

Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 12

How to Increase Children and Youth Sunday School Attendance

Why are we gifting you this volume? Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to www.TheParishPaper.com for subscription information.

Purpose of this Volume: Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures that increase the attendance in children and youth Sunday church school classes.

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I. Healthy Sunday Schools Grow Two Crops

Few ministries accomplish more lasting results than Sunday church school for children and youth. Its positives manifest in two major ways:

(a) *Faith and character formed during younger years grow a lifetime of Christian behavior that impacts everyone around the individual.* Sign on the hallway door leading to an elementary Sunday school classroom: “A child is the only known substance from which a responsible adult can be made.” In most cases, parents play the strongest role in spiritual and character formation. Sunday school reinforces and matures that crop. Eighty-five percent of people who become a Christian at some point in their lifetime have a connection with the church prior to age eighteen. For most of those people, that connection was Sunday school. When viewed from a purely volume perspective, Sunday school is the church’s most powerful evangelism opportunity.

(b) *Effective children and youth classes grow healthy churches that attract and retain young-adult parent newcomers.* Contrary to appearances, children’s Sunday school classes are not for children but for their parents. Few states issue a driver’s license to children. Since parents drive the cars, they select the church their children attend. Parents believe the presence of excellent children and youth ministries are one of the essentials for effective churches.

In a recent study, 79 percent of Baptists, Catholics, and United Methodists said they had at one time been inactive members. They had “attended church less than twelve times a year.” For most of them, that inactivity occurred during young-adult years. Fifty-eight percent who said they had been inactive returned to church as young adults. Their mean age of reentry was twenty-eight. What caused these inactive members to return? The denomination in which they grew up (Catholic, Baptist, or United Methodist) had no influence on whether they returned. Rather, “the adult variables that were associated with whether a person was currently active in church were whether they had two or more children, held more traditional or conservative religious beliefs, and tended not to see the individual as the source of religious truth.” (“Young Adults Often Leave But Usually Return to Church,” *The Cara Report*, Winter 2000, p. 6) Parenthood marvelously increases the likelihood of spiritual maturation in adults.

A quality Sunday school does more than form spiritual and character qualities in children. By magnetically attracting and retaining parents, it empowers the congregation’s health and vitality.

II. Recruit, Motivate, and Encourage Teachers

Where would you begin if you wanted your church’s Sunday school attendance to increase by 10 percent a year for the next five years? Teachers are the foundation. The following blueprints construct that essential component.

Build Teacher Teams. Why do so many congregations experience chronic teacher-recruitment migraines? Several causes contribute, but two play especially powerful roles:

- (a) A congregational attitude and behavior climate (ethos) that lacks conviction of Christian education’s value for children
- (b) A teacher-recruitment, encouragement, and organizational system inadequate for contemporary culture

In congregations where those two negative factors rein for one or more decades, several byproducts increase their destructive potency:

- (a) Teacher burnout, too many years without a break
- (b) Increasing difficulty in teacher recruitment, as people learn that saying yes means a life sentence
- (c) Teachers who cannot find substitutes when ill or out of town
- (d) Low teacher morale
- (e) Inadequate educational procedures, such as rotating a different teacher through each class each week

- (f) Teacher recruitment via pleading, threatening, scolding, or shaming in the church newsletter

The Teacher Team concept reverses this downward spiral of Sunday morning Christian education quality.

Warning: As you explain the Teacher Team method, anticipate that some people confuse the idea with “team teaching.” Teacher Teams are *quite different* from that older concept in which two people teach together or teach in alternate months.

With the Teacher Team concept, a group of four, five, six, or seven people works together to make each class a rich learning experience. Teacher Teams also create high morale among teachers, making new-teacher recruitment less like paddling a canoe up Niagara Falls.

Teacher-Team Timeline

Start January 1, anticipating the actual system changes on the first Sunday after Labor Day.

During January, the Christian Education Committee approves the plan. It charges the pastor and the Christian Education Chairperson with leadership and oversight of the timeline.

During January and February, use repetitive oral and printed announcements to state the following expectations of all adult church members: (a) Communicating the Christian faith to the next generation is every Christian’s privilege, opportunity, and responsibility; (b) No one takes early retirement from our church’s teaching ministry; and (c) Our congregation asks everyone to play a role in Christian faith formation, not just parents whose children attend Sunday school.

During March, ask all members to pray for God’s guidance in deciding the age level (preschool through grade twelve) where their “gift-abilities” can make the best contribution to a teacher team.

During April and the first week of May, telephone or visit people, inviting them to serve on a specific Teacher Team beginning September 1. Whenever possible, allow them to shift to a different age level than the one you request, if they indicate a different preference. Mail a thank-you letter the day after each telephone call. Complete this recruitment process by Mother’s Day in early May.

During May, celebrate success. Publish next fall’s teacher team lists. Recognize these teachers during Sunday morning worship.

The last Sunday of August, schedule a Teacher-Team Covenanting Service and Orientation at 4:00 p.m. With personal letters, newsletters, worship bulletins, and oral announcements, stress that “Every teacher-team member must attend.” Use the following format:

- Invite a top-quality outside speaker for the 4:00 p.m. “Covenanting Service.” Ask the speaker to focus on *motivation*, not on how-to information. The address content should emphasize
 - (a) The positive impact of Christian education on students’ lives
 - (b) The sense of meaning and purpose derived from teaching
 - (c) The biblical objectives of Sunday school: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5)

The speaker assumes that the “how-to” comes with months and years of teaching experience and study. This address should power up the *want-to*, without which effective *how-to* never develops.

- Follow that address with a formal covenanting ceremony. Ask teacher-team members to sign their covenant, bring it forward, and lay it on the altar or communion table. (Reproduce the “A Covenant for Church School Teachers” form below.)
- After the covenanting ceremony, the pastor or Christian Education Chairperson presents an overall teacher-team system orientation. Photocopy and distribute to each person the Teacher-Team Roles, Short-Term Benefits, and Long-Term Benefits printed below. Read it aloud. Ask attendees to follow along on their copies.

- At approximately 5:00 p.m., following the formal covenanting address and orientation, Teacher Teams disperse to their respective classrooms. They discuss
 - (a) Location of materials such as pencils, glue, and scissors
 - (b) Teaching procedures for this age level
 - (c) The system by which this team works together to deliver quality Christian education during the next twelve months
 - (d) The prayer covenant by which each team member prays daily for the other team members
- At 5:30 p.m., Teacher Teams assemble for a meal in the fellowship hall. The pastor and Christian Education Chairperson answer any questions that emerged in the individual team meetings.

A Covenant for Church School Teachers

I give myself in dedicated and disciplined commitment to the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ. Having heard Jesus's call to discipleship, I pledge myself to God and others on my team to teach Christ's way of love and faith to children in this year's church school.

Therefore, I formally covenant with God and my teacher team:

- To learn God's purpose for our world and my life as well as teach it
- To live God's purpose, by surrendering myself to Christ's lordship
- To pray for my teacher team and students as I teach students to pray for the Church and one another
- To teach hope to our children as I become hopeful for a new world of love and trust in Jesus Christ
- To be prepared to teach each Sunday
- To begin the class on time each Sunday
- To be faithful to Christ's love each Sunday

Signed: _____

Teacher-Team Roles

Each team consists of a lead teacher and several teacher-team members.

Lead Teacher Responsibilities:

1. Attend the August "Teacher-Team Covenanting and Orientation" service.
2. Arrive ten minutes prior to the class's starting time each Sunday.
3. Be fully prepared for teaching each Sunday.
4. Enlist students in preparing the room for teaching and learning.
5. Notify the Christian Education Chairperson of all curriculum and material needs.
6. Build the class membership and attendance by inviting potential new students.
7. Let children know that they are special in God's eyes by showing them that they are special in your eyes.
8. Tell absentees they are missed with telephone calls and cards.
9. Recognize students' birthdays or other special times by telephone calls and cards.
10. Schedule a rotation by which each teacher-team member assists in your class for one month from September through May for training purposes.
11. When possible, give a teacher-team member at least one week's notice of your absence so that she or he can adequately prepare to substitute.
12. Teach from September through May of the coming year. In March, the Christian Education Chairperson will ask whether you wish to covenant for another year of teaching. Lead teachers are expected to teach for one year but may continue beyond that if they elect to do so.

Teacher Team Member Responsibilities:

1. Receive training at the August “Teacher-Team Covenanting Service and Orientation.”
2. Substitute for your lead teacher upon request.
3. Complete one month of in-service training between September and May, by observing and assisting your lead teacher on Sunday morning.
4. If requested, teach for one month during June, July, or August.
5. If you desire, renew your covenant for another year.

Short-Term Benefits:

1. Teacher Teams produce better quality teaching and more effective transmission of the Christian faith, the end goal of teaching.
2. Teacher Teams involve more people, providing stronger congregational support for the Christian education program.
3. Teacher Teams increase Sunday school attendance, since teacher-team adults feel more responsible for attending and bringing their children.
4. Teacher Teams double or triple the number of potential lead teachers for future years. The three months of summer substitution accomplishes several goals simultaneously.
 - Inexperienced teachers get experience at the best possible time, when the class is small during summer vacation drain.
 - Potential teachers with low self-confidence who would say no to a year-long teaching assignment can give it a one-month try in the summer.
 - Lead teachers for the coming year are selected *after* instead of *before* they taste some teaching experience and know how it feels to them.
5. Teacher Teams reduce teacher burnout, since people do not get stuck with a teaching responsibility for thirteen years without a break.
6. Teacher Teams make recruiting lead teachers much easier, since people know they will teach only nine months and have time off during the summer.
7. Teacher Teams provide the best type of teacher training, experiential and in-service.
8. Teacher Teams eliminate the difficulty of finding substitute teachers.
9. Teacher Teams reduce the teachers’ feelings of inadequacy.
10. Teacher Teams build greater teacher self-esteem. They know they are not just plugging a hole that Christian education leaders could not persuade anyone else to fill.
11. Teacher Teams enrich teachers’ lives as they feel the exhilaration of doing a good job as part of a strong team. This happens in two ways.
 - Teachers do not experience the loneliness and lack of group support that kill teacher motivation.
 - People who teach often learn as much as those taught. Through their involvement in the teacher team, adults teach the Christian faith to children while learning that faith themselves.
12. Teacher Teams are an excellent way to incorporate new church members and attendees into congregational ministries. (Leaders are free to add new team members throughout the year, not just in August. This gives new attendees and members an important, yet not too demanding, responsibility and reduces backdoor inactivity traffic.)

Long-Term Benefits: The Teacher-Team concept improves (a) the congregation’s attitude and behavior ethos regarding the value of Christian education for children, (b) the expectations of adult members in accomplishing that ministry, (c) the quality of faith and character-formation in children, and (d) the quality of the congregation’s overall ministry.

Communicate High Teacher Standards. To a great extent, church leaders determine the teaching performance in their congregation. Whatever the leaders state, restate, and reward becomes the norm. Churches that continuously achieve teaching excellence, set and communicate the following standards:

1. Teachers attend worship regularly.
2. Teachers pray for God's guidance as they prepare each lesson plan.
3. Teachers read articles and books about the age level they teach.
4. Teachers attend regional denominational training sessions.
5. Teachers use a wide range of teaching methods to avoid sameness and boredom.
6. Teachers maintain neat classrooms with updated bulletin boards.
7. Teachers maintain extra copies of curriculum materials and other resources for visitors.
8. Teachers arrive at the classroom ten minutes before the stated beginning time, recognizing that visitors often arrive early.
9. Teachers are prepared to cheerfully greet new students as they enter the classroom.
10. Teachers attempt to learn whether parents expect visiting children to remain in the classroom until picked up.
11. Teachers introduce class visitors and help them feel at home.
12. Teachers encourage class visitors to attend upcoming social events or field trips.
13. Teachers provide Christian education leaders and the church office with the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of class visitors.
14. Teachers have procedures for reaching out to regular class attendees who stop attending.
15. Teachers maintain attendance records and provide them to Church school leaders.
16. Teachers notify the pastor of regular class attendees who are absent four consecutive weeks.
17. Teachers do not remove students from their class roll without consulting the pastor.
18. Teachers plan a class party, field trip, or get-together at a time other than Sunday morning at least once every two months.
19. Teachers get acquainted with the families of all their class members, and visit their homes if possible.
20. Teachers in classes of older children and youth encourage students to consider making the initial commitment to Christ.
21. Teachers extend personal care and concern to each student.
22. Teachers encourage students to attend worship.
23. Teachers contact Christian education leaders with questions or concerns about classroom needs, curriculum, and discipline problems.
24. Teachers deliver curriculum materials to their substitute teacher early in the week before their absence.
25. Teachers who feel strongly critical of the pastor or a Christian education leader go to that person and express concern, rather than talking about that person to other church members.

Sunday school excellence increases as Christian education leaders publish and reiterate those teaching standards. Provide the above list to potential teachers. Tell them that due to the enormous importance of their roles, we expect a great deal of our teachers. Talk with teachers immediately about apparent infractions. Tell them you are concerned. Give them an opportunity to explain. Help them find solutions.

Summary: Project what you expect. Inspect what you expect. Protect what you expect.

Maintain the Gears that Drive the Teaching System

Harrison Owen says that an organization's *spirit* begins at a high level and moves downward over time. By contrast, an organization's *structures* begin at a low level and increase in complexity and rigidity over time. The organization enters a dangerous period when its line on a chart depicting the *spirit* going down crosses the line depicting the *structures* going up. At this point, when the system is the most organized and structured, the spirit of enthusiasm is most likely to die. When the spirit dies, the organization reaches equilibrium. Conflict ceases, but the organization also stops creating enthusiasm. When that happens, the organization begins to die. (Harrison Owen, workshop titled "Open Space Technology" at Church Champions 2000, March 2000, sponsored by Leadership Network, Dallas, Texas)

What is the answer to this dilemma? Disturb the equilibrium. Reorganize the system. Do things differently. Let someone lead whose mind is not paved with the way we have always done it or the way it *ought* to work. Find someone with less knowledge but more enthusiasm, someone who can re-infuse the system with *spirit*, someone who strongly believes that Sunday school is a valuable ministry. Let them try some of the following ways to restart its gears.

Teacher Meetings that Make Sense. Christian education leaders often think they should schedule training events monthly, "to increase the teachers' skill levels." That seldom works. Few teachers attend such events. Most teachers feel that they can learn what they need to learn from a combination of intelligence, motivation, teaching materials, and experience. Experts would argue that such a viewpoint is not always accurate. But it is reality! Few teachers attend monthly or quarterly training events, regardless of how high their educational quality.

What teachers really need and appreciate from Christian education leaders is caring and emotional support. A Sunday school teacher's spirit dies from loneliness more than from any other single cause. Trapped in a small room with small children, they wonder if anybody cares about their work. They wonder if it matters to anyone how well they do it.

Schedule ten-minute monthly or quarterly meetings for elementary and youth teachers immediately after the Sunday school hour to ask, "How is it going?" Those brief, stand-up meetings give teachers the opportunity to communicate concerns and needs to Christian education leaders. Cared-about teachers care about their students and their teaching skills.

Recruit Teachers for a Set Period, with Option to Renew. If possible, avoid systems in which teachers rotate frequently. Small children need a dependable teacher relationship, not just valid lesson-content presented in a persuasive and interesting style. Elementary children and youth need the sense of emotional security derived from knowing and being known by their teacher. Without that, they lack the freedom to share problems and anxieties.

One year is the best time-length for teacher service. Like adults, children require about six hours to develop a relational bond with a teacher that creates a sense of emotional comfort and candor. That makes an every-week rotation the worst possible plan. Many churches practice every-other-month rotation, which is only slightly better than weekly. Once a quarter is the next best, if the potential volunteers are not willing to commit for one year or the nine months in the "Teacher Teams" model described above.

Churches may find themselves in circumstances where second-best is the only plan they can use. This often happens if many years have passed in which anyone who says, "Yes, I'll teach that class this year" feels guilty about deserting it. So, when "We can't find anyone else to teach it." they end up with a life sentence. In that circumstance, burnout causes teachers to complain to their friends. Over time, this poisons the well from which the church could have recruited new teachers. Work with the circumstances you find. Try to gradually evolve to Teacher Teams or one of the other systems outlined in later sections of this *Nuggets Volume* that keep teachers in place for nine months to one year.

At the end of each year, probably April 1, mail teachers a card that lets them sign up to teach another year, if they wish to do so. Teachers to whom you should not send this card include people who behave in one or more of the following ways:

- (a) Regularly arrive late, thereby disrupting the learning climate
- (b) Do not show up at all and do not get a substitute
- (c) Exhibit other performance deficiencies

However, give most teachers the option of teaching another year. Decide whether you should mail or hand-deliver these cards. Do *not* distribute them on Sunday morning. If you do, a teacher for whom that Sunday is the year's worst experience may make his or her decision out of that day's emotion. Keep the teacher's reaction to the card emotionally compartmentalized by mailing it or personally giving it to him or her at a time other than Sunday.

When people agree to teach for another year, always respond in a personal way, usually with a telephone call or visit. Tell them that their continued service will make a difference in the lives of the children and you greatly appreciate their commitment to this ministry. In extremely large churches, a response by letter may be necessary, rather than a telephone call or a visit. However, paper never totally substitutes for people. Avoid such impersonal responses if at all possible. The teacher is giving a major block of time and energy. Responding in a personal way is a well-spent investment.

Formally Recognize and Thank Teachers. A few moments of special commissioning and recognition in morning worship as the year begins says, "Our church values Christian education. Our church values people who devote time and energy to passing on the Christian faith to others." Giving a book or some token of appreciation in the late spring or late summer adds an exclamation point to that statement of appreciation!

Some churches go a step further, honoring the teachers at a dinner following worship on the Sunday of that special thank-you presentation. We learn to say thank you in kindergarten. Saying thank you to teachers, formally, informally, and often is an appropriate sentiment. A sincere thank you makes a difference, not just in teachers' feelings but also in the congregation's opinion about the importance of its Sunday school ministry.

Other ways to say "I appreciate your teaching ministry" include

- Stopping by the classroom after class to ask how things are going
- Telephoning teachers three months into the year to say thanks and ask how things are going
- Writing a note of appreciation at midyear
- Telephoning a teacher to pass along a compliment from a student or a parent
- Giving sincere compliments during conversations with teachers and other church members

In corporate life, whatever management praises, employees do better, with more enthusiasm. Whatever management pays little attention to, employees neglect. That principle has triple strength in organizations that reward people with a sense of meaning and purpose rather than paychecks.

Provide Orientation for New Teachers. Spend time with each new teacher. Do it informally in small churches. Large churches often do it more formally, at a "Preparing for Your Teaching Ministry" orientation dinner. Include information such as the following:

- Goals of the Christian education ministry
- Standards for teachers such as the twenty-five listed above
- Special instruction for this particular curriculum
- Storage area for craft, media, and music material
- Instructions about where to purchase craft materials

- Reimbursement procedures for expenses
- Timing and procedures for completing attendance records
- How and to whom teachers report local, first-time class visitors
- Characteristics and needs of children in this age bracket (available from most denominational Christian education departments)
- Teaching methods to which children of this age respond best
- Special needs of this class and/or of individuals in the class
- Special events across the calendar that affect this class (Christmas, Easter, etc.)
- Weekends each year when this church traditionally recesses Sunday school
- Special instructions for dealing with discipline problems
- Procedures to follow when a teacher must be absent
- Who to contact with questions
- Dates for or traditional times of teachers' meetings

Let Teachers Who Threaten to Resign Do So. With few exceptions, Christian education leaders report that talking someone out of quitting was a mistake. Contact them by telephone or a visit. Acknowledge and graciously accept their resignation. During that contact, ask, "Would you mind sharing the reasons behind your decision to resign. If there is a problem with a student or with the material or with the class itself, I'd appreciate knowing about it." Resist the temptation to use the conversation that follows as a way to talk them out of their decision. Instead, try to learn whether inherent problems with the class may handicap the next teacher unless you deal with them constructively.

Sometimes, the resignation relates to a personal or family problem. In that case, express care and concern in appropriate ways. Communicate grace and understanding. Avoid words that the resigning teacher might construe as a guilt trip. That attitude gets on the grapevine, jepordizing your reputation with the potential volunteers through which you accomplish your church's Sunday school ministry.

Recognize that Attendance Regularity Varies with Age Levels. The percentage of children and youth on Sunday school class rolls who show up on a typical Sunday goes down as age goes up. One study, slightly distorted because it includes all of the congregation's "constituents" as well as actual class members, nevertheless indicates this pattern of drop in percentages:

Kindergarten through Second Grade.....	64%
Third Grade though Sixth Grade.....	55%
Seventh Grade through Eighth Grade.....	51%
Ninth Grade through Twelfth Grade.....	43%
Eighteen through Twenty-Two Years of Age.....	21%
Twenty-Three Years of Age and Older.....	29%

Studies by many denominations confirm that a large number of people quit coming to church school classes due to one or more of these three factors:

- They do not have a strong feeling of acceptance.
- They feel offended in some way (often without the offending person's knowledge or intention).
- They do not feel that their ideas are appreciated.

(Steve Clapp and Jerry O. Cook, *Reaching Out Through Christian Education* [Elgin, Illinois: The Andrew Center, 1994], p. 88)

With any of these causes, caring about people who seem on the borderline of dropping out can make a big difference. Sunday school attendance is voluntary, not a state-law requirement of all citizens. Building and maintaining positive personal relationships is the foundation on which the ability to transmit life-changing biblical content depends.

Summary: Spirit counts as much as method and organization. A jeweler always has a positive comment about whatever he shows a customer. Examples: “That is very much in style now. People are using a lot of that. It is very different from what you usually see. Very unique!” That jeweler is enthusiasm personified. His feelings get you excited about the fine choice you are making.

Effective methods and organizational systems for Sunday school are important. No amount of enthusiasm compensates for lousy coordination and communication. However, Sunday schools do not live by organizational bread alone. They thrive when the spirit of the leaders feeds the souls of the servants with an uplifting attitude.

III. Reinvent the Sunday School in Childless Churches

“But what if your church doesn’t have any children?” the workshop attendee asked. The speaker, who had just made several suggestions on how to build a stronger Sunday school, replied with another question: “You mean you have no elementary school children in your church?”

“None!” said the workshop attendee. “We have two high school kids, but nobody younger than that.”

“Then you have two choices,” the speaker responded. “One of them is slow congregational death. Churches in retirement communities with a constant inflow of new adult members are exceptions to that rule. In all other communities, the absence of elementary school children means the church is terminally ill.”

“What’s the second choice?” the sober-faced layman asked.

“Reinvent the Sunday school,” the workshop leader said. “But that option is hard work. Few churches will put out the seven months of concentrated effort necessary to accomplish it.”

The layman replied, “Several churches in our Presbytery, many of which are in small towns and rural areas, are already doing the slow-death option. Where can we get a plan for the second option?”

A Seven-Month Strategy. Begin by accepting the fact that zero-attendance Sunday schools almost never grow *incrementally*. They cannot reinvent themselves by adding one or two students per month. The old adage “Kids go where kids are!” also applies in reverse: “Kids don’t go where kids aren’t!” Building a Sunday school from nothing to something rarely happens through a “one child a time” approach.

The only way to grow a zero-based Sunday school is through a “big bang” procedure in which four classes containing several children start simultaneously. To get that kind of combustion, use the following formula.

Twelve Steps to Success. Reinventing lost Sunday school attendance does not happen by accident. Once people put their minds and shoulders to the wheel, God can provide providence. But God does not act until people make intentional efforts to do God’s will. The following steps do not guarantee success. However, without intentional efforts of this kind, non-success consistently happens.

Step #1: February 1, present the plan to your church leaders in whatever way seems appropriate in your congregation. Tell parishioners the plan works but is a lot of work. Make sure that several of them prefer the effort necessary to reinvent the Sunday school over passively permitting slow congregational death. Some church leaders, when confronted with the two options, will say this plan takes too much effort. If that happens, forget the next eleven steps. Find a pastor who can enjoy several years of pastoral care ministry that precede the congregation’s funeral.

Step #2: March 1, begin unfolding the plan to the congregation. Say something like the following. “Many of you feel you have done your time as Sunday school teachers. That may be true, but no one takes early retirement from Christian discipleship. Some of you have the gift of teaching. We’ll be calling on you to help reinvent our Sunday school. This fall, right after Labor Day, we plan to launch four Sunday school classes—preschool, grades one and two, grades three and four, and grades five and six. That requires a team of four teachers and four assistant teachers. Ask yourself whether you feel God is calling you to serve on that team.”

Step #3: March 1, ask members to commit themselves to daily prayer for God’s power. Make sure the prayers are specific. Ask people to pray that God will give us (a) twenty-four children present in elementary Sunday school the first Sunday after Labor Day and (b) a total fall enrollment of forty children. Prepare a simple prayer commitment card. Ask people to sign it on Sunday morning, then bring it forward and place it on the communion table as their final act of worship before the benediction.

Step #4: April 1, begin recruiting the eight-person teacher team. Four people teach the four classes. The other four people serve as assistant teachers. Meet with them and unfold the plan.

Step #5: May 1, begin developing the largest possible list of potential Sunday school students. Urge parishioners to provide children’s names during morning worship and by every other means available. Since 40 percent to 50 percent of people in every community do not attend church, potential names abound. Ask people for them. Set a goal of six regularly-attending students in each of the four classes (when classes begin this fall) for a total of twenty-four children. To achieve that goal, you must gather the names and addresses of one hundred potential students in the preschool through sixth-grade age range. Have all of those names and addresses in hand by the end of June.

Step #6: After the July 4 weekend, mail a letter from the Sunday school superintendent to all prospective homes. Address the letter to the parents. Say that your church is organizing a new Sunday school class this fall for children Johnny’s age (personalize each letter and use the child’s name). In the letter say, “We want to invite Johnny to attend, but we want to be sure that is okay with you. Someone from our church will contact you later this summer to make sure we have your permission.”

Step #7: During the last two weeks of July, organize members of the congregation to visit the potential students’ homes. Do this from 4:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on two consecutive Sundays. Come back to the church for coffee, refreshments, and sharing at 8:00 p.m. The callers, if possible, visit the homes of people they know. Their objective is to (a) get acquainted with the parents and (b) say, “This fall our church is organizing a new Sunday school class for children Johnny’s age (or Jill’s age). We want to invite him (or her) to attend. Is that okay with you?”

Step #8: The third week of August, mail another letter to potential attendee homes. Address it to each of the children whose parents gave their consent. If the home has more than one child, send each of them a personal letter. Wherever possible, ask a member of the congregation who knows a specific family member to write that letter. In other cases, ask the person who made the July visit to Johnny’s home or Jill’s home to write the letter. Provide the writers with a model letter to which they can add any personalized paragraphs they desire.

Step #9: The fourth week of August, the pastor sends a personalized letter to all the Johnnys and Jills. Introduce and praise the person who will teach their class. Remind students of the beginning date (first Sunday after Labor Day).

Step #10: The Tuesday evening after Labor Day, a telephone team calls all the Johnnys and Jills. Remind them that the class starts next Sunday. Ask the parents whether the children need transportation. If possible, talk first to each child, then to one of the parents. Offer to pick up the child if transportation-needs become apparent. Make the telephone calls between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Schedule a meeting of the telephone team at the church at 8:30 p.m. for desert, coffee, and reporting in to one another.

Step #11: The Wednesday after Labor Day, the pastor writes a letter to all of the children contacted who responded in any kind of positive way. Even if they did not totally commit to being present, remind them of the class's starting-time this Sunday and the teacher's name. The pastor says that he or she will welcome them at the front door when they arrive and tell them the location of their classroom.

Step #12: The first Sunday after Labor Day, celebrate results in the morning worship service. Meet with the teacher team that Sunday afternoon to discuss any needs they are experiencing. Set up a system for sending personally handwritten notes to every absent student the next and subsequent Sundays.

Warning: This procedure works, but it demands much work. If the pastor does not plan to give it aggressive personal leadership, do not attempt it. If the pastor lacks "detail" leadership ability, or lacks a layperson who serves as detail superintendent, it cannot succeed.

*Promise: You are reaching out to a generally responsive public. Research by the Gallup organization and others indicates that more than three-fourths of *unchurched* adults would like to see their children involved in religious education. This is a fertile field in which to sow seeds. Plant them with care. Results will follow.*

IV. Manufacture Magnetic Attendance Motivators

During the 1960s, a new emphasis on professionalism in Christian education patterned itself after public school education. Many associate pastors and Christian education directors said, "We need higher standards for curriculum and teacher training. Increase the quality of the educational experience for children. They will enjoy Sunday school more. Attendance will increase."

That theory overlooked an important difference between church school and public school education. State laws do not require parents to educate their children in the Christian faith. Providing high-quality Christian education experience when children and youth attend a particular class does not guarantee the regularity of their attendance. Many other variables interfere with their attendance behaviors.

After several decades of observing that reality, Christian education leaders have a more balanced understanding of the correlation between class quality and attendance patterns. A quality classroom experience is important. When people come to God's table, feed them something tasty. However, procedures for getting the body to the building are equally important. If the body is not in the building, the brain cannot absorb the high-quality instruction.

Increased Sunday school attendance in children and youth classes happens in a variety of ways. Some of those are outlined below.

Increase Adult Class Attendance. Research indicates that total Sunday school attendance is strongly influenced by the number of adult classes. Congregations that increase the number of adult classes see increases in overall Sunday school attendance. The more adult classes, the more children and youth attend Sunday school.

An old axiom says, "Get the kids there and you get the parents." That saying is less true than its opposite: "Get the parents there and the kids come." Adults who attend Sunday school seldom hire Sunday-morning babysitters for their children. Adult Sunday school attendees who develop a relationship with people in their classes are also much more regular in their church attendance. This automatically produces more consistent attendance in their children.

Use one or more of the following methods to increase adult class attendance:

- Use the methods in *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 11, How to Increase Adult Sunday School Attendance* (download free at www.TheParishPaper.com).
- Recognize that long-established adult classes seldom grow larger, and start new classes to meet the needs and interests of specific age groups.

- Offer through-the-week adult groups and classes and ask new adult members to choose which they wish to attend, a weeknight group or a Sunday morning class.
- Put as much effort into promoting and setting goals for the adult Sunday school as you put into the annual financial stewardship emphasis.
- Once or twice each year (fall and pre-Easter), offer an eight-week course on a specific topic.
- If possible, avoid shutting down classes during the summer, recognizing that attendance is a habit that, when broken, is not always recovered.
- Put as much effort into recruiting students as you put into annual teacher recruitment.
- If he or she is available at that hour, involve the pastor in teaching an adult class.
- Offer at least one Bible study class and at least one topical class.
- Start a new class when other classes have thirty on the roll and fifteen in attendance, recognizing that few adult classes exceed this size.

F.E.T.C.H. Originating in Southern Baptist congregations, variations of this attendance-enhancer circulate in other denominations. FETCH has produced 10 percent increases in average Sunday school attendance in countless churches. In each version of this plan, the five steps hang on a five-letter acronym: FETCH.

This effort includes adult classes, not just children and youth. Composition of the FETCH leadership team that meets to plan it depends on congregational size and structure. Team possibilities: The pastor, Sunday school superintendent, a representative from each adult class, Christian education chairperson, and the age-level coordinators for children, youth, and adults. The FETCH team meets about August 1 to plan a strategy that unfolds on a timeline something like the following:

Find. *August 15 through August 31*, begin developing the largest possible list of potential Sunday school students. Ask class members to give the teachers, the pastor, the education chairperson, and the Sunday school superintendent names of friends and family members who do not attend a Sunday school class. Publicize this name-gathering ministry in morning worship and by every other means available.

Encourage. *September 1 through September 15*, the appropriate leaders, depending on denomination and church size, write letters to all potential class members. Stress the benefit of being in a group that studies what the Bible says about how to live a meaningful life. Inform people of other significant activities in your church at this moment in its history.

Telephone the Prospects. *September 16 through September 30*, telephone every potential class member. Make two calls, spaced one week apart. To plan the sequence and decide who makes each call, the FETCH team meets and reviews all the names. As much as possible, personalize the contacts. Use appropriate age-level team members. Whenever feasible, team members telephone people they know or people with whom they have some relationship link.

Cultivate. *October 1 through October 15*, personally visit all potential class members that did not say no when contacted by telephone in September. Take appropriate copies of curriculum resources and/ or church brochures. The question: “We’d love to have you in the group. May I put you on the class roll?”

Schedule a High-Attendance Sunday. *October 16 through 22*, each class sets a specific numerical goal. On the day before this Sunday, individual class members contact all potential class attendees who did not say no when visited earlier in October. They offer (a) to stop by and pick people up, (b) to meet them in the entryway and show them where the class meets, or (c) to do whatever might help the person feel more comfortable.

Increase Intentional-Recruitment Behavior. Many Sunday schools are exactly the size they intend to be, despite the fact that the church leaders say, “We need more kids in Sunday school.” Virtually all churches in all communities can increase their Sunday school attendance. The secret: instead of waiting for God to bring new people, they partner with God to make that happen. They (a) set class attendance goals, (b) engage church members in providing three times the number of prospective names as the goals they set, (c) make contact with those prospective Sunday school attendees three to five times over a period of five to ten weeks, (d) set a target date such as the beginning of Lent or the first Sunday after Labor Day, and (e) just do it.

Contrary to popular opinion, the old adage “God helps people who help themselves.” is not in the Bible. When someone writes a *Sunday School Bible*, it should contain that wisdom.

V. Examine Alternative Sunday School Models

“Dakota tribal wisdom says that when you discover you’re on a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount. Of course there are other strategies. You can change riders. You can get a committee to study the dead horse. You can benchmark how other companies ride dead horses. You can declare it’s cheaper to feed a dead horse. You can harness several dead horses together. But after you’ve tried all those things, you’re still going to have to dismount.” (Dave Travis, *Church Champions Update* August 26, 2000, quoting Gary Hamel, *Leading the Revolution* [Boston: Harvard Business Press])

That insight often escapes Sunday school leaders. They urge one another to work harder at doing things the same way. “If we put out more effort,” they say, “we will surely recover the glory years of our high-attendance past.” Sometimes we need to work harder. However, when we lean our ladder against the wrong wall, climbing it faster is not the answer. Sometimes we need to set aside a cherished way of doing Sunday school and adopt a model that better fits our congregation’s present size and circumstances. The following are several examples of alternate models.

The One-Room Sunday School. What if attendance totals one or two children in each elementary class? If possibilities seem slim for enlargement through motivational methods listed above, secure information about the curriculum titled *One Room Sunday School* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 800/672-1789 (www.cokesbury.com). That method’s several benefits include the following:

- Much less expensive, because the church purchases only one book and makes photocopies of sheets for each age level
- Covers all age levels, through high school
- Gives ideas by which older kids can help with the teaching process
- Teacher-friendly, providing several options from which to pick for use that day

Check with Group Publishers at www.group.com or 800/747-6060 for a similar type of curriculum.

The Whole People of God. *The Whole People of God* (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions) is an excellent, lectionary-based Sunday school curriculum that systematically presents the Bible’s content. Churches say the material costs 50 percent less than other curricula because they only need to purchase a *Teacher’s Packet*. The congregation reproduces all student materials on its copy machine.

Teachers rave about its user-friendliness, teacher-support, and age-appropriate materials. Nine different age-level packs are published each year, nursery through adults. Smaller church schools (fewer than twenty-five children ages three through twelve) find the *Multi-Age Pac* especially valuable.

Each Sunday, every class works with the same text. Pastors that follow the lectionary base their sermon on the same text as the classes' lesson for that Sunday. Clergy appreciate the fifty-two weeks of biblical background material, children's sermons, song suggestions, liturgies, prayers, and intergenerational worship ideas.

Each lesson plan comes with a "Bible Background" page. The material acknowledges differences in opinion regarding interpretation of some passages and focuses on issues that are common concerns among Christians. The denominational handbooks deal with specific theological positions for individual churches.

Several mainline denominations recommend this material. Obtain information from the www.wholepeopleofgod.com Web site.

The Workshop Rotation Model. Suitable for grades one through six, some churches call it "classroom rotation" or "zones." (The Workshop Rotation Model is not recommended for children younger than first grade.) Although extremely valuable in small churches with few children and a small teaching staff, congregations ranging in size from 40 members to 6,000 members use the system. It requires fewer teachers and less preparation time than the traditional Sunday school models. After the initial start-up cost to develop the four-to-six classrooms, curriculum costs are vastly cheaper. The concept crosses denominational lines with ease.

The Workshop Rotation Model came into being in several Presbyterian churches in suburban Chicago during the early 1990s. The Sunday school leaders were looking for solutions to chronic problems: boring curriculum, boring classrooms, boring teaching methods, bored kids, apathetic parents, and low Bible literacy. The concept evolved and expanded into United Methodist congregations and other denominations. Thanks to educators' willingness to freely share information on www.rotation.org the method continues to expand. Churches can either (a) purchase the curriculum materials and lesson sets, or (b) obtain many of them free of charge on www.rotation.org or (c) develop their own materials.

Kids rotate by class into a different workshop (classroom) each week during a four-, five-, or six-week period (number of weeks in the rotation depends on church size and preferences). Each classroom delivers the same biblical story (Exodus, for example) in a different way. This process immerses children in one Bible story from several perspectives. By repetition and involvement, they actually learn it rather than simply receive exposure to it. The class energy stays higher than in traditional Sunday school.

The format allows for broadly graded groups in small churches. Example: two rotation groups, one consisting of grades one through three and the other consisting of grades four through six. Large churches use more narrowly-graded groups. Example: six rotation groups, one for each grade.

The teachers do not rotate with the children. This allows teachers to teach in the workshop of their strength. The lesson stays the same for several consecutive weeks, reducing preparation time. Teachers make slight adjustments of the content-delivery to fit the learning abilities of children from the various grades. Teachers are easier to recruit. Focusing on a particular mode of biblical-content delivery (computers or art, for example) increases the number of potential teachers. People who never before thought they could teach children can see themselves handling one of the specialties in the rotation.

The only difference between small churches and large ones is the number of workshops open on a given Sunday. Some smaller congregations have two or three workshops open each Sunday, rather than six. Thus, a teacher in this kind of arrangement might only have to teach his or her workshop two or three times during the four-, five-, or six-week rotation. In some cases, people sign up to teach two workshops. The first two weeks of the rotation, that teacher might staff the Art Workshop. The third and fourth week, he or she might teach the audio-visual lesson.

Some small churches used to be larger churches. They now have plenty of empty rooms but few children. This unused space lends itself to the Rotation Model, often allowing inexpensive conversion of rooms with outdated décor in ways that make them feel modern and contemporary. In small churches with fewer than four-to-six rooms, some of the rooms can pull double duty. For example, in one small congregation the Art Room becomes the Puppet Room in week five of the rotation and the Audio-Visual room becomes the Bible Skills and Games Workshop.

The educational theory behind this approach is Howard Gardner's "multiple intelligences," which some call the seven ways of learning. Gardner says we learn in many different ways, not just through words (linguistic) or numbers (logical-mathematical). We also learn through pictures (art, visuals, and symbols). We learn with our bodies (acting, movement), through music and relationships with other people (interpersonal), and through self-reflection (intrapersonal). (Barbara Anne Keely, "Classroom Rotation," *The Clergy Journal*, September 2000, pp. 24, 52)

Examples of a five-workshop rotation in one congregation:

- Drama Room
- Art Room
- Audio-Video Workshop
- Computer Lab
- Temple Workshop (Bible games and puzzles)

In that scenario, the congregation teaches the Exodus story in five rotations.

*Week #1: The first-grade class is in the Audio Visual Workshop, where the children's Story/Theme/Focus is the overall Exodus story sequence, and their learning activity is viewing select video clips from *The Ten Commandments*, plus discussion questions.*

Week #2: The first-grade class is in the Temple Workshop, where the Story/Theme/Focus is the Exodus story sequencing, and the learning activity is each child making his or her own jigsaw puzzle of Exodus events.

Week #3: The first-grade class is in the Drama Workshop, where the Story/Theme/Focus is Exodus story sequencing, and the learning activity is high intensity "Seven Emotional Exodus Episodes."

Week #4: The first-grade class is in the Computer Lab, where the Story/Theme/Focus is sequencing through geography, and the learning activity is interactive maps followed by a computer quiz on the Exodus story sequence.

Week #5: The first-grade class is in the Art Room, where the Story/Theme/Focus is the geography of Exodus, and the learning activity is a relief map with features of Exodus in non-drying clay.

In the above rotation sequence, the congregation's other five elementary Sunday school grades, two through six, rotate in the same sequence but begin their journeys in one of the other five workshops.

Examples of the six-workshop rotation in Spirit of Hope United Methodist Church, Golden Valley, Minnesota, which transformed its conventional first-grade through sixth-grade Sunday school into six *Discipleship Discovery Zones*:

- Abundant Life Theater, a fifteen-seat theater with a large screen TV, VCR, a theater-style popcorn machine, and a chasing-light theater marquee
- Thou Art, an art studio with a full wall of cabinets, abundant counter space, and a deep stainless-steel sink for cleanup
- Mary and Martha's Kitchen, a teaching medium incorporated into the church kitchen
- The Computer Mouse, featuring three new Pentium computers and three donated older models
- Parable Productions, a puppet and drama center that boasts full-wall murals, a puppet stage adaptable for shadow or hand-held puppets and marionettes, and video taping capabilities that can capture each classes' interpretation of the biblical story

- Father Abraham’s Arcade, which houses the Bible skills and games center
- Matter of Faith Science Center, where experiments and nature studies enhance the units on creation and miracles

Sunday school attendance skyrocketed in this United Methodist congregation, which turned its outdated classrooms into the fun learning spaces described above. In her article in *Church Educator Magazine* titled “Spirit of Hope,” Ardys Sabin, says, “The Rotation Model gave us a way to teach the same Bible stories we’ve always taught—only now in a kid-friendly, teacher-friendly, and facility-friendly way.”

Download information about the Workshop Rotation Model from www.rotation.org which includes (a) explanation of how this model differs from the classic Sunday school, (b) free lesson sets, (c) articles describing the experiences of Christian educators from several parts of the country, church sizes, and denominations, (d) cost of starting the Rotation Model, and (e) a six-year teaching plan. A book by Melissa Armstrong-Hansche and Neil MacQueen, *Workshop Rotation: A New Model for Sunday School* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000) gives still greater detail regarding how to set up and deliver this Sunday school model. Sizeable sections of the book are viewable and downloadable from the www.rotation.org Web site

Computer Learning. Some extremely small churches find value in software programs that help children learn the Bible through individual learning. Obtain from Wisdom Tree, Inc. (www.wisdomtreegames.com). Contact the Christian Education Director in your denomination’s national office for other recommendations. Contact local bookstores and religious publishing companies from which your church often purchases material, and ask whether they provide software of that type.

Revisit the Opening Exercise. In some congregations, an old tradition that began dying in the mid-1900s still has value. Prior to that time, Sunday school began with a ten-minute worship/announcements/singing gathering. Then classes separated to their various rooms. The benefits were several:

- Younger children learned songs and choruses that conveyed important teaching messages which echoed through their minds for a lifetime.
- One or two talented musicians took pressure off teachers who, lacking that talent, could not deliver singing experiences in their individual classrooms.
- Small classes felt less lonely.
- Teachers felt less lonely, due to weekly reminders that other adults are giving time and energy to the Christian education process.
- A sense of multi-generational wholeness united an otherwise fragmented atmosphere.
- Children whose parents attended neither Sunday school nor worship experienced weekly worship.
- Students whose parents always got them to Sunday school late did not disrupt their classes. The opening exercises provided a buffer zone.
- Teachers who characteristically arrived late had a buffer zone that protected nearby classes from the disruption of students milling around, making distracting noise.
- Arriving late for opening exercises produced more peer pressure to arrive on time, meaning that far fewer teachers were late. Walking in late in front of other adults feels different to time-challenged people than walking in late in front of small children.

During the years when churches disbanded opening exercises for Sunday school, educators argued, “This is a meaningless ritual. We should spend more time teaching.” Generally speaking, that hopeful prophecy did not come true. In many churches, classes *always* start about ten

minutes after the stated time for Sunday school. By eliminating “opening exercises,” many congregations did not add teaching time; they subtracted the ingredients listed above.

Is your church small and experiencing some of the problems outlined above, such as teachers chronically arriving late? You may want to test for one year an opening worship session for children, at least through sixth grade and perhaps through high school.

Simultaneous with Morning Worship. Multiple Sunday school hours with simultaneous worship services are essential to some congregations’ ability to provide sufficient Christian education opportunities. Unless they use the classrooms two or three times per Sunday, many large churches must turn children away from Sunday school.

Many midsize churches use multiple Sunday school hours for entirely different reasons. Double Sunday school sessions increase both the worship attendance and the Sunday school attendance. Why? Many parents will not attend adult classes. Therefore, many of them drop off their children for Sunday school and seldom if ever attend worship. The kids get Sunday school and no worship. The adults get neither. Contrary to the opinions that inexperienced adult leaders often express, adult class attendance does not diminish with double Sunday school hours.

What if the church has Sunday school at 9:30 a.m. and worship at 11:00 a.m.? Invent a Sunday school at 11:00 a.m., perhaps broadly graded (with two classes) at first. Use the *One Room Sunday School* materials or the *Sunday School Specials* noted above. About two years later, add more elementary classes and one new adult class. Warnings: Do not ask any of the present adult classes to change their meeting times to 11:00 a.m. Do not ask any adult classes to split into two classes meeting at the two different hours. Either course of action reduces adult Sunday school attendance.

What if the church has two worship services, perhaps at 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. with Sunday school in between? Two options: (a) add a Sunday school at 11:00 a.m. or (b) shift the worship schedule to 9:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. with a Sunday school at both hours. Either way, as noted in the paragraph above, start with two elementary classes, broadly graded. Two years later add more elementary classes and one or more new adult classes.

To obtain more insights and detailed information, contact your regional denominational staff. Ask for the names of two or three congregations that made this change within the last few years. Telephone those Christian education leaders and ask them the following questions:

1. What would you put on a list of positive results that came from your switch to double Sunday school classes?
2. What would you put on a list of negative results from your switch to double Sunday school classes?
3. If you were making the switch again, how would you do it differently next time?
4. If you were giving advice to a church like ours, what would you suggest we be most concerned about as we prepare to institute double Sunday school hours?

Combined with Saturday Night Worship. Large congregations benefit themselves and their families by developing a Sunday school for children simultaneous with a Saturday night worship service. The values are numerous:

- The worship attendance on Saturday evening at 5:00 p.m. or 5:30 p.m. often doubles when the church school component is added.
- Stressed parents who previously had to choose between Sunday school and the increasingly popular league and tournament soccer, tennis, swimming, basketball, and hockey on Sunday mornings have a solution.
- Parents who must work on Sundays no longer find their family fragmented.

Some large churches with 5:00 p.m. Saturday evening worship services conduct church school in conjunction with that service. Children attend the first fifteen minutes of worship with their parents. After a hymn, opening prayers, and the Bible reading, children come forward for a children's message. During a hymn that follows that message, children leave for church school classes. Teachers meet the children in the narthex outside the sanctuary, standing in different locations holding signs denoting the grade levels. Classes continue to the end of the worship service. Parents come to the rooms to pick up their children.

Extension to another Location. Some churches reach out across ethnic and cultural lines with a combination Christian education/evangelistic effort through Sunday school classes in one or several satellite locations. Examples include extension Sunday school in another part of town for American Indian children, Japanese language children, and Spanish language children. Some congregations that begin these extension outposts eventually develop related worship services in other-than-English languages in that location.

VI. The Bottom Line

Garth Lean describes John Wesley like this: "The man was a marvel, such as the world only sees now and then. Once show him the path of duty and with a dauntless step he trod it. Nothing frightened him; nothing could lure him from the path assigned him by Providence. However arduous the work and however great the privations and the dangers, he went trusting in his Master's power for defense and help.

"My brother, Charles,' he once remarked, 'amid the difficulties of our early ministry used to say, 'If the Lord would give me wings I would fly.' I used to reply, 'If the Lord bade me fly, I would trust Him for wings.'" (Tom Fuller, Hereford, Texas, email, quoting Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed*, pp. 75-76)

Has God called you to Christian education leadership through your congregation's Sunday school for children and youth? Has God said to you, "Will you help me pass the faith to the next generation?"

If he has, trust him for the wings. God powers your way to results in the ministry to which he calls you.