

Some say that Sunday School is dead, But I say...

Margaret Ann Crain

When I was 13 years old I refused to go back to Sunday School. “I’m never going to go to that class again,” I announced to my parents with all the self-righteousness that an adolescent can muster. Our well-meaning, elderly teacher had preached to us about abstaining from alcohol, and I rejected her as a straight-laced, out-of-touch old woman. A year later, another adult volunteer taught me that sexuality is a good gift of God to be enjoyed responsibly. Both made lasting impressions on me. They illustrate both the failure and the possibilities of Sunday School in our United Methodist Church. It has the potential to be both out-of-touch with life and a powerful process for Christian formation.

I believe that many persons in the United Methodist Church are yearning for God.¹

Just last week my brother-in-law called, reporting with excitement that after many years away he had decided to try Sunday School. Changes in his life had made his spiritual search urgent. “The leader just asked a question and the conversation flowed for the whole hour!” he reported. The class was discussing Leslie Weatherhead’s concept of the will of God. This topic really resonated with issues in Bill’s life. In this instance, **the Sunday School is relevant to Bill’s life issues, a port-of-entry into church life, an effective tool for evangelism, and a place for Christian formation.**

Some say that the Sunday School won’t fly in this culture of internet, 24/7 entertainment and shopping, of people whose lives are overloaded and fast-paced. Sunday School is dead when it is irrelevant to the real life issues that trouble adults in the congregation. It is dead when it has only platitudes and outworn ideas to offer. We must ask ourselves, Are we getting to the heart of it? What are the questions that trouble the people in our congregation? Then we must courageously address those questions using the resources of Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. We affirm in the *Discipline* ¶104 that “the Church encourages serious reflection across the theological spectrum.” The task is “both individual and communal.”² For many people, Sunday School is the only opportunity to reflect on their lives in the company of other Christians striving to be faithful to the call of Christ. Sunday School must be a place for serious reflection that explores the theological spectrum.

Sunday School is for the whole body of Christ and all ages. Solutions to the Sunday School doldrums for children are plentiful. For instance, friends tell me that the rotation method for children’s Sunday School has reinvigorated both children and their adult volunteer teachers. This new method, with Power Xpress from the UMPH as resource, has transformed the old, tired hour of Sunday School into an inviting and creative time of exploring Bible stories. All children are included because this curriculum takes multiple intelligences seriously. Every child can genuinely find a place where her or his gifts are welcomed and where he or she can learn. Kids are looking forward to coming to Sunday School each week! Adult volunteers bring their

special interests and skills along with a love for children to the activities on Sunday morning. And everyone benefits.

The rotation method has made it easier to recruit teachers for children. Still, finding the right people as leaders is another reason that some say the Sunday School is dead. Volunteers in the congregation are not equipped to deal with the sophisticated faith questions that arise in response to genetic engineering, complex global economics, and the reality of worldwide terrorists. Perhaps even more challenging is the growing cultural and religious diversity that is all around us. How do we affirm the truth of our United Methodist faith and also seek to be in relationship with persons and faiths that are different? Yet, congregations have members who lead their businesses in complex discernment practices with a staff that is culturally and philosophically diverse. One woman who is vice president of a large, international corporation told me recently that they have developed guidelines for interaction between their employees that seek to honor differences and find ways to work together that do not violate those differences. Those skills can help a group of adults gathered on Sunday morning to address complex issues even in the face of controversy. **Persons in every congregation have the spirit and heart to love and resource groups even as they struggle with diversity. We must identify and recruit them for our critical theological task.**

Get on the media wagon! Interest and energy for theological reflection is present in our culture. Many people were reading *The DaVinci Code* last fall. The mystery with its puzzles and clues pictured a Christian tradition with secret societies and forbidden ideas. Crowds flocked to bookstores here in Chicago to learn about the historical veracity of the novel. People were excited to learn about their religious tradition and were stimulated to ask new questions. The women in my UMW book group arrived armed with newspaper clippings and internet stories. They were ready to enter into a discussion about the Church and our beliefs about Jesus' life. As I write, the Mel Gibson film is stimulating similar discussion I main-

tain that Sunday School does have the potential to address relevant, exciting issues that emerge in our culture and our lives. Sunday Schools must learn to respond quickly to such teachable moments when popular culture poses important religious questions.

Those who want to plan a funeral for the Sunday School argue that the teaching and learning that goes on there is not "sophisticated" and often is theologically deficient. Whose fault is that? I believe

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that both clergy and laity share the responsibility. First, too many pastors have abdicated the teaching office. They have not made teaching a priority. Most good teachers are not born that way. They take time to learn HOW to teach. In addition too many clergy have not been faithful in exploring WHAT to teach. They have withheld the most compelling and enlightening scholarship from their parishioners. I remember leading a group of women who were reading together some material from the Jesus seminar. I invited them to read things that they might not agree with, things that would stretch their theological assumption. We read one scholar who had studied the different social and religious contexts out of which each of the gospels was written, stressing the differences between the gospel accounts. The women asked me, "Did all our pastors know about this?" I answered that seminary Bible courses include extensive study of how biblical texts are shaped by their social and historical contexts. "Then why didn't they tell us?" responded the women. Too often we

who have graduate level theological and biblical training have not shared what we know with the people in the congregation. Do we feel that we cannot trust them with this information? Or are we so insecure in our own beliefs that we cannot allow an idea that challenges those beliefs into the parish? Or are we just uncomfortable with guiding a group of self-starting adult learners in a process of theological reflection on their lives? If we genuinely believe that the Holy Spirit is available to guide our work, then we have nothing to fear. Learn how to facilitate a group learning process. **Walk boldly into the most controversial of topics and, with humility, varied resources, and prayer, encourage the body of Christ to consider what it might mean.** The pastor must set a climate that values Christian education.

Youth and adults who go on Sunday morning, not expecting anything, will probably not be disappointed. But it doesn't have to be that way! When a class begins to take responsibility for its own curriculum and to be intentional about addressing the theological and social questions that are urgent in its members' lives, the learning will become effective. The life questions of the participants provide the curriculum. The Christian tradition provides the resources. The result is relevant and engaging Christian education.

If a class is addressing an urgent question, they should seek out a variety of opinions. When all biblical and theological resources seem to speak with one voice, the dialogue becomes ho-hum. With the addition of diverse voices, we give permission for class members to explore their own thoughts and see where their opinions are supported and where undermined. This exploration process requires a facilitator who can help the group to engage the question, focus the discussion, honor differences, and encourage convictions and commitments that lead to discipleship.

Finding good resources with a variety of viewpoints may require leaders and learners to leave the comfortable old curriculum behind. Some publishers put out one-voiced material exclusively. It avoids controversy, certainly. It also risks predictability and boredom. It can silence

variant points of view. These resources leave little room for exploration and claiming one's own learning. Thankfully, this is not true of most United Methodist resources.

The *Discipline* stresses our theological task as United Methodists. "[T]he Church encourages serious reflection across the theological spectrum." That means that we must continue to revisit our historical documents and convictions and test them in light of our current experiences of God. Where and when do we address this critical task?

Our own United Methodist resources have attempted to meet the need for a varied point of view. The study on homosexuality is a good case in point. Congregations have refused to even look at such materials out of fear. However, the lesson of a refiner's fire is relevant here. A faith conviction that cannot withstand a test probably should be discarded. It was not very strong to begin with. Diverse resources should be put to the test of Scripture, experience, reason, and tradition within a community of love and trust. The exploration will help us

to find our own place to stand.

Some want to bury the Sunday School and place a memorial gravestone on it because there is not enough time to do anything important. Often congregational schedules allow an hour for Sunday School but after many people of all ages are late and others need to leave early for choir or miss entirely because they are out of town or at a required soccer practice, little time remains for learning. I agree. As an experienced Christian educator, I prefer a two hour session weekly such as we have with *DISCIPLE Bible Study*. However, the hour on Sunday morning is less hotly contested than most other hours during the week for religious education. Many United Methodists are already making the journey to church for worship. We ask less from them if we ask for another hour added on to that trip than if we ask for another trip at a different time. It saves gasoline, if nothing else! And it has a recognizable name. We don't have to teach people what it is. Why not reinvigorate the institution? Venture into the difficult issues that are really a part of our lives.

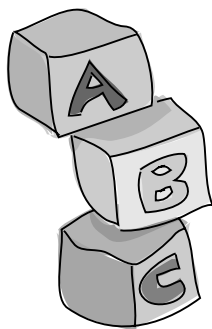
Claim the task of theological reflection for all laity, of all ages. Churches with strong Sunday Schools are missional congregations.

Sunday School: It's for Life! □

- 1 See the book *Yearning for God: Reflection of Faithful Lives* by Jack L. Seymour and Margaret Ann Crain, Upper Room Books, 2003.
- 2 *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2000. ¶104. United Methodist Publishing House.
- 3 *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2000. ¶104.



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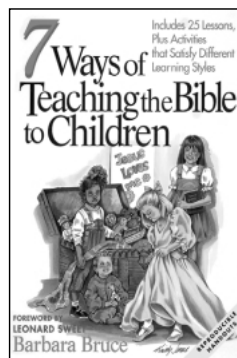


CHRISTIAN BUILDING BLOCKS

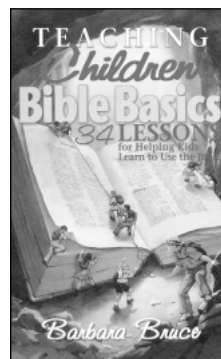
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