

# Some churches cancel Sunday school, put parents in charge

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(RNS) Don't look for children's Sunday school classes at Ridgewood Church in Port Arthur, Texas. And forget about scavenger hunts and water park trips: the youth ministry is no more.//  
Sound like a dying church?

No, it's a family-integrated congregation, whose leaders wanted parents -- rather than Sunday school teachers and youth ministers -- to spiritually train their children. Driven by statistics about youth leaving church after high school, they've turned to the Bible as their sole educational text and shunned age-segregated structures.

"Nobody disagrees that there's a problem," said Ridgewood's Pastor Dustin Guidry, whose church started the transition seven years ago.

"What do we do about it? It's just going back to the basics, relying upon the sufficiency of Scriptures."

Guidry later learned other congregations were doing the same thing -- shuttering classrooms, demanding parents -- especially fathers -- take on more of a spiritual leadership role and sometimes canceling Sunday schools.

In "Divided," a controversial video circulating online and a related book called "A Weed in the Church," the movement's leaders warn that "unbiblical" age-segregated activities can lead youth away from the church.

Pastor Scott Brown, director of the North Carolina-based National Center for Family-Integrated Churches and author of the book, said many of its close to 800 affiliated churches have either stopped or reduced

traditional Sunday school classes.

"When Jesus gathers people together, he gathers the generations," said Brown. "He doesn't segregate people by age. He's famous for saying 'suffer the little children to come unto me' because his disciples wanted to banish the children. Jesus wasn't that way."

Pastor Paul Thompson of Eastside Southern Baptist Church in Twin Falls, Idaho, was influenced by Brown's book when he presented a resolution to his church in April calling it to "repent and cease" its past age segregation, acknowledging that "few in our city, state, region, or nation may understand."

Brown and Thompson say the disappearance of youths from their pews was a catalyst for change.

"Probably the hard, hard questions were 'Where are the students and the children who have grown up in this church?' Thompson said. "A lot of them live still here in Twin Falls, and they don't go to church at all and they don't live what we taught them when they were children."

Pastor Josue Raimundo of Iglesia Biblica de la Gracia (Grace Bible Church) of Arlington, Va., agrees with the principle that Brown's movement espouses but thinks churches can apply it differently. There's still Sunday school at his church but youth and parents sit around a big table together, taking turns reading and discussing the Bible.

"The issue is for the parents to have the charge of instructing their children," he said.

The family-centered movement is part of a broader trend of churches struggling to respond to statistics that claim a youth attrition rate of 40-88 percent. Christian Smith, director of the National Study of Youth and Religion, said there is cause for concern but those statistics are sometimes wildly exaggerated.

Smith has found that 14 percent of youth ages 13-17 identified as "not religious." That number nearly doubles five years later. And he notes that those numbers could change as these young adults marry and

have children.

Yet he doesn't consider Brown and others' age-integrated approach extreme. While it's not the "silver bullet," it fits his findings about the key role parents play in influencing children's lives.

"Parents are so crucial that if you just split them up from their kids and the parents think that some ministry professional is taking care of it, that's not going to be very effective," he said.

A range of ministries are responding to the research with books, lessons and conferences.

The third conference of D6, a movement that explores how churches can encourage parents to spiritually train their youth, will meet Sept. 21-23 in Dallas, expecting more than 2,000 people from about 700 churches. It's named for the sixth chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, which is also cited by the family-centered movement for its admonition to teach children God's commandments.

"I do believe there is an overbalance of age-segregated programming and that overbalance must be corrected," said Richard Ross, a D6 presenter and professor of student ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. "But it is throwing out the baby with the bath to suggest that those groupings should never happen."

Daryl Nuss, chief ministries officer of the National Network of Youth Ministries, also thinks the family-centered movement is too strict.

"That may work in a small segment of churches but what about all those students who do not come from a healthy family, do not come from a nuclear family?" he asked.