

A Different Way to Do Sunday School: Sunday School Workshops

The goal of Sunday School is to teach the Bible. But simply knowing-what we want to teach isn't enough. Developing how we will teach it is equally important for a successful Christian Education program. Sunday School Workshops is an approach that describes how to organize Bible teaching for maximum effectiveness. It works because it overcomes the difficulties that exist in a more "traditional. approach" 'to Sunday School.

Traditionally, churches organize their teaching ministry by finding a volunteer to teach a specific grade or class. Both the teacher and the class are then assigned to one classroom which is then creatively labeled the "3rd Grade Classroom". However, this room differs from the "1st Grade Classroom" only because it has slightly larger chairs and tables. Within this generically styled room, the teacher is asked to make Biblical education happen. The general qualification for this daunting task was something like "needs to be good with kids." Of course everyone hopes the teacher will also be "creative", but beyond that the church is just happy to have the position filled.

When a teacher is found churches traditionally equip them with a "denominational" curricula that has one thing in common with all other published curriculum: all the lesson plans include "options" for teachers. Options may include music/singing, a drama skit, an art or craft project, ideas for creative storytelling, word games, and other activities. The lesson plan calls for the teacher to choose a few of these options to tailor the lesson to their specific class situation.

On paper this seems like a good way to create an interesting and effective Sunday School class. Why is it, then, that in many

situations Sunday School fails to reach its goal? Because in the traditional approach, several assumptions are made: 1) That the teacher is multitalented and gifted enough to implement such a wide variety of teaching "options"; 2) That the classroom can easily be transformed during the class time so that these options can be utilized; and 3) That from one class period (typically 45 minutes to 1 hour) students will gain long-term retention of lesson information.

These assumptions are almost never true in the real-world setting of the church. A teacher may be gifted in one area (for instance, he/she is a great storyteller), but he/she may not have any skills in music, drama, crafts, or in utilizing technological tools. However, because they need to utilize more than one lesson option to fill out the class time, teachers end up leading a music/singing time even though they possess no gifts in this area, and then follow that by trying to lead a skit even though they don't have personal experience of the fundamentals of drama. Their sincerity and effort alone will not make up for their lack of gifts. Teachers know it because they feel uncomfortable and students know it because the activity lacks the power of clear direction.

The second assumption is that the classroom can be transformed every week so that a variety of teaching options can be utilized. Again, this is rarely the case. By sliding tables and chairs to one side you might create just enough space for a skit to be performed but severe limitations are evident. Without the needed space, props, backgrounds, and other details we wonder why students don't "get into their characters." The fact is whenever we "make do" in a room, the learning process suffers.

The last assumption we've known to be false for some time-1 hour is simply not enough exposure to a lesson to make a

lasting impact. Student retention of Bible lessons is unimpressive because there is no opportunity to repeat it. Unfortunately, most curriculum (because it is designed for the traditional arrangement) also give teachers a new lesson every week. In this way, it is almost impossible for students to retain information and process it for life application.

How does the Sunday School Workshop approach address these issues? First, it is organized according to "teaching tools". A teaching tool can be anything from food to high-tech electronic equipment-anything that a teacher can use to bring a lesson to life in the mind of the student. A variety of teaching tools can tap into the different ways students learn. For instance, videotapes help students learn visually. Art is a great way for students to learn kinesthetically (through their sense of touch). Computers are excellent teaching tools because they are designed for interactive participation. Drama helps kids learn emotionally, by enabling them to "step into the shoes" of specific characters from a story. These teaching tools provide different pathways to overall lesson goals, and they ensure that students with different learning styles will have equal opportunities to understand content.

A "workshop", then, is a room that is transformed to maximize the impact of one specific teaching tool. Instead of constantly moving tables and chairs to accommodate a new option, each room is designed to utilize one specific teaching tool. Workshops also become places where resources are organized and used more because they aren't so easily misplaced. (videotapes are notorious for disappearing when there isn't one room that is actually designed to use videos)

In addition to being natural storehouses for keeping track of resources, workshops understand the importance of how a

room feels and looks, so they are usually creatively arranged and decorated. This makes them fun and exciting places to be!

But fun and creative workshops alone can't teach. However, when matched with a teacher who is gifted in a workshop's teaching tool a powerful combination is born! Now teachers are recruited not just for being "good with kids", but for having a talent with a specific teaching tool such as drama, art, computers, etc. They can focus their attention on using this one tool for the duration of their teaching time.

With a number of different workshops (and teachers for each), a "rotation" can be arranged for participating grades. For instance, five different workshops would allow elementary ages (grades 1 - 5) to take turns rotating to a different workshop each week. And if the Bible story remains the same for those five weeks, students will receive important repetition - without boredom since they'll be getting that same lesson in five different ways.

In a rotation, a teacher will eventually teach every grade involved in the workshop approach. However, since he/she is teaching the same Bible story throughout the rotation, only small, week-to-week adjustments in the lesson plan are needed to accommodate the varying ages of the students. Lesson preparation is easier and a greater focus can be achieved. Additionally, teachers truly learn from the previous week's mistakes and are able to make appropriate adjustments for the remainder of the rotation. It's a process that sharpens teaching skills and makes the educational process more productive.

The workshops listed in the rotation chart example are not the only choices for a church. Every church is unique and will naturally adapt ideas to make them fit. Sunday School

Workshops encourage this (demand it!) since they are based entirely on a church's personal and physical resources. A drama workshop may sound exciting, but if a church has no one with drama skills and no available space to utilize drama as a teaching tool, it should not include drama in its repertoire of workshops. That sounds like common sense, but sometimes seeing or hearing about a particular workshop in another place can cause churches to forget the importance of a serious assessment of their own situation.

Of course there's nothing wrong with listing some possible workshops and then conducting a search of resources to see if it's a viable option. Just be prepared for the possibility that your unique situation may not allow you to do it. And don't worry- there are plenty of teaching tools to choose from. Below is a list of teaching tools that have been used successfully by some churches. A list like this is never complete, but it does provide a starting point for exploring the possibilities.

- Computers (Bible research software, quiz software, story-creation software, Bible edutainment software, Bible games software)
- AudioVisuals (videotapes, slides, filmstrips, computer-generated presentations)
- Drama (skits, plays, Muppet/puppet shows)
- Art (not simply crafts, which restrict creative freedom)
- Storytelling (hands-on object lessons, quality storybooks, and verbal presentations)
- Games & Puzzles (game show formats which reinforce Bible story details and situations, team competitions that involve story details)
- Food (preparing, creating, and eating food that helps tell the story)
- Music (more than just singing songs-using music to teach

lessons)

When a church discovers which workshops are appropriate for its situation, an organizational model is needed to clarify how they will function as a unit. A three-tiered structure that includes the positions of Coordinator, Teacher, and Class Shepherd is one model that helps "spread the educational load".

Each position in this structure fulfills an important role. The entire process begins with either a group or individual choosing what material will be taught. Many churches are comfortable with the decisions Of the curriculum publishers as to which Bible stories receive attention. In a workshop approach, this curriculum can be used, though a fewer lessons would be taught over the course of a year (typically 10 to 15 instead of 52). Some churches may choose to create their own lessons. In either case, when a Bible story is selected certain theological goals should be clearly listed. These goals must clear enough for Coordinators to "shoot for".

The role of Workshop Coordinator is to take one of the theological goals and try to reach it by crafting a lesson plan that utilizes their particular teaching tool. A Coordinator focuses their skill in this one area, oversees and organizes the resources of their workshop, and transfers the lesson plan to the teacher for that rotation. Coordinators do not necessarily teach in their workshop (though they can), but they are expected to supply the creative force to make it effective.

Workshop Teachers are individuals who commit to teaching one rotation (typically 4 or 5 weeks long) in a workshop where they have some skills or talents. During a rotation, a teacher will stay in their workshop while classes rotate through from week to week. Teachers are not required to create the lesson plan they will use to teach. Their task is to implement what the Workshop

Coordinator has developed for them.

To this point, the process has yielded what we will teach, how we will teach it, and who will teach it. Now we need some glue to hold it all together-the crucial role of the Class Shepherd. The Class Shepherd is an individual who is assigned to one specific class. This person is gifted relationally (they really are "good with kids"!) and he/she rotates with his/her class from workshop to workshop each week. Shepherds do not teach, and they do not coordinate. It is likely that many Shepherds will have virtually no skills in some of the workshop teaching tools, so in that sense they become just another student. But the importance of the Shepherding role is in the personal relationships that are built with the class. This relational glue makes sure that Workshops don't become impersonal and cold. Shepherds take attendance and offerings, greet students as they arrive, chat with them about their week, and do follow-up on students who have been missing for a period of time.

Organized in this way, Sunday School Workshops can become an effective approach to teaching the Bible. The idea of workshops is catching on in churches for these good reasons:

- Workshops are based on teaching according to specific gifts and talents, allowing people to focus their efforts on one, specific teaching tool
- Workshops support the different learning styles of students
- Workshops provide needed reinforcement through repetition and avoid boredom because of the variety
- Workshops are adaptable to the unique situation of any given church
- Workshops make Sunday School a fun place to be, and students who are having fun are more teachable!

Cliff Heagy has been a Christian Educator for over 8 years. Previously he helped start Sunday School Workshops at Park Ridge Presbyterian Church in Park Ridge, Illinois. He currently serves as Director of Youth and Outreach at Zion United Church of Christ in Sheboygan, Wisconsin where the Workshop approach is now in full swing! You are invited to take a virtual tour of Zion's workshops on the World Wide Web at: www.zionucc.org. You can reach Cliff lots of ways ... Church phone: 920-457-7800; E-mail: cheagy@excel.net; Church fax: 920-452-1825

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