

Do We Only Bemoan Our Sunday Schools?

Or Are We Willing to Take Some Innovative Steps for Children's Ministry?

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When infants and children are baptised into Christ's family, the parents and godparents are entrusted with the responsibility of bringing them up in the Christian tradition, instilling in them Christian values, that they may become good citizens of the kingdom of Jesus. Options for parents and others seem to be shrinking, with the round-the-clock, always-on mode of working — not least as "work from home" becomes the norm in many professions. The problem becomes more acute when both parents are in jobs or professions, and the children are growing up in nuclear or single-parent family systems. The best such parents can do is to bring their children along to Sunday worship and put them in the church Sunday school, where one exists. Many churches around the world have adopted different approaches to this critical subject.

The value system inculcated during the formative years of a child's life lasts a lifetime, though it too will suffer wear and tear with age, and as a result of environmental factors. Having said that, let me make it equally clear that this diminishing shine is not without remedy, but can be polished by appropriate spiritual input received from the Bible, the church, fellow Christians, workshops and other such means. We have seen enough said on this subject in general terms, and so will let that be for now.

The question parents and church leaders need to address is how best to achieve the objective of instructing our children and grandchildren about the kingdom of Jesus. Let me list what people have been doing, with the caution that this list is not exhaustive, and may be added to as we go along.

Children are made to sit through church services alongside the elders. It is indeed a tall order to expect children to sit still for such a length of time, which even devoted adult Christians sometimes find difficult. In the course of the service we then see children running up and down the aisles, or their parents frequently getting up from the pew to stop their children going out onto the roads. The net effect is that neither the children nor the accompanying adults learn a great deal from the service.

Children attend part of the service and are then sent off to the church-run Sunday school. Unless the Sunday school programme is well

attuned to hold the attention of children, it will serve only as a way of keeping children away from the main service. We must also appreciate that children go to regular school at least five days a week, and would rather have their Sunday as a break than sit through further classroom teaching. I am not suggesting that all Sunday school programmes are poor, but the good ones are not easy to find.

If neither of the above options proves workable, one or both parents stay at home to look after the children. We see, increasingly, the number of parents adopting this method. The impact is that neither the parents nor their children receive spiritual instruction, and both miss out on fellowship with fellow worshippers. Over time, we find such parents growing distant from the church. Some entrust their children to grandparents, to fulfil the task of teaching them about Christianity; some success may be found here, but I do not believe it can be a lasting or the only solution.

Some churches include a short children's sermon within the regular service, after which children are sent out to play on the church premises. People have argued back and forth over this arrangement: the time taken from the pulpit is a matter of debate, and no one seems to agree on how much time ought to be allotted to sermons. Among many churchgoers, the length of the service, and in particular of the sermon, is a deciding factor in attendance. We see sermons preached anywhere from ten minutes to forty-five minutes or more (and I know it takes excellent skill in language and preaching to preach an impactful sermon in twenty minutes). Given all these considerations, including a children's sermon within the framework of the main service may not find acceptance among most churchgoers.

The main objectives of children's ministry are to establish a firm knowledge of the word of God; to communicate the gospel in word and deed to the children of our church and community; to enable children to embrace Christ through consistent corporate and personal worship and service to God; to assist parents in the Christian nurture of their children; and to promote inter-generational involvement with children in our churches. Teaching theology is only one of the purposes that most Sunday school programmes may address. I believe that corporate worship and inter-generational effort should also be considered, to make the teaching of the Bible more effective.

We also need to address the exodus of children as soon as they come into the category of youth. In many instances, this age group leaves Sunday school, and the church with it. If they do come to church services, it is almost always due to parental compulsion, and they take their place outside the worship proper. While there are many reasons for this sad state of affairs, one prominent reason is the church's failure to build inter-generational involvement during the Sunday school years. I have heard some former youth members say how boring they find the

traditional hymns, and that they would rather attend contemporary churches. Youth ministry deserves its own, more serious, examination at some other time.

In my home church, one Sunday each year is set aside as "Sunday School Sunday," when children are encouraged to lead worship and even deliver the message; for the rest of the year they return to Sunday school. In the church I attend presently, children and youth lead the choir and do the Scripture readings.

What we probably need is a hybrid children's ministry.

Churches might devote thirty minutes of the hour or so that children are in Sunday school to an abridged service. This would introduce corporate worship to them, and children would find it easier to migrate to the main service when the time comes. Such a service would need to be crafted innovatively and skilfully, to keep the children's interest in what they are doing. Children should know the theological meaning of each activity they perform in such a service, and should be encouraged to deliver a short message of, say, five to ten minutes. This should never become a mere ceremony, but should use several models to avoid monotony. Adult intervention should be kept to a minimum, so that children develop leadership qualities early, and learn to lead themselves.

It would call for innovative thinking on the part of church leaders, and its execution should be appropriately supervised, but not dominated.

Amen.