

Coping with Change in the 21st Century Sunday School

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Practical Resources for Churches

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Changes in the pews

I came across a website the other day that was having a discussion about [Sunday School Yesterday and Today](#). One post from Happy Retiree said:

I went to and later taught Sunday School ...in the 1950's and early 60's. This was a time when there literally were hundreds of children in Sunday School. This was the time when so many churches had to expand their space to accommodate so many children. Our church built the Christian Education Building. Even with the extra building there had to be two times for Sunday School. The older children went at 9:30 and the younger ones at 11:00. We weren't bored. All our friends were there. Sunday School and church activities were our main social happenings.



Happy Retiree also added this:

At my church now there might be twelve children on a really, really good Sunday. The usual number would be two to five, but if you look around the church there are very few young adults. Most of the people who bring young children are their grandparents. The world has changed since the fifties; it's time the church did too if we want some type of religious place for future generations.

Changes in the classroom

On the same site, Hilary posted:

I attended Sunday School in the late 80s and early 90s until the end of grade 8.
-maybe 30-50 kids per Sunday
-all gathered in an auditorium for offering and singing with a designated youth leader...split into classes by age group in bright classrooms
-I don't remember the content of any of the lessons, but vaguely recall taking crafts home or memorizing scripture passages to earn a tidbit!



After that, I started teaching.

-numbers dwindled...
-group gathering time became less common as piano players and music leaders became scarce

- age ranges within a classroom became bigger (as the number of kids overall got smaller) making class planning more of a challenge
- teachers incorporated games, crafts, songs, drama, and -yes- connect the dot coloring pages
- stopped serving snacks as allergies and sensitivities became more commonplace

Now, at my current church, I lead Children's Time instead of teaching Sunday School. I don't know for sure what goes on upstairs but based on the number of kids I see (anywhere from one to ten-ish), they're probably operating from a single classroom.

Changes in the Church

A Decade of Change In American Congregations 2000 - 2010



Changes in Sunday school are a direct result of changes in the church. Faith Communities Today, a multi-faith group of religious researchers and faith leaders, issued a report called "[A Decade of Change in American Congregations 2000-2010.](#)" Among their findings were:

- Fewer people in the pews
- Half are seniors
- Less younger people
- Drop in financial health and high levels of conflict

The report found that faith communities are entering this decade less healthy than they were at the turn of the century. In 2010, more than one in four congregations had fewer than 50 people in the pews. Over half of mainline congregations consist of seniors 65 years or older and could lose one-third of their members in 15 years. 75% of these churches said that 18-34 year olds make up less than 10% of their membership. Additionally, the study found a steep drop in financial health and continuing high levels of conflict.

Changes in the world

The world today is very different than it was a few decades ago. Some recent trends in the United States that were identified by the [American Religious Identification Survey](#) and the [Pew Research Center](#) include:

- Spiritual not religious
- Diversity
- Decline in family faith
- Media saturation
- Web and digital technologies
- Time-stress

Increasing numbers of people say they are spiritual but not religious or they are no longer affiliated with any religion. There is a greater acceptance of ethnic, cultural, religious and sexual diversity among the younger generations. There is a greater acceptance of diverse family structures. There are declining levels of family faith practice in the home. Other changes in our world include the fact that 8- to 18-year-olds experience at least seven and a half hours of media each day. People are increasingly using the web and digital technologies for school, work, information, and social connections. People's lives today are complicated and time-stressed. Attending church may no longer be a priority.

Positive change

If congregations can change, they can grow.

However, the news is not all hopeless. There are growing, spiritually healthy churches. A report by Faith Communities Today called ["Facts on Growth: 2010"](#) found that if congregations can change, they can grow. Congregations that are spiritually vital and alive, have strong, permanent leadership, and enjoy joyful, innovative and inspirational worship are more likely to experience growth.

A church that is spiritually healthy will most likely have a successful Sunday school program; the opposite is true as well. So if your church has boring and joyless worship or conflict between members or is lacking a spiritual, missional focus, it makes sense for you to get involved in changing that. Otherwise you can do everything right in your children's ministry and it will probably still be a failure.

At PRC we work with churches who are striving to be spiritually healthy and are willing to make necessary changes. We help them plan engaging, creative worship

services. We help churches plan and facilitate visioning retreats and follow-up with further resources as they seek to be the church God is calling them to be. We have a wide range of resources for spiritual practices including portable labyrinths and many books, DVDs, and curriculum on prayer and spiritual practices. We work with churches in all areas of ministry including leadership training, stewardship, and faith formation and make ourselves available in many different ways – in person, by phone, and of course online.

Challenges in Sunday school

Let's look now at some of the specific challenges we're facing in Sunday school today. These include:

- Declining enrollment
- Erratic attendance
- Competition with other activities
- Lack of volunteers
- Budget cuts

Declining enrollment

For those of us who remember when Sunday school was a crowded and noisy place, the Sunday school classrooms of the 21st century may seem empty in comparison.

The first step in growing your Sunday school is reaching out to children and their families and creating a professionally run and high quality Sunday school program. Sometimes people in leadership don't realize the high expectations of parents today regarding the safety and well-being of their children. The world is not the same place that many older adults grew up in, where the kids ran out the door in the morning to play and only had to make sure they got home in time for dinner. Churches need to have a Safe Church policy in force and welcoming classrooms and other spaces. Try to look at your church through the eyes of a first-time, perhaps nervous, parent visitor.



Making your Sunday school program a high quality one is important, no matter how many children are involved in it, and may help it grow. But it may be, because of changes in the church and the world, you'll have to adjust to the reality that you have less children than you had in the past.

At PRC we work with Sunday schools to help them with this. It may be necessary to go to a one room Sunday school or combine classes. It is a challenge to have children of differing ages in one classroom, but a class with only one or two students just isn't as much fun as a larger group!

Erratic attendance

Another challenge in the 21st century Sunday school is erratic attendance. You may have 30 children attend one week and the next week have only 12. Some children may attend Sunday school once a month or less. You can try to make families see the value of regular attendance, but you also have to accept that this may be a challenge you will have to adapt to.



As was mentioned previously, one way to handle this is to have a one room Sunday school or multi-graded classrooms. There are curriculums specifically written for these types of groupings. One format is the large group/small group. All the children are together for a time of worship, music, and/or storytelling and then break into smaller groups to do age appropriate crafts or other activities.

Since you can't count on children being in Sunday school every week, you may need to adapt the content you're teaching. It's important to review what you've been doing in previous weeks for those children who've been absent. You may want to give an overview of a particular lesson for several weeks in a row, with an emphasis on a different part of the lesson each week. For instance, instead of covering Holy Week by teaching about Palm Sunday one week, then Maundy Thursday another, etc. you may want to do an overview of Holy Week for several weeks in a row and then go into detail about different days.

A short e-mail each week to those students who were absent from Sunday school could include an overview of what was taught and perhaps some activities for the children to do at home. Even if most families don't utilize the activities, if one or two do then it's worth your time and effort.

Competition with other activities

Once upon a time in many communities, Sunday was considered the Sabbath by a majority of people – stores were closed, there were no sports activities or birthday parties, and people went to church and Sunday school. As we all know, those days are over.



Some churches are exploring different times for faith formation of their children. Think creatively and talk to the families in your church. The Catholic Church offers religious services on Saturday night as well as Sunday morning; they offer religious instruction at various times during the week. I know of two Protestant churches on the east end of Long Island which decided to offer their “Sunday school” on Tuesday night, the same night that the local Catholic Church offered their classes. Together they went to the local school officials and got them to agree not to have school activities on Tuesday nights.

You can also offer resources for families to use at home, at a time that’s convenient for them. There are a number of companies to purchase these from. Some churches create lists of Christian websites and apps with games and activities for families and children. You also might want to think about having a section of your church’s website for children and families with links to games and resources, as well as updates on what’s going on in Sunday school. Some churches are experimenting with online resources for faith formation where families meet together once a month in person and then the learning is continued online.

Lack of volunteers

Many Sunday schools struggle to get enough teachers and other helpers. We often work with churches to help them learn effective ways of inviting people to share in their children’s ministry. One of the simplest is to issue personal invitations. I can’t emphasize this enough. Ellen E. Larson, the author of *Recruiting: Help and Hope for Finding Volunteers*, describes the response of Christian educators and leaders when they were asked how they got started teaching Sunday school:



Fewer than ten percent of the attendees had responded to an announcement or request for teachers without a personal invitation. Over 90 percent said they taught their first Sunday school class because someone asked them to teach...The method that works, the “bottom line,” is the individual, personal approach – asking people.

21st century volunteers are different than those in the past. In the book *The New Breed: Understanding and Equipping the 21st Century Volunteer*, the authors say that “more than ever, today's volunteers...need flexible hours, and want to play a role in defining their jobs.” So you might not ask people to commit to an entire year of teaching or to be there every week. You should also allow your volunteers to be a part of a team and make decisions about Sunday school together.

Anything you do to enliven your Sunday school program will naturally make it easier to get volunteers. Consider having people come in, not necessarily to teach, but to share a particular gift or talent they have.

Teaching is a ministry and a calling. I think we often belittle it and tell people that “anyone can do it” or that “it doesn’t require much time.” This is wrong. I can’t think of any ministry in the church that is more important than teaching our children and youth.

Budget cuts

Many churches are struggling financially and are looking to spend less on Sunday school curriculum and supplies.



If you are willing to be creative and get away from the traditional curriculums with their various pricey components, you don’t need to spend a lot on Sunday school curriculum. There are many free curriculums out there and many which offer lower-cost downloadable options.

More and more curriculum publishers are including reproducible sheets, so you will be helping the environment as well as saving money. There are even books which have all you need for a quarter’s worth of lessons in one book.

You can also get better prices on curriculum and supplies if you shop around. There are various curriculum discount websites and websites like Amazon and Christian Book Distributors sell discounted curriculum as well.

PRC helps churches save money on Sunday school curriculum. We often assist churches in creating their own customized curriculum. We also have a list of websites which have free curriculum and send out lectionary curriculum resources by e-mail for each Sunday to subscribing churches.

If you need classroom supplies, there are great sales right before school opens. Why not ask your congregation to pick up an item or two that you’re in need of? You can have a

tree with leaves that have supplies written on them and each person can take a leaf and bring back something.

We may need to get rid of Sunday school



When something isn't working it forces us to re-evaluate what we're doing and ask some hard questions. If the Sunday school of the past was effective, how come so many of those who attended as children stopped coming as adults? Is there a better way to make disciples?

Some of the experts looking at the church today think our challenges are actually positive signs. Diana Butler Bass, the author of *Christianity after Religion*, believes that the decline in church attendance and the trend to be "spiritual but not religious" reflects a time of spiritual awakening in the church. Phyllis Tickle, author of *The Great Emergence*, see a pattern in the church of major transitions every five hundred years or so and believes we're living in such a time right now. She compares these transitions to a giant rummage sale with the church casting off the things that restrict its growth.

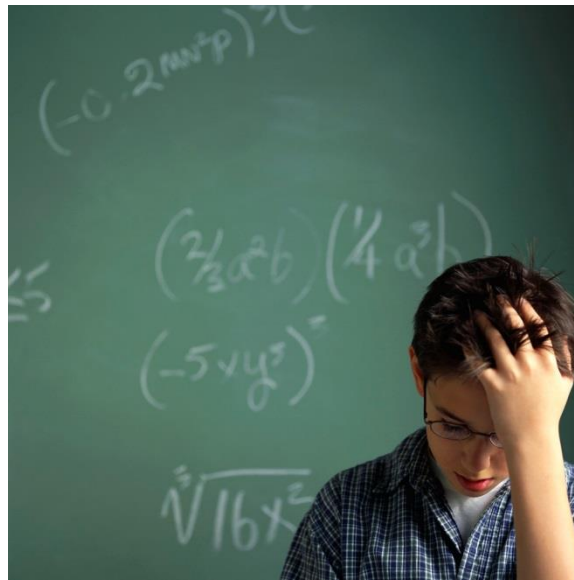
So, you may need to get rid of Sunday school. But, I don't mean getting rid of children's ministry or faith formation or Christian education. Many churches are starting to offer intergenerational Sunday school and/or intergenerational worship. There's an emphasis to do more online and to partner with families in their children's faith formation. Overscheduled families may respond to online resources that they can access at home on their own time schedule.

Online faith formation is something any church can do; there are many tools available for little or no cost and you don't need to be a computer geek to use them. St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Arlington, Virginia, recently shut down its Sunday school. They set up a website which offers weekly resources for families, including a Gospel story, family discussion topic, and a prayer starter. People can share their experiences on the

site each week. Every four to six weeks, families gather after worship for a potluck lunch, teaching, activities, and fun.

We've already talked about exploring other times beyond Sunday morning for children's ministry. Perhaps Sunday is the best time in your church, or perhaps another time would be better. So, you might want to consider getting rid of the "Sunday" in Sunday school.

And next, you should consider getting rid of the "school" in Sunday school.



Although we want our children to know about their faith, to learn Bible stories, and study the teachings of Jesus, we also know that faith isn't something that happens from reading a book or listening to someone talk. Faith formation should include experiences and relationships.

Instead of structuring our time with children like a traditional classroom setting, we need to provide opportunities for children to experience their faith through worship, spiritual practices, hands-on service and mission projects, and interactions with people both in the church and outside of it.

Children and youth are stressed and overwhelmed by all the demands that school makes on them. How many of them really want to spend more time in something else called "school"? Perhaps it's time to change the name of Sunday school to something more appealing like "Kids Club" or "Journey with Jesus."

But don't just change the name of your children's programs -- change the content and the style of teaching as well. Be aware of modern methods of education. Lecture style

teaching is a thing of the past; we know now that children learn best when they discover things for themselves. We also know that children learn in different ways so offer opportunities for children to learn through as many different types of experiences as possible; go beyond reading and writing and use art, music, nature, and other experiences.

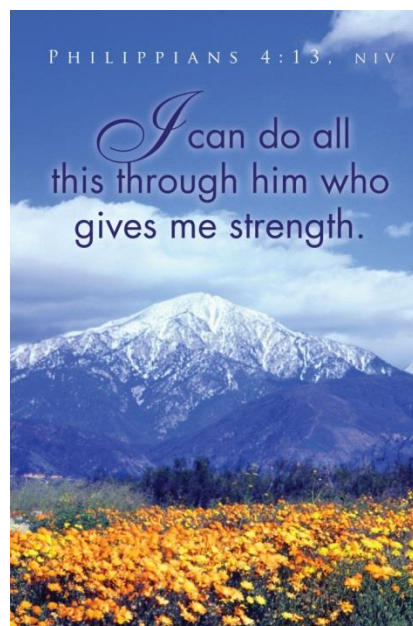
Uncharted territory

Being a leader in the church today is a bit like being an explorer in uncharted territory. The old maps no longer work; we need to forge ahead and we may be finding our way through trial and error. In a sense, we're like the early Christians, trying to find a way to share our faith in a world where the majority of people are either not interested or even antagonistic of what we believe.

Jesus didn't promise his followers an easy life or one with no challenges, but he did tell us that God is always with us and will give us the strength we need to accomplish what we are called to do.

Young people being spiritual and not religious should be viewed in a positive light. Now, more than ever, our children and their families need God; we have the privilege of partnering with them to assist them in their faith journeys.

And we at PRC have the privilege of assisting you in this most important ministry.



Visit our [website](#), [Facebook page](#), and [Pinterest boards](#) for more free resources and to sign up for our monthly free Christian Education webinars.

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