

The Changing 21st Century Sunday School

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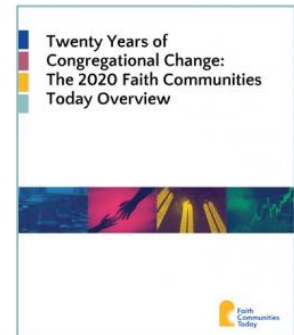
Introduction

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 70s, 80s, or 90s, 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 showing up. The parents are too busy to get involved or perhaps it's the grandparents who take 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 called "[Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview](#)." It captures a pre- and early pandemic picture of America's faith communities and affirms many of the trends evident in the religious landscape over the past few decades, while also highlighting some distinct areas of change.



The report states that the "pre-pandemic picture of America's faith communities clearly highlights many of the trends evident over the past few decades. Overall, the portrait shows a majority of congregations are growing older, smaller, and, by many measures, less vital."

The decline in average weekly worship attendance continued. In 2005 the number was 129, in 2010 it was 105, in 2015 it was down to 80, and in 2020 it was down to 65.

The report also notes:

Another major challenge evident across two decades of Faith Communities Today surveys is the dual issue of aging of both participants and religious leadership, and also the strong correlation of these trends with a decline in vitality and the diminished possibility of congregational change or revitalization. Since 2008, the average percentage of senior participants in congregations has risen 5%. This reflects a similar national aging trend as baby boomers grow older. However, in congregations, on average, 33% of participants are 65 or older whereas in the general population it is half that, just 17%.

Changes in the world

The changes we see in Sunday school are also the result of changes in the world. In a report entitled [“8 in 10 Americans Say Religion Is Losing Influence in Public Life,”](#) the [Pew Research Center website](#) “finds that 80% of U.S. adults say religion’s role in American life is shrinking – a percentage that’s as high as it’s ever been in our surveys.”

Another report on the Pew website states that “Today, about [28% of U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated](#), describing themselves as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular” when asked about their religion.”

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.

Some good news

Going back to Faith Communities Today’s report “Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview,” we can see some hope.

The report notes there are congregations that are growing and are spiritually vital; these congregations are more likely to:

- have strong leadership that fits well with the participants
- have a clear and compelling mission
- be innovative and open to change
- be active in the local community
- have more vibrant worship that is thought-provoking and stimulating
- have a community of participants that represents a diversity of ages, genders, races and other differences
- be good at incorporating new people
- have significant lay involvement, including contributing financially and volunteering

- live out their faith commitments in everyday life and tell others about the congregation

Those of us involved in children's ministry might consider helping our churches to focus on changes they will bring about revitalization. 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 groups. 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 [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 importance of partnering with families. You can give out resources for families to use at home, at a time that's convenient for them. Churches may also extend their learning opportunities by creating online resources for families.

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 looking 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 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 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.

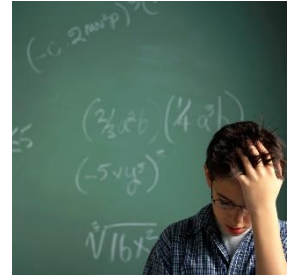
Getting rid of Sunday school

For churches which can't 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*

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