

What reaches children? The Sunday school challenge

by [Sharon Ely Pearson](#) in the [February 19, 2014](#) issue



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When some of us think of Sunday school, we envision a group of children in child-size chairs listening to an adult read a Bible story. Behind them is a bulletin board filled with maps of the Holy Land and the children's art work, with a chart on the wall boasting lines of gold stars for each child's attendance. Everyone colors in a workbook and can't wait to take home the handout that the teacher distributes.

The reality is much more varied and uncertain. As an editor and Christian formation specialist, I hear teachers report that "faithful families," those that used to attend once a week, now attend only once or twice a month. The children are less willing to sit quietly listening to one adult and are eager, accustomed to and restless for programs that involve them in active, participatory roles. And no more two-sided text-heavy handouts. Any hands-on materials must compete or coordinate with technological and media entertainments. Now we see Sunday school curricula marketed with pop music CDs, cheesy videos, Internet companion sites and cheap trinkets—all to make the lesson entertaining and easy to use.

In addition hearing about poor attendance, I hear about lack of commitment, the cost of running an education program (and buying the materials mentioned above) and the declining number of paid directors of Christian education. When I'm asked to recommend "the best curriculum," the inquirer wants one that will encourage families to attend and keep attending week after week. The same curriculum should be something that a volunteer can read the night before and teach the next morning. An impossible request.

Some of the above information comes from a biannual survey of churches that I use to determine the needs, concerns and resources used in teaching children, youth and adults. It is by no means scientific (most respondents are Episcopalians, reflecting my connections to the denomination), but it does highlight trends. I've asked the same questions in each of the last three surveys so that I have a baseline for comparing results over the years. Questions are multiple choice and include:

- What curricular resource are you using with children? (Respondents choose from 53 marketed programs or from categories including “other, I write my own” and “we do not have children’s programming.”)
- How many children ages 0–12 regularly participate in your children’s ministry programs?
- How much time does your church designate each week for children’s education?

Some sections of the survey are devoted to youth ministry, confirmation programs and adult education.

Respondents take the survey through communication channels that include Forma (Episcopal), the Association of Presbyterian Christian Educators, Christian Educators Fellowship (United Methodist), the Lutheran Association of Christian Educators and the Association of United Church Educators (UCC). Whether they are volunteers, paid educators or clergy, those who respond share many of the same concerns and issues.

As church attendance declines, Christian educators see a parallel decrease in children’s participation in Sunday schools and educational programming. The survey results confirm this trend; in fact, a growing number of churches have no programming for children. Some carefully integrate the children’s interests and needs into worship. Other aging churches have few or no young families present.

While most churches prefer using materials specific to their faith tradition, they are no longer always loyal to their denomination’s publisher. They’re looking for ease of use, low cost, user-friendly content and eye-catching packaging or smart marketing. Many Episcopal educators, working with overscheduled children who attend only once a month, choose resources that are contemporary, experiential and “entertaining,” then add Episcopal content—and perhaps edit out objectionable fundamentalist content.

Ellen Johanson, manager of the Regional Media Center in Des Moines, Washington, receives curriculum inquiries from many denominations. “Many churches are deconstructing traditional, orthodox Christianity,” she says. “They want curricula that are more postmodern, inclusive, less creedal and dogma-oriented. Churches looking for ‘progressive Christian education curricula’ are not excited about curricula promoted by the denominational publishers.”

A corporate-size Episcopal congregation in Dallas uses materials from Group, a nondenominational publisher, because they are more experiential, attractive and easy to use. Church leaders would often prefer that their denominations produce this type of resource themselves so that educators do not have to work to align other publishers’ materials with their own theological view. An ELCA suburban congregation that worships in a shopping center in the Washington, D.C., metro area is looking for “materials from the progressive Christian movement that help Christians think about their faith in relation to science.” Congregational leaders added their wish that publishers relate children’s faith to contemporary issues such as evolution, human sexuality and the environment.

This can be disheartening to denominational publishers as well as to denominational leaders. How are we to pass along the faith to our children as Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, etc., if the materials in our churches are not rooted in our denominational perspectives? How do we teach our history, our polity and our understanding of reading and interpreting scripture? What is the purpose of the Sunday school? How do we evangelize to those outside our doors when we aren’t teaching our own story inside? And how will a curriculum help accomplish this?

In the Acts of the Apostles (2:42, 44–47), Luke describes the course of the early church’s life—its purpose and its actions. We can think of this as the church’s curriculum. After all, the word *curriculum* comes from the Latin verb *currere*, which means “to run.” Taken literally, then, curriculum means a course to be run, whether it’s the early church living out its existence or today’s Christians’ total experience of education and formation. In *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*, Maria Harris says that the church’s curriculum involves every facet of discipleship, at every age, when we:

- proclaim the word of Jesus’ resurrection (*kerygma* )
- teach the sacred story and its meaning to our lives (*didache* )
- come together to pray and break the bread (*leiturgia* )

- live in community with one another (*koinonia* )
- care for those in need (*diakonia* )

Yet too often we understand curriculum in a narrow sense, seeing it only as a set of materials for teachers and students. It is more accurate to speak of these as resources, a part of the whole curriculum for education in the church. We must also remember that worship, proclamation, community and service continually form us as people of God, no matter what our age.

Most churches that offer Sunday school use more than one curriculum with children ages 0–12 years, or nursery school through fifth grade. (The larger the church, the more likely that educators are using several curricula.) In the surveys that I've taken, 25 percent of the Christian educators report they "write their own," which usually means picking and choosing from a variety of materials, reusing old curricula, searching the Internet and then copying and pasting from a multitude of sources. A few actually write their own curricula, but that is rare and usually done in a congregation that has a full-time lay or ordained educator.

Instead of traditional Sunday school, many churches are engaging their children in a more holistic ministry. They understand that having children in worship, for example, is central to their efforts, as is offering intergenerational service projects and holiday celebrations. These churches recognize that children are spiritual beings and not "empty vessels waiting to be filled," a theory that Paulo Freire denounced in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Children are not depositories, and the teacher's role is not the depositor.

This understanding is evident in the increased use of Montessori approaches to children's formation. This approach respects a child's natural development and provides options so that the child can make his or her own choices in the learning process. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Godly Play, Children Worship & Wonder, Children & Worship, The Way of the Child—each has its roots in a faith tradition (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, Reformed and United Methodist respectively) but is used in a variety of ways in all denominations. Leaders often blend stories and resource materials to fit budget, time and teacher training. My surveys indicate that Montessori approaches are now used as frequently as traditional, story-based curricula.

One of the brightest spots in Christian education today is the popularity of Godly Play, a Montessori approach developed by Jerome W. Berryman in the 1990s. Godly Play welcomes the child into a dedicated space where he or she can “play with God.” Godly Play lets children learn scripture and stories through creative play, inviting them to make a “journey of discovery for their personal theological meaning rather than memorizing concepts that others have discovered.” According to the surveys I’ve taken, Godly Play is being used in 43 percent of Episcopal churches and by 39 percent of all survey respondents.

Ironically, although my surveys show that volunteers don’t have time for preparation and training, Godly Play and similar programs are seeing success in churches that train their volunteers. According to responses, adult volunteers find Godly Play spiritually enriching for themselves. Learning the stories and attending workshops helps them tap into their own spirituality and into knowledge of biblical stories, sacraments and liturgical language that they may not have learned as children.

Godly Play also engages a variety of senses, which helps children experience God’s story not only visually and orally but through touch, movement and even smell. In today’s world of overstimulation and overscheduling, both children and adults are eager for a chance to slow down, quiet themselves and absorb the wonder of God’s presence. Curricula from past generations do not offer this type of faith-formation experience, which may explain the popularity of Godly Play.

Bible story-based curricula follow the biblical story from Old Testament through New Testament in sequential order. Most not-for-profit denominational publishers produce a Bible-story-based curriculum: Weaving God’s Promises and the Episcopal Children’s Curriculum (both are Episcopal), We Believe (Presbyterian), Gather ‘Round (Mennonite) and Witness (ELCA). Other denominational offerings include Spark (ELCA) and Grow, Proclaim, Serve! (United Methodist), while examples of independent for-profit publications include Bible-in-Life (Cook), DiscipleLand (Through the Bible Publishers) and FaithWeaver NOW (Group).

Volunteer leaders are most comfortable with these programs, which usually include a leader’s guide with a formatted lesson plan, student materials, posters and “project packs.” Support websites and webinars are available, although those surveyed said that they don’t have the time to use these. Many of the programs, especially those from nondenominational publishers, offer the teacher a script of questions and answers.

The use of lectionary-based curricula seems to be declining. Living the Good News (Morehouse Education Resources) is downloadable, as is Feasting on the Word (Westminster John Knox). Other lectionary curricula include Whole People of God and Seasons of the Spirit (both Wood Lake Books). These are published for the ecumenical market. Those who use this type of curriculum have all ages study the same lessons each week and make a connection to what is heard (and preached) in worship.

The Workshop Rotation Model (WoRM) began in the 1990s in Presbyterian churches and grew into an Internet phenomenon. It is based on Howard Gardner's theory that children do not learn in the same way but have different "intelligences," including musical, interpersonal and linguistic. WoRM energized churches to redecorate classroom space and involve more adults in sharing their cooking, storytelling, woodworking, drama and computer skills. Today, however, most curricula offer teachers a variety of activities that tap into a child's multiple learning styles in each lesson plan.

The largest issue facing educational ministries is commitment. A congregation in the Philadelphia suburbs uses lectionary-based Living the Good News for all ages, but its leaders say that it's difficult to get people to attend. "Once [children] show up they have a good experience, but everyone is pulled in so many different directions that consistent attendance is just a dream."

A paid educator at an Episcopal congregation with Sunday attendance of 125 to 150 said, "We have a small group—four kids—of infrequent attendees in fourth, fifth and sixth grades. One teacher waits in that room, and if a child shows up on Sunday morning she gets a second person from the adult class, and they do crafts while chatting about the day's lections."

A leader of a small congregation (Sunday attendance of 50) in Madison, Wisconsin, expressed frustration about the challenges. "We have some weekly people but a whole lot of 'drop-in' families, which is a challenge with programming for children and youth. We have teachers, but they need 'hand it to me on Sunday' curricula."

In addition to time constraints, educators are concerned about teacher training—it isn't happening. A volunteer Sunday school coordinator in Honolulu writes, "We have the bare minimum of storytellers for Godly Play. It is like pulling teeth to recruit. Our children love it, but we live in fear of a storyteller having to move away and leaving

us dangling . . . either the adults are intimidated by the training or just don't want to commit."

The majority of paid church educators (39 percent of the survey takers) want their congregations to take education and faith formation more seriously. They are frustrated with old pedagogical models and volunteers who don't have the time to learn new ways or to take time to grow in faith themselves. No matter the size, those churches that have a paid Christian educator reported more consistency in attendance, a wider range of learning opportunities and curricular resources. So size does not matter—but having a Christian educator does.

We aren't prioritizing our children's Christian formation when we choose the cheapest, easiest or most nicely packaged curriculum. We aren't prioritizing Christian formation when we have only one person making educational decisions and that person changes from year to year. How can we ever hope to develop a consistent foundation of the biblical story or congregational plan for education? We must press our congregations to take time to discuss and then to discern what the Christian formation mission is for their particular congregation. Only then can they choose curricular resources to support that ministry. It is not a task to be taken lightly. Just as it takes a village to pass on the faith, it takes a community to discern the best resource to fit its people and circumstances.

That mission must include faith development of the Christian at every age. We can begin by building up our volunteer teachers. Church leaders need to regularly encourage and support teachers as they share their love of Christ with their students. We must let them know, and remind others in our congregations, that developing a relationship with those we lead is at the heart of the gospel—no matter what the curriculum.