

## Our Sunday School Wasn't Working

A "Case Study" of One Church's Shift to Try a New Approach

### The Why

We found ourselves seeking the latest curriculum, gathering our most dynamic and wise teachers, and texting, posting, and emailing constantly. Then Sunday morning would come, and two teens would stroll into the youth room, shove a donut in their mouth, and melt into the sofa to say about ten words groggily over the next hour. Meanwhile, attendance was simultaneously dropping in children and adult Sunday School classes too.

Something is changing in the patterns of church programming, and Sunday School, for us especially, is one of those hours that feels like it needs a breath of new life.

In our situation, we had to take an honest look at our numbers. We found that they did not lie, and, in fact, they told us a story. And with that story, we had to be honest about who was actually showing up most weeks.

Our pastoral and program leaders and their corresponding committees began to speak honestly together and ask our congregation what was important to them about church programming on Sunday mornings. Here's what we found to be true:

- Most families have only an hour to give to church, and worship is their priority.
- Sunday School is early for teens.
- Parents like to bring their children to a program, but not weekly, more occasionally as schedules allow.
- Families value a time to not feel busy and scheduled. Many families need Sunday mornings for that.
- Young people value a critical mass in class; they want friends there.
- Parents most value that their children have hands-on service experiences.

Since we did not have much to lose, making a big shift on Sunday mornings made sense for us. We talked to ten or so families with children and youth, and twenty or so adults attending Sunday School periodically, and let them know we were going to try something new.

# The Changes

Based on our learnings from the congregation, reading books and articles, talking to other Christian educators, youth directors and pastors, we decided to include the following six varieties of programming in what used to be our designated Sunday School hour:

1. **Must Haves**—Before we plan anything else, we put the “must haves” on the calendar. For us those are our church-wide Christmas pageant performance (yes, it’s a Sunday morning and our highest attended event of the year), our annual meeting, and our youth retreat.
2. **Short Series**—We plan five series a year. Each series is only two or three weeks long. We separate by age groups much like the traditional Sunday School model. We pick five meaningful topics that we will explore and study for each age group. For example, our youth series has focused on such topics as “How to Choose and Be a Good Friend,” “Sexual Ethics,” “Social Justice as an Act of Faith,” and “Faith and Politics.”
3. **iGen Events**—We then plan periodic, intergenerational, faith formation events. We spend extra time inviting people to these to emphasize that these are deeply meaningful for all ages. Fuller Youth Institute’s research, “Sticky Faith,” that looked for measures of young people bringing faith into adulthood claims, *“Despite the age segregation that exists in our churches and broader culture, each young person is greatly benefited when surrounded by a team of five adults. We call this the new 5:1 ratio.”* We remind our adults of this obligation to be in our young people’s lives. The first year we did iGen events around holy days, such as All Saints’ Day, Advent, and Lent. The next year we did them around topics, such as poverty, storytelling, and recreation. The main trick for iGen events is to not scale them down so that all ages are doing the same preschool arts and crafts, but to spend time crafting meaningful lessons and creating spaces for conversations between the generations so the time together is meaningful for all ages.
4. **Mission**—We also plan mission events that are intergenerational. They are designed to be something that can be completed in one-hour (sometimes with an additional 15 minutes for driving). Mission projects have included volunteering for our city’s marathon (it runs by the church), caroling at the neighboring assisted-living facility, hosting a mass packing of 10,000 meals, and organizing a service blitz where we had many small projects that participants split up and accomplished, like sorting food in our Food Pantry, making snack bags for the Ronald McDonald House, and cleaning up our grounds. For our congregation, if it’s mission, they are our highest attended programs.
5. **Music**—With the music staff and committee, we collaborate to bring in special musicians for worship. Part of the invitation includes asking them to come early to also do a concert for all ages. We have had bluegrass, Japanese drumming, and a barbershop quartet.
6. **Nothing**—Yes, that’s right, part of our “programming” is cancelling programming and having about ten Sundays a year with intentionally free space. We looked at what was a need for our young people and their families, and it was a break. Busyness is a sickness that is harming our young people. It is a gift to have time carved-out for rest. We encourage families to use this as a true break—Sabbath and rest time for families. Some of these dates already had no programming, such as Easter Sunday and the Sunday after Christmas. Then we added more. We looked at typical low attendance Sundays and those were often in the winter. We also looked at dates that were overly busy in the culture, so one Sunday in Advent is a break. These are the hardest to implement and maintain. It’s easy to go back and plug things into the slots, but the reality is these have become holy Sundays for families and for staff. We now have breakfast treats in the narthex and congregants show up to simply socialize with each other and the church staff. We also found that not filling the holes with these ten or so low attendance Sundays gave the pastoral and program staff and committees time back to make the other programs throughout the year really great and meaningful.

# The Results

We recently finished our second year of this model and are excited to be planning year three.

For staff and committees, we have more time to do better programming. The time we used to spend recruiting teachers and making sure we had many programs for each age group every Sunday of the year, we now use to think creatively and spend more time planning programs and events. It has made our team think outside the box, try new things, and incorporate new volunteers with particular skill sets to lead specific events.

We have noticed that we are reaching a wider range of people than we did with traditional Sunday School. On some Sundays our attendance is hugely up and on other Sundays it is about the same. The few people who were showing up every Sunday before the change still show up every Sunday. But now others are showing up from time-to-time due to our changing program topics. There is something that draws a greater variety of people, but it's not all the same. Overall, there are more people participating in our Sunday morning programs; but more importantly, more people are finding ways to deepen their spiritual lives on Sunday mornings.

## Other Alternative Sunday School Ideas

- If your youth Sunday School is during worship, try canceling it and inviting youth to worship with the whole congregation. The only way to learn to worship is by the act of worshipping. Offer them journals and education tips to integrate them into the worshipping community. Have a lunch after church to get youth's feedback on worship and allow their voices to be heard to influence worship planning.
- Try another block of time that better fits the schedules of youth. Try immediately after church, Wednesday evenings, or before school one morning.
- Try simply adding short series that have clearly defined beginnings and endings based on your youth's schedules and be sure to take breaks on the weeks between series.
- Try using the former Sunday School hour to give your youth leadership roles. Invite youth to help prepare for communion or other worship setup. Invite youth to teach younger children's Sunday School classes. Invite your youth to an adult Sunday School.
- Cancel it all together. Look at your numbers and all your other programming. If you have a lot of programming in other times, maybe you don't need Sunday School anymore. Look at the big picture of your programming.

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