

## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE SMALL MEMBERSHIP CHURCH

by Ruth A. Wiertzema

*Models for Ministry in small membership churches are occasional publications of the Hinton Rural Life Center and demonstrate examples of programs, organization or procedures that have provided effective ministry and mission in small membership church settings. The models are suggestions by which a local church may gain insights for strengthening their own ministry and mission.*

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***"I think I can. I think I can. I think I can."***

These are the words of the Little Engine who wasn't very big and who had never climbed a mountain. But by believing in herself and making use of the abilities she had, she ultimately accomplished what had seemed to be impossible.

Unfortunately, smaller membership churches often compare themselves with "bigger engines" that have more members, more leaders, more resources and facilities; when they do, they end up feeling inadequate to provide a vital Christian education program.

***Every church (regardless of size) is called to teach.*** Jesus gave high priority to teaching; he was known primarily as "Rabbi" (teacher).

While the teaching ministry is the responsibility of both pastor and the laity, the pastor is the chief "Rabbi"/teacher. It is the pastor's responsibility "to read and teach the scriptures, and engage the people in study" and "to give oversight to the total educational ministry of the church" ( $\pi$ 331.1 and  $\pi$ 331.3 (d), *The Book of Discipline*), and to assure that an effective Christian education program is in place.

Multiple-charge or part-time pastors may not be able to participate in every activity, but they can work with the laity in assessing and planning, recruitment and training of teachers, and in supporting the total Christian education ministry. When pastors fail to take this responsibility seriously, the educational ministry becomes an

addendum or afterthought rather than an integral part of the total life of the church. Laity have a right to expect leadership from the pastor.

The actual implementation of the educational activities normally falls to the laity. However, it is crucial that out of the body of the church, a specific group is identified to be responsible. Everyone's job is usually no one's, which can result in confusion and in no one doing it at all. To expect this of the Sunday School Superintendent alone is unrealistic for at least two reasons. First of all, Christian education is more than Sunday School. Secondly, the job is bigger than one person. Most importantly, decisions should be based on thoughts from a wider representation.

*Effective Christian education does not just happen; it is the result of an intentional partnership between pastor and laity.*

## CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

So, exactly how does a Little Engine go about climbing a mountain? There is no perfect formula that fits every situation. Each church must begin by making a list:

1. the gifts and strengths they already possess
2. the needs in their own church and community
3. matching their gifts with the needs
4. prioritizing and making an action plan

*Christian Education is much more than the Sunday School experience and it is for all ages. It is also a life-long experience, therefore, whatever age groups there are should have opportunity for learning and growing in their Biblical knowledge and faith development.*

After years of working with churches of small membership, I have learned that when a church honestly answers the question "Who are we called to be in this community?" they will also find that God provides the resources and the people with the gifts necessary to fulfill the call. Instead of seeing obstacles, they begin to live in a *state of anticipation and discovery*.

There are examples and models that can aid the discovery process. As we read about the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, we discover implications for the small membership church of today.

### **Jesus taught small audiences. One Samaritan woman, twelve disciples...**

*Every congregation (regardless of size) is called to reach out to people, to relate them to God through Jesus Christ, to nurture them, and to send them into the world to live as disciples.*

No matter how few there are in any church or community, it is the church's responsibility to provide opportunities for faith development.

This became real to me through the wisdom of a matriarch in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky. Mrs. Collett, by then in her senior years, faithfully continued reaching children in her small membership church. She also was the teacher who would not let the church forget the children along Elk Creek eighteen miles away. She recruited me and others to spend Sunday afternoons conducting Sunday School for them in an abandoned one-room schoolhouse.

Attendance was always unpredictable since the families were basically unchurched. We worked with however many would be standing along the road waiting. There were times when we gathered twenty or more; there were times when there was only little Debbie. On one of the "only Debbie" days, I asked Mrs. Collett if God was trying to tell us our journey was no longer needed. She looked me straight in the eyes, and said, "Honey, as long as there is one child standing on this road, God is calling us here. One child counts in the Kingdom." I never asked that question again.

I reflect on this often. But for her wisdom, one of our strongest ministries would not have come to be. Today, nearly seventy people of all ages are carrying on that call through not only Sunday School, but weekly worship, youth programs, Bible studies, and after-school ministries. To be sure, "one child counts in the Kingdom."

**Jesus modeled teacher training.  
He chose his twelve and taught them carefully.**

*Every congregation (regardless of size) needs to be intentional about the recruitment, support and training of its teachers.*

To the surprise of many small membership churches, recruiting teachers is a struggle in churches of all sizes. Small churches may have fewer to choose from, but larger churches have more classes to fill. I have wondered for some time what it might be like if filling teaching positions took priority over any other nomination in the church. Would it elevate the importance of the teaching ministry of the church? Would it make teaching a position to be desired and sought?

Showing genuine appreciation and support for the teachers you do have is essential. Everyone needs encouragement; everyone needs to know they are valued. Many persons in small membership churches have given years and years to teaching. Such faithfulness should never be taken for granted.

Any teacher who takes seriously the call to teach also wants to grow spiritually and to develop their teaching skills. Any church that takes their teachers seriously wants to provide opportunities for them as well. I have been challenging pastors for a number of years to look at the example of Jesus. He not only called the disciples, he taught them. Since there are limitations to the pastor's involvement in teaching, I know of no better choice than to follow this example and become a teacher of teachers.

Quarterly gatherings of pastor and teachers could do much to help teachers grow and keep the pastor connected. It would strengthen the entire educational ministry of the church. Identifying and inviting potential teachers would be excellent, and would have a positive affect on recruitment in the future.

The format for Christian education gatherings could include a devotion by the pastor, a time of sharing successes and concerns, and a longer segment devoted to specific skill training such as storytelling, using study helps, classroom discipline, etc. There are many resources for teacher training available from Cokesbury bookstores and catalogs. High on my list of recommendations are:

- *Foundations: Shaping the Ministry of Christian Education in Your Congregation*  
This is an excellent resource from Discipleship Resources that every pastor, educational leader and teacher should study. This basic document of our church explores the biblical theological foundations and purpose of Christian education. A special guideline for the small membership church, written by Myrtle E. Felkner, is available.
- "Training Your Teachers", a three-volume video set by Dick Murray.

On occasion, you may want to consider inviting a professional Christian educator from a neighboring church, the district, or conference to lead the skill training in one of your quarterly meetings. Teachers should also be made aware of district, conference, and national level training events and helped to attend, if possible.

**Jesus taught for transformation.  
Jesus knew the power of effective storytelling.**

*Ultimately, Christian education in every church (regardless of size) is about inviting persons to be transformed by "The Story" in such a way that a person may know and experience God through Jesus Christ, claim and live God's promises, and grow and serve as Christian disciples.*

Our curriculum materials are tools to help us in this process. They contain not only the biblical story, but other stories and activities that help us apply "The Story" to our lives, and they challenge us to respond in love and service.

A teacher came to me concerned about the teenagers in his class. He discovered they had a very narrow scope of Bible learning even though they had been in Sunday school most of their life. It turned out that the curriculum materials used in his church were chosen by individual teachers from a variety of sources, with no overall coordination with other classes and no long range planning. Selection of curriculum materials is a serious matter in even the smallest church and should be done by the education committee or designated group, with the help of the pastor. I strongly urge the use of United Methodist teaching materials. They are: 1) Bible based, 2) produced in three-year cycles that cover a broad scope of Bible knowledge and faith development, 3) the only curriculum materials that include United Methodist theology and tradition, 4) designed to call persons to Christian service in the church and the world. Independent materials are produced to be sold to a variety of customers, and therefore do not reflect United Methodist theology and may not be of the same quality as UM materials.

*One-Room Sunday School* is a resource especially designed for the small membership church. Churches with few children can combine all into one class using only one kit that includes a teacher book, a reproducible activities book, and a Class Pak that includes a music tape. The reproducible activities book has four age/ability level activities for each lesson. Children can be divided for the activity time but the Bible lesson/story is done as a total group. This is a golden opportunity to make use of a "storyteller"!

Storytelling is the oldest method of teaching. It is a safe assumption that one of the first things humans did was to share stories. They are still doing it. For centuries the stories of the Bible were orally transmitted. Jesus was familiar with this in his growing years, and storytelling was a significant part of his own ministry. Who has not been touched by the power of his stories? Whose imagination has not been stimulated by his parables?

Stories are a particularly important part of the fabric of the Appalachian culture, and that is where that I learned we need to recapture this art for use in the church. When Mrs. Collett and I traveled to Elk Creek for Sunday School, we carried our supplies in a small suitcase. In it were Bibles, a teacher's manual, learning activity supplies and take-home papers for the children. Mrs. Collett was the storyteller; she would refer to the lesson manual to know which story to share, but never "read the story". With all Bibles open and in hand and a few words about where it was found and its context, she would tell the day's story with such color and passion that even the rowdiest child sat mesmerized.

Sometimes she would hold up a picture or an object, but would never allow them to become a distraction to hearing the story. She did not moralize. The dialogue afterward was to clarify and to allow thoughts and reflections from the children, prompted by "what if" or "I wonder" questions. Nearly always, she encouraged the re-telling by the children. (She was developing good storytellers!).

Because small churches are places of "family," with a sense of belonging and caring relationships, they are natural settings for the use of good storytelling to pass on the stories of the Bible, Jesus, and the faith. There are great storytellers already in your congregation, and even more potential storytellers. Books and videos abound to assist you in becoming a good storyteller. The Church (*regardless of size*) has the most important of all stories to tell!

**Jesus taught in a variety of settings.  
...hillsides, homes, synagogues, in a boat, along the road...**

*Every church (regardless of size) needs to seriously consider breaking out of its walls.*

Our communities are filled with persons who are not part of any regular church experience, and who for whatever reason find it difficult to cross the thresholds of our existing churches. Take a "windshield survey" of your community. Include low-income housing areas, apartment complexes, mobile home parks, elderly housing units, and yes, even the high rent districts. Many are disconnected from the church. Then, ask God what you are to do about it. The answer may be to minister to people where they are, which is exactly what Jesus did.

In our office hangs a poster with footprints and the words "The sign of God is that we are led where we did not plan to go." It is a reminder of a time when we were seeking housing for a young couple who had been assigned to develop youth programs in two of our rural United Methodist churches on either side of a small town. No houses were available.

We were cautiously directed to check out a 60 unit low-income apartment complex. The manager could only place us on the waiting list; the units were full. She inquired about the couple and their purpose. When she was told, her immediate response was, "This complex is a mission field. None of these families go anywhere to church. Our town is full of churches, but nobody wants to mess with these people". That statement changed everything,

The youth workers were housed in a mobile home as close to the apartments as we could get. Children's after-school ministries were begun in shifts in a 12-foot shed behind their residence. The two rural churches they came to serve realized that God was also speaking to them about reaching out beyond their walls. They assisted the youth workers in establishing the Faith Ministries outreach center. God had called all of them where they had not planned to go.

Even the ministries we do within the walls of our own "synagogue" may require some rethinking. *Sunday morning may no longer be the only time we offer Bible learning for the young.* In many communities, after-school programs have higher attendance. It is a wonderful opportunity to reach children in homes where adults are all at work. We can no longer assume that all families are on similar life schedules, and children do not make those determinations. Times are changing, and the church must realize this and take it into consideration.

It is not uncommon that children attend multiple Bible schools. Is this a signal that there is a need for additional summer ministries? One successful model is a 4-6 week "Children's Hour" (actually two hours). Sessions are held once weekly, with storytelling, music, learning activities and recreation. The key is an effective storyteller who can capture the audience in creative ways and bring "The Story" alive. When this becomes an ecumenical or cooperative effort, the leadership can be rotated among churches.

***"I thought I could. I thought I could. I thought I could."***

Like the Little Engine That Could, churches of small membership need to believe in themselves and make use of the abilities *already within* them. They *can* climb mountains. They *can* have vital Christian education programs. They *can* tell "The Story" effectively!

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**RESOURCE LIST**

*This is a basic list of resources available for UM Christian Education. You will no doubt find more resources as you look.*

**United Methodist curriculum for all ages**, including "One Room Sunday School"

Cokesbury (1-800-6721789), PO Box 801, Nashville, TN 3 7202-0801

Cokesbury catalog (annual/all resources)

Cokesbury Youth.Resources catalog - from Cokesbury

Forecast catalog (S.S. and small group study resources) - from Cokesbury

Discipleship Resources catalog (resources for planning, nurturing, supporting Christian education)  
from Discipleship Resources Dist. Center, PO Box 6996, Alpharetta, GA 30239-6996

**Curric-U-Phone (1-800-251-8591)** assists with resource/curriculum questions

**Info-Serve (1-800-251-8140)** general United Methodist information

**Publications** (most available through Cokesbury)

*Teaching the Bible to Adults and Youth*, Dick Murray, Abingdon Press

*Foundations: Shaping the ministry of Christian Education in Your Congregation*

*Planning for Christian Education*, Carol F. Krau

*Developing Christian Education in the Smaller Church*, Brown

*Interpreter* – magazine that is helpful with all church programs

from UM Communications, PO Box 320, Nashville, TN 37202-0320

**Storytelling Resources:**

*Dancing with Words, Storytelling as Legacy, Culture and Faith*,

Ray Buckley, Discipleship Resources

*Telling the Old, Old Story*, Delia Halverson, Cokesbury

*The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible Series*, Michael E. Williams, Cokesbury

Storytelling video, Michael E. Williams – Discipleship Resources

**Other:**

*ABC's of the Bible* – 26-page flip-chart of Bible Memory Verses for Children

from Red Bird Missionary Conference, 6 Queendale Center, Beverly, KY 40913

## ***Teaching in the One-Room Sunday School*** **The Anatomy of a Sunday School**

by **Bob Landis**

It is virtually impossible for anyone to go to school without studying some kind of anatomy. Almost everyone has looked at the anatomy of a poem or of a story. The anatomy of a country tells us a great deal about what will happen there. In biology we learn about the anatomy of frogs and of people. When we look at the anatomy of a thing, we study its parts and learn about how it works. Take some time to look at the anatomy of your one-room Sunday school class.

### **Space**

One thing a small-membership church's Christian education program often does *not* have is an abundance of space. At best there may be dividers to separate classes. Sometimes several classes meet in an open space with no physical dividers at all. I can well remember being in a church where as many as six Sunday school classes met in the sanctuary. We could hear not only our own lesson but several other lessons as well! Activities were done on our knees, using the pews as desks. Really, there was nothing unusual about that since we always knelt for prayer anyway! In retrospect, those were wonderful days.

But in the best of all possible worlds, children will have as much space as possible. Children will benefit from a space where they can be active and talk freely. How is space used in your church? Are the children given the largest space possible for movement? Is the space pleasant? Are they able to place pictures on the wall at their eye level? Is the space colorful? Remember that adults can easily adapt to limited space, but children need all the room they can get and more!

### **Grouping**

Having a small number of children of many ages who meet together for Sunday school may be a special blessing. Older children learn by being able to assist younger children. Brothers and sisters have opportunities to work together. Children from many age levels working together can begin to view themselves as a family. In a one-room Sunday school class there are many opportunities for children of all ages to learn at their own pace.

### **Personal Attention**

It's likely that you know each child in your class personally. In fact, you may have known many of them from the day they were born. However, don't assume that you know everything there is to know. In one-room Sunday schools, just as in any other setting, children sometimes face difficult and painful problems that even their parents may not know about. Be a very careful listener. Some children may be looking for someone to talk to. Some may even talk to you about things they will not tell their parents. Part of being a Sunday school teacher is being a counselor. Be prepared to help the children in your class or to direct them to someone who can help them.

In a congregation I once served there was a boy whom everyone thought of as mean. We chalked it up to his being hyperactive. His teen and early adult years saw one crisis after another. Then he joined the service. We didn't hear from him for years. We often wondered what had happened to him. Almost thirty years later we received a call from him. He wanted us to know that he had become a Christian. He wanted to thank us for the part we played in his early life. Only when he called so many years later did we find out about his troubled childhood. He told us about being an angry child. His mother had left the family when he was young. He and his sisters had no mother to receive the gifts they made in Sunday school. When they left Sunday school, they threw away the things they had made; and then went home to cry. If only we had picked up on that pain when he was a hurtling little boy! How much pain might we have been able to spare him? Listen for the cry. Watch for the hidden tears!

## Equipment

Small-membership churches often do not have all the up-to-date equipment and technology that larger churches may have. A lot of that stuff might be nice to have. Just imagine: Here comes Jesus walking along the road to Jericho. Peter is close behind with the VCR. John has the portable television. Andrew is hauling the computer, complete with CD-ROM and disks of the latest Bible games and quizzes. Oh, we can't forget the copier and printer. James has the cassette player and tapes containing the musical accompaniment for the hymnals. Levi has the overhead with the words typed on plastic sheets.

But whoa! Did Jesus have all these things? No. But Jesus was the greatest teacher of all time. Remember that effective Christian teaching is not based on the abundance of things we possess. Effective Christian teaching is the result of the abundance by which a teacher is possessed with the love of God.

Jesus had no gadgets. He was able to look at a farmer planting seed and say, "Look there. That farmer is an example of God's kingdom. I am sowing the seed; some falls in different places. But the seed that falls on fertile soil brings a harvest." Or, Jesus picked a lily, held it in his hands, and said, "Don't worry. If God could make this beautiful lily, God can take care of you." Equipment is convenient and useful — if you have it. But you don't need it. You, the teacher, are more vital than equipment. Let the wonderful stories of Jesus flow out of your heart into the minds, emotions, and hearts of your children.

## A Special Community

Members of small-membership congregations may be the most blessed people of all. We are part of a caring, loving, compassionate community of faith. And you, the Sunday school teacher, have the great privilege of teaching the same group of children for years. You are the one who will continuously have the most impact on the spiritual health, well being, and life of each child.

Continue to examine the anatomy of your Sunday school. But examine each part in a different way than you would examine a frog or a poem. Make plans to make it better! Do the best you can with what you have. It will be enough!

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*From "The Anatomy of a Sunday School," **New Invitation: One Room Sunday School Teacher Book**, Winter 1996-97 (pages 2-3) Copyright © 1996 Cokesbury. Used with permission.*

Cokesbury's *One Room Sunday School* curriculum kit is a convenient resource containing everything you need for an entire quarter of lessons to teach children from age three through middle school together in the same class. Bible stories and specially designed activities help them study and learn together. The kit includes a *Teacher Book*, *Class Pak*, Reproducible Activities book, and cassette. At \$52 per kit, you can teach 5 children for an entire quarter for only 80 cents per week per child. To order, call 1-800-672-1789, visit your local Cokesbury store, or go to <http://www.cokesbury.com>. Fall item number 0687036224. Winter item number 0687036194. Spring item number 0687036291. Summer item number 0687036283. Questions? Call Curric-U-Phone at 1-800-251-8591.