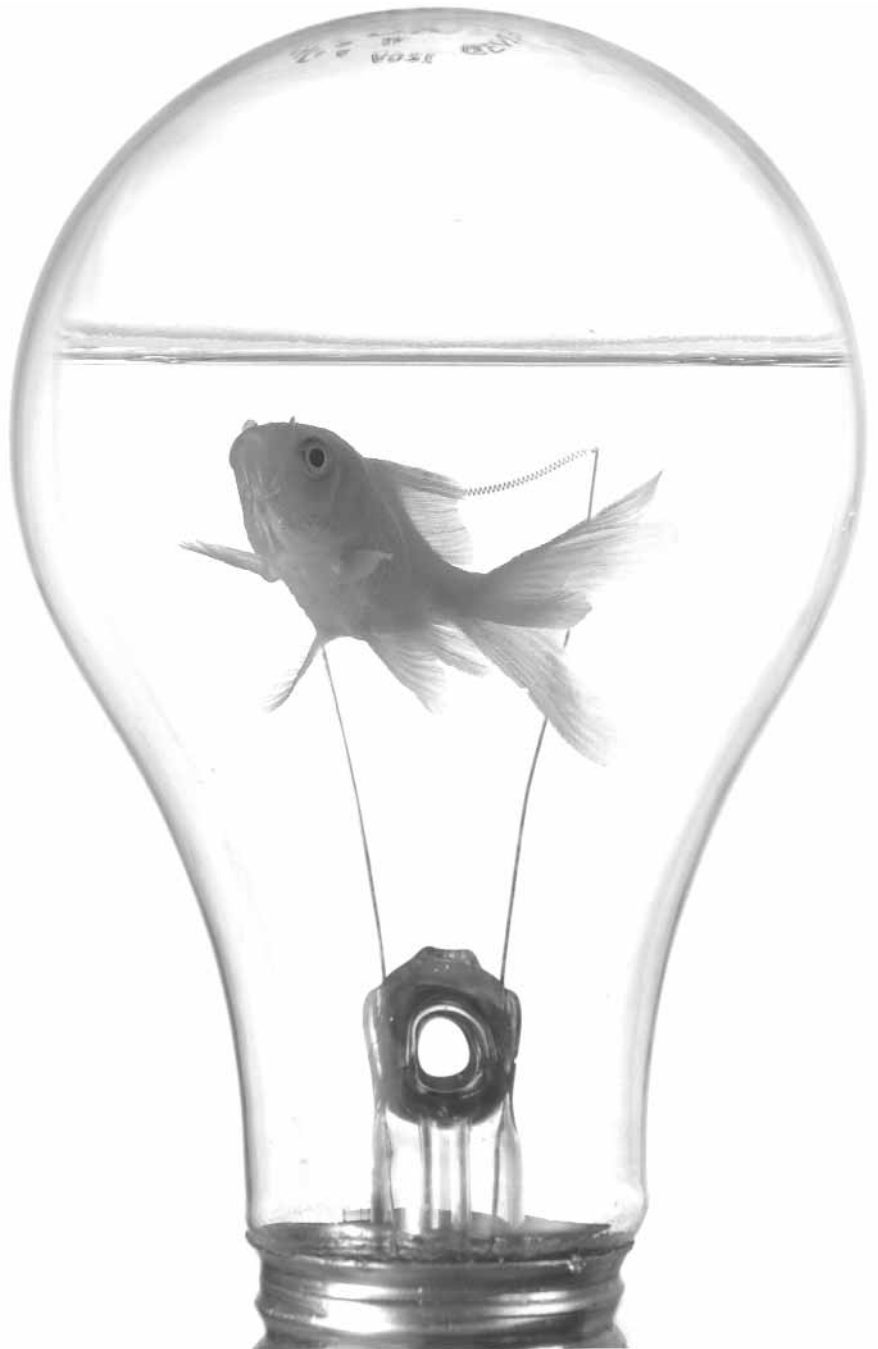
What do growing Sunday schools have in common?

1. Growing Sunday schools have good teachers

A majority of the respondents said that their teachers are excellent, that they give a vibrant witness to Jesus as Lord, that they are willing to be part of on-going training. Churches that pay attention to their teachers have greater success.

2. Growing Sunday schools connect with families

The growing Sunday schools made lots of effort to involve the entire family through personal contact, newsletters, luncheons, seasonal parties, home visits. The valuable work of the Search Institute (www.search-institute.org) in the last decade helps us to understand much about faith development. When asked, "What or who is a significant religious influence in your life?" about 87 per cent of Grade 7 children said Mom and 64 per cent said Dad. Grandparents were close behind. Growing Sunday schools realize that family plays a pivotal role in the faith of their children.



3. Growing Sunday schools offer staff support

Many growing Sunday schools mentioned the important role that staff—primarily the minister—played in helping the Sunday school stay connected to the rest of the congregation. The minister was integral to helping integrate children and youth into worship and the social life of the congregation.

4. Growing Sunday schools offer something new

In the responses there was a wide variety of new things and this “newness” gave energy and vitality. Sometimes it was a new curriculum, a new approach (club), a new method (e.g. rotation model).

5. Growing Sunday schools are Christ-centered and biblically-based

In a vibrant Christ-centered Sunday school, teachers will constantly say things like this: This week, how will you include Jesus in your life? What do you think Jesus would like you to do about that? What challenges do you see at school this week, and how will Jesus guide you in the tough times?

Lessons, stories, crafts and songs are all seen through the lens of our best understanding of Jesus Christ. Even to small children Christ is presented as life-giving, liberating and compassionate. If we do not stay Christ-centered in Sunday school, we find ourselves slipping into child care, keeping the kids quiet through church or “doing crafts.”

6. Growing Sunday schools explore their context and invite others in

It's important to ask, “Who is in our community...and what are they like?” It is important to gather demographic details of your community. But, it is not enough to just understand the current context. The growing Sunday school invites others in.

Creating a growing Sunday school

There are no “magic bullets” for creating a dynamic Sunday school. However, here are questions to guide your congregation as you work at this together:

- How are we helping our teachers to be vibrant and excellent witness to Christ?
- How does our Sunday school stay connected with families?
- Is our staff—particularly the minister—closely involved with Sunday school?
- Is our Sunday school alive with new fresh ideas?
- Is our Sunday school Christ-centered and biblically based?
- Have we examined the context of our community? How does this affect our Sunday school? Have we invited the community in?

In 1975 William Abernethy wrote a wonderful (ahead-of-his-time?) book entitled **A New Look for Sunday Morning** (Abingdon, 1975). This book is now out of print but can still be found in used books on Amazon.com. It offers an alternative to the competing Sunday school/ worship arrangement by offering a pattern of gathering worship, refreshments and study for all ages, followed by celebration worship.