

The Changing 21st Century Sunday School

By Debbie Kolacki of

PRC– Practical Resources for Churches

www.prcli.org



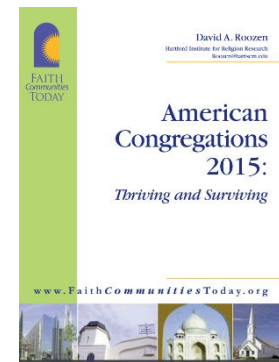
Introduction

As the senior consultant for an ecumenical resource center for churches, I talk to people about Sunday school all the time, both in person and online, and I hear many of the same concerns. They talk about the 50s, 60s, or 70s, when there were so many children in Sunday school that churches needed to expand their space or have Sunday school at two different times. Sunday school and church activities were an important part of the local community's social life.

Now I hear stories of Sunday schools where there are too few children to have age-graded classes or where teachers often find themselves planning lessons and then have no children show up. The parents are too busy to get involved or perhaps it's the grandparents who bring the children to church.

Changes in the church

The changes we see in the 21st century Sunday school are directly related to changes in the church. [Faith Communities Today](#), a multi-faith group of religious researchers and faith leaders, issued a report recently called "[American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving](#)." It follows up on their findings from a study released in 2010.



Information about the study is posted on their website:

American Congregations 2015 is the introductory report on the Faith Communities Today 2015 (FACT 2015) national survey of congregations. FACT2015 is the fifth survey in a series beginning in 2000, and replicated in 2005, 2008 and 2010...The entire FACT survey series includes responses from over 32,000 randomly sampled congregations in the United States from all denominations and faith traditions. The FACT2015 survey contains responses from 4,436 congregations.

Among their findings were:

- Steady decline in average worship attendance
- Decline in spiritual vitality
- Financial distress
- Drop in full-time paid staff
- Fewer churches making young adult ministry a priority

The decline in average weekly worship attendance continued. In 2005 the number was 129, in 2010 it was 105, and in 2015 it was down to 80.

There was also a decline in spiritual vitality, which was determined by asking someone (usually the leader) in a congregation: “Do you strongly agree or strongly disagree that your congregation is spiritually vital and alive?” High spiritual vitality describes those congregations that strongly agreed, which was 27% of the congregations.

Financial distress continued. The report shows that “dipping into savings or investments, postponing capital projects, and reducing mission and benevolence giving were among the most typical ways congregations dealt with recession induced financial shortfalls.” The median annual church budget fell from \$150,000 to \$125,000 from 2010 to 2015.

Churches are dealing with financial distress by cutting full-time staff. In 2010 71.4% of churches had a full-time paid pastor; in 2015 the percentage was 62.2.

Young adults (ages 18-34) make up just over 20% of the U.S. population, but only about 10% of U.S. Congregations reached this level in 2015; in 2010 it was 15%. Young adult ministry is not a priority in nearly half of U.S. congregations.

Changes in the world

The changes we see in Sunday school are also the result of changes in the world. In a report entitled [“America’s Changing Religious Landscape,”](#) which is based on a 2014 survey, the [Pew Research Center website](#) stated that the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining. According to the report “the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in...2007 to 70.6% in 2014.”

In that same report, Pew stated that the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religions is growing. The report said that “the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” – has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%.”

A report called [“Millennials increasingly are driving growth of ‘nones’”](#) based on the same Pew Research survey noted that the already-large share of religiously unaffiliated millennial adults is increasing significantly.

A high percentage of younger members of the millennial generation – those who have entered adulthood in just the last several years – are religious “nones” (saying they are atheists or agnostics, or that their religion is “nothing in particular”). At the same time, an *increasing* share of older millennials also identify as “nones,” with more members of that group rejecting religious labels in recent years. Overall, 35% of adult millennials (Americans born between 1981 and 1996) are religiously unaffiliated.

There has been a shift in thinking, especially among younger people, from modernism to postmodernism. According to the [Faith and Reason section](#) of the PBS website:

...postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually...Postmodernism is "post" because it denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody - a characteristic of the so-called "modern" mind.

It's easy to see how a postmodern thinker would be turned off by the doctrines of organized religion and the concept that there is only one truth for all.

Another [Pew report](#) focuses on the feelings of stress and fatigue among parents.

"Feeling like there aren't enough hours in the day no doubt contributes to feelings of stress and fatigue among parents. And most parents today say that they feel rushed at least some of the time. In fact, 31% say they *always* feel rushed, even to do the things they have to do."

Why don't they attend church?

In the Barna Report ["Making Space for Millennials"](#) millennials (those born from 1981-1996) were asked whether they thought church was important: 30% said attending church is not at all important, 30% said it's very important, and 40% fall somewhere in the middle.

Among those who say church is not important, most are split between two reasons: two in five say church is not important because they can find God elsewhere (39%), and one-third say it's because church is not personally relevant to them (35%). One in three simply find church boring (31%) and one in five say it feels like God is missing from church (20%). Only 8% say they don't attend because church is "out of date," undercutting the notion that all churches need to do for Millennials is to make worship "cooler."

A significant number of young adults have deeper complaints about church. More than one-third say their negative perceptions are a result of moral failures in church leadership (35%). And substantial majorities of Millennials who don't go to church say they see Christians as judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), anti-homosexual (91%) and insensitive to others (70%).

The millennials who do attend church said they "attend church to be closer to God (44%) and to learn more about God (37%). Getting outside the humdrum of their

everyday lives to experience transcendence – in worship, in prayer, in teaching – is a key desire for many Millennials when it comes to church.”

Another finding of interest is that “The only piece of information a sizeable majority of Millennials is comfortable sharing with a church is their first name (82%). Only half are willing to give their last names (53%). Just one-third are comfortable sharing their email address (33%).” This information can help churches determine how they respond to guests.

A [Pew Research Center survey](#) from 2017 asked adults who attend religious services a few times a year or less whether each of eight reasons is “very important, somewhat important, or not important” for why they do not go to religious services more often. The answer cited most (37%) was “I practice my faith in other ways.” The same percentage said there were things they dislike about religious services or particular congregations, including one in five who dislike the sermons and 14% who don’t feel welcome.

Good news and bad news

Going back to Faith Communities Today’s report “American Congregations 2015” we can see some hope. It notes that congregations which are open to adaptive change “are much more likely to have higher levels of spiritual vitality than those who struggle with change.” The report notes a close relationship between spiritual vitality and growth. Change, such as innovation in worship, is a stimulus to growth.

However, the bad news is that congregations willing to “change to meet new challenges” fell from 74% in 2005 to 62 percent in 2015.

But there are growing and spiritually healthy churches. An earlier 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.

Those of us involved in children’s ministry might consider helping our churches to focus on changes they will bring about spiritual vitality. However, many churches cannot or don’t want to change, so those involved in Sunday school may have to work with the reality of the church and the world they’re in.

So let’s talk about some of the things that are in our power to change and what we can do as we face some big challenges in Sunday school. We’ll be talking about children and youth; the challenges faced in teaching adults in Sunday school are quite different.

Declining enrollment

Declining enrollment is a concern for many Sunday schools today. Sometimes teachers and staff wonder what they're doing wrong, but the reasons for declining enrollment usually have nothing to do with the efforts of those in children's ministry.



However, those involved shouldn't give up on trying to grow their Sunday school by reaching out to children and their families and creating a professionally run and high quality Sunday school program. Safety is important; make sure you have a Safe Sanctuaries/Safe Church policy and that you train and do background checks on your staff. Have information available for parents about your policy and your Sunday school in general. Make sure the physical environment is safe, clean, and welcoming.

While there are many things we can do to try to increase the number of children and youth in our Sunday school, changes in the church and the world may make it necessary to accept that we have less children and need to act accordingly. We may want to look at how our classes are grouped and make some changes. It may be necessary to go to a one room Sunday school or condense classes. 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.

It is a challenge to have children of differing ages in one classroom, but a class with just a few students just isn't fun! Check out my [recent blog post](#) about the advantages of a one room Sunday school for more information.

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 that you will have to adapt to.

Since you can't count on children being in Sunday school every week, it's a good idea to adapt the content you're teaching. Review what you've covered 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., give an overview of Holy Week for several weeks in a row and then go into detail about different days in different lessons.

A short email 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.

Since studies show that the most important influence on a child for future faith formation is the parents/family, part of our responsibilities in Sunday school should include partnering with parents, providing encouragement and resources for faith formation at home.

Competition with other activities

Once upon a time Sunday was considered the Sabbath by a majority of people in America – stores were closed, there were no sports activities or birthday parties; instead people went to church and Sunday school. But 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 a Protestant church 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.

I mentioned before the important of partnering with families. You can offer resources for families to use at home, at a time that’s convenient for them. The Channing Bete Company offers seasonal and other booklets for children on the [FaithGuides section](#) of their website. Another company which offers similar resources is [Christian Tools of Affirmation](#).

Families and children may also extend their learning opportunities by going online. There are a number of Christian websites which offer games and activities for children.

Lack of volunteers

If you find that you lack volunteers in your Sunday school, changing your age groupings or going to a large group/small group format will probably lessen the number of volunteers you’ll need. Allow flexibility in volunteers’ schedules by using

teams of teachers and look for volunteers outside the groups you usually think of for children's ministry.

When asking someone to get involved in your Sunday school, make a personal invitation. I can't emphasize this enough. Ellen E. Larson, in her book *Recruiting: Help and Hope for Finding Volunteers*, asked Sunday school leaders and teachers how they got started teaching Sunday school. She states that "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." It's also important to tell the person you're asking to teach what gifts you see in them that make them a good choice for a teacher. Try to pair a new teacher up with a more experienced one.

Have a sample job description available and let the person you're inviting know how the church will support them, such as providing resources and training. Communicate with your volunteers and let them have input to decisions that are made.

Emphasize the importance of the ministry and the calling--it's not something just anyone can do. Present your children's ministry program in a positive light, as something the person will want to be a part of. Clearly communicate the vision for children's ministry in your church.

Be open to those who can't be there every week or who don't feel comfortable being in a teaching or leadership position. Ask them what they would like to do in your children's ministry and be open to new ideas! Perhaps there are people who would be happy to prepare crafts or snacks or pray for children.

Budget cuts

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

With a little creativity, you can get away from the traditional curriculums with their various pricey components. When purchasing a curriculum, consider whether it's necessary to buy all the components. More and more curriculum publishers are including reproducible or downloadable sheets, so you will be helping the environment as well as saving money.

There are downloadable curriculums which are priced according to the size of your church or Sunday school. There are many free curriculums online, however, they are not all of the same quality so be cautious.



A resource center, such as PRC, is another way to save on Sunday school curriculum. We often help churches put together a customized curriculum with our resources or help them supplement the curriculum they're using.

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 a supplies written on them and ask your congregation to take a leaf and then purchase the supply and donate it to Sunday school.

Do we need to “kill” Sunday school?

Many of you have probably heard of the book [Let's Kill Sunday School \(Before It Kills the Church\)](#). To simplify a bit, it makes the argument that the reason young adults no longer attend church is because they were kept apart from the rest of the congregation by being in Sunday school and never learned to be a part of worship. The solution is to get rid of Sunday school and other ministries that segregate by age and make worship intergenerational. This may be part of the reason that church attendance is declining, but there are many other factors involved as well. I think the church has a lot of work to do in addition to getting the children back into worship.



Recently I was on the Facebook page connected with the book and there was a conversation about whether Sunday school had any benefits. One person was quite adamant that all the efforts of Sunday school teachers were completely useless in terms of forming faith in children. I started thinking about this and the experiences of my own children (now adults) in the church as they grew up. The alternative to Sunday school at the time would have been to attend a very traditional service every week. My children's experiences when they did attend that traditional service included a sense that Christianity is boring, that worship is for adults and not children, that one person gets to “do everything,” that church music is dreary, and that they were to watch and be still. In Sunday school they were actively involved, able to ask questions, participating in mission and service projects, and experienced God through praying aloud as well as interacting with other children and adults. In their Sunday school, each week they had a mini worship service where they learned The Lord's Prayer, the Doxology, etc. and once a month they attended an intergenerational worship service.

Don't get me wrong. I am an advocate for children being in worship, but I am concerned that worship in many churches has become stagnant and removed from contemporary culture. Many adults find it difficult to relate to a very traditional worship service. Someone I know once referred to the sermon as “painful” for people

like herself who aren't auditory learners. Children today are being taught in many different, interactive ways and a one-way lecture will certainly seem strange to them.

I support the movement towards intergenerational worship which is interactive, involves all the senses, and is led by both clergy and laity. I believe this sort of worship will benefit both adults as well as children. But given the choice between Sunday school and a lifeless worship service for children, I would choose Sunday school.

I urge caution for churches who are considering getting rid of Sunday school. I have seen churches do this without making changes to their traditional worship service and have then had an exodus of most of the young families of their church. Whatever changes you are considering to your Sunday school, please take your time and prayerfully consider them.

There is no one solution for every church. For some churches, where there is strong resistance to changes in the worship service, the best choice may be to continue offering Sunday school. For other churches bringing all ages together in worship may be the best alternative. Or perhaps it will be a blend of the two. I think sometimes of a family holiday gathering, with everyone together at the same table, but perhaps after the meal, people gather in groups to talk or play based on their interests or ages.

Ideally, for churches willing to change, we will see a metamorphosis of our worship services and Sunday school into a community gathering which combines the best elements of worship, serving, and learning together.

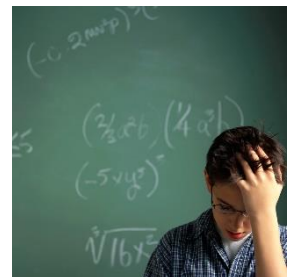
Getting rid of Sunday school

For churches which aren't able to move to a model of intergenerational worship, they may still need to get rid of Sunday school. But I don't mean getting rid of children's ministry.

First, they may need to get rid of the "Sunday" in Sunday school. 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.

Next, we 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.

Choices

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. 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.



The decline of the church is forcing us to look again at our faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Perhaps we have something to learn from the young adults who are

increasingly identifying themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” We just might start to think of Christianity as a way of life, rather than a set of doctrinal beliefs. It may be that we will consider that perhaps the best means of faith formation for children (and adults) is active participation in the Christian walk with others, instead of head learning in a traditional classroom. The world is changing, the church is changing, Sunday school is changing, but God is with us through all these changes.

*Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
- Isaiah 43:19*

***Please consider making a
donation on our website
so that we can continue
to offer our booklets free
of charge.***

www.prcli.org



Practical Resources For Churches
consultants - webinars - workshops - resources

Revised June 2019