

What Are We Learning?

Some Reflections Arising from Our Review of Our Sunday School

The following reflections arise out of three cottage type meetings during June and July in 2008. The point of the meetings was to determine the unique challenges faced by current parents of children grade 5 and under. The meetings were attended by the most involved church members, some of whom were Sunday School volunteers. While not a scientific study, the conversations yielded some clear impressions and, at least to me, revealed some challenges that parents of older children have not faced.

The porosity of family boundaries. All of the conversations went quickly to the impact that high tech electronics plays on young children—notably cell phones. Increasingly, children can be connected with friends outside the environment they are in. Text messages are particularly insidious because children quickly become adept at “texting” and can be communicating with friends while seeming to be engaged in other activities.

The internet—often available to kids beyond parents’ immediate supervision—exacerbates the parental challenge of

having influence over children by virtue of controlling their space.

Generalized affluence with attendant busyness, which keeps parents and children preoccupied, contributes to this challenge. While not particularly new, television, movies, realistic video games, also make available to younger children influences traditionally deemed as "adults only." I was struck by the amount of energy needed by conscientious parents to block their children's access to pornographic, violent, or nihilistic materials that erode the family culture, which parents instinctively wish to provide for their children.

To restate this theme: the ability of parents to establish a family sphere where wholesome values and behaviors prevail is significantly undercut by the penetration of electronically borne influences that carry an unending stream of "second opinions" to parents' wishes.

The dismantlement of authority in general. Not surprisingly, the erosion of the consensus where parents, school, community, and church all operated by the same value standards has continued apace and has significant impact on this newest crop of young families. The most striking story shared in the cottage meetings was of grandparents purchasing a DVD for

grandchildren that was forbidden by the parents. The oft-repeated story of the days when punishment at school automatically meant punishment at home is testament to the pervasiveness of the lack of consensus on values.

This factor appeared to have impact on parents who endured no small amount of angst over how their family values appeared to both their children and outsiders. The impression given through the cottage discussions was that children today navigate through a patchwork of cultures. Certain standards obtain at home. Other standards exist at school, church, friend's houses, on sports teams, in the fictional world of media, and so on.

All the parents were self-conscious about their own use of authority over their children, not wanting to overstress their kids by expecting them to conform to rules where were wildly out of synch with the other spheres their kids inhabited. Conscientious parents half-jokingly referred to themselves as the "mean parents" because of any firm commitment to unpopular standards.

One attendant factor to the above conditions is that children feel authorized to negotiate with parents about decisions and expenditures affecting them. The old line,

"because I said so," is less and less available to simplify family decisions.

Heightened investment in parenting. My overall impression was that parents were bringing enormous relational and financial resources to the task of parenting. Several factors lead to this conclusion, some of which are the sheer cost of providing a rich educational and experiential environment for kids, the engagement of grandparents in the parenting process, the heightened demands parents have, of late, made of church programs for kids. Church leaders no longer hear of fathers and mothers who train their kids to be still in worship services. Parents instead demand that churches provide alternative kid-friendly activities, an effort that may be emblematic of parental investment in adapting every environment to the kid rather than kid to the environment.

The opposite of this point is the criticism that parents bring a breezy naiveté to parenting, bearing kids into the world, and then leaving them to find their way through many human challenges on their own. This charge appears less true today than ever before. Where parents appear to default on parenting responsibilities is where they are so impoverished, isolated, or so beleaguered by other problems, that they simply

can't muster the massive resources that are deemed essential to raise a child. Put starkly: parenting is enormously complex and demanding.

Implications for Religious Education: The cottage meeting discussion questions did solicit direct criticism of the existing Sunday School program. Neither did criticism emerge. My overall impression was that the content and structure of the Sunday A.M. program was satisfactory.

Neither did any clear theme emerge for what parents wished ultimately for the program to emphasize. Themes discussed were Biblical knowledge (meaning Bible Stories), theological acumen (being able to assemble religious convictions into a coherent whole), values (owning a behavior standard that resists social pressure), compassion (possessing the capacity to perceive and respond to another's distress), mission (doing caring or service activities as an avenue for learning Christian values). It's worth noting that having a conversion experience—the heartbeat of Christian education before the 20th century was not mentioned.

As for what a Christianly-educated person looks like or should look like, the groups mentioned happiness, ethical self-definition, and compassion as characteristics they would like to

see established in their children by the time they became adults.

Programming Suggestions: Happily, several promising ideas emerged from the conversations that are worth listing here.

1. Providing parents with weekly take-home summaries of what their children studied during Sunday School. This would permit parents to reinforce learning at home.
2. Teaching advanced versions of what children were learning to adults in the Celebrations and Discovery classes.
3. Expanding on the successful model of "God's Gift of Sexuality." This would utilize additional weekend-length mini-retreats where one subject is studied in depth.
4. Parenting Classes that might utilize a dinner-date format with guest speaker. Children's activities would be provided to run concurrently with the adult program.
5. Parent networking that would permit parents to know about one another's rules and values. This would provide a good exchange of ideas, mutual support, and would undercut the children's monopoly on this information.

Soul Searching: A Movie About Teenagers and God: Prominent conclusions from this massive study and documentary include:

1. About 1/3 of America's teenagers' have the degree of exposure to a faith tradition that the children of most of our active members have. Very few American children benefit from better Christian education than we provide. Another third have some exposure to faith and have spotty information. One third are far-removed from any faith tradition and know practically nothing about faith, God's nature, or the ethos of a faith tradition.
2. Virtually all American children and teens possess a generally positive view of God's nature that holds God to be personally interested in individuals, responsive to prayer, available upon need, and desiring the best in life for them. Very few teens can articulate a coherent theology that assembles broad themes (Bible, Jesus, Sin, Heaven, Church, sacraments etc.) into a systematic, usable whole. Put differently, one might not be able to discern most teens' faith tradition (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish) on the basis of observation of their lives or conversation with them if that conversation did not include which church they attended.
3. Parents' behavior is the single most determinative factor in the nature and depth of children's and teens religious faith. We get what we are.

4. The upper third of American teens whose faith is most prominent, also score generally more highly in every measureable sociological category of well-being. Religious kids are happier, less lonely, more successful in school and so on.
5. Kids are sociologically among the most conservative people in society. Religiously, they are conventional. They respond to established religion rather than explore exotic alternatives such as eastern religions or new age practices.
6. Churches that have programming for children and youth and that present a basically positive and wholesome approach to faith (God is love, love one another etc.) have favorable influence on children and are populated by many of the top third of the religious kids.

Conclusions: On the basis of the positive climate in the cottage meetings and the conclusions of the nationwide study, Soul Searching, it appears that First Presbyterian Church is doing very well in its overall Christian Education program. Nothing we've learned so far indicates that we need to explore a structural change in our Sunday a.m. program or a change of content. All of the new ideas that arose spontaneously entail

work with and deeper involvement of parents. At this juncture, if it appears to me that scheduling one additional parent event that addresses a topic in their area of their concerns. Such a topics might be,

1. "New Tools New Rules: A Parent's Guide to Taming Cell Phones, Video Games, and the Internet."
2. "Will our Children Have Faith? What Parents Must Do to Foster Compassion, Morals, and Discipleship in their Children"
3. "What Makes This Generation Different?"
4. Expand the GGS program from one weekend every two years to three weekends over the period of two years and call it "Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll." The sexuality weekend would remain the same (but would be updated to include new denomination sexuality materials). The other two seminars would focus on drinking and chemicals and popular culture.
5. Invent a concept called "God-grandparents" that would assign a mature couple to each family presenting children for baptism to foster support for fulfilling baptismal promises.
6. Replace the second weakest Sunday School quarter (leaving only two quarters a year for classroom learning) with a

- non-classroom emphasis on mission and service. This would be hands-on learning that emphasized work and generosity.
7. Conduct a pre-confirmation retreat approximately one year before the confirmation retreat that would emphasize storytelling, movies, and narrative to foster Christian values.
 8. Visit other religious communities with the children with the view not to contrast them with Presbyterianism, but with the view of offering something the children may wish to explore to nourish their own faith. Examples might be visiting a contemplative community (Benedictine monastery), an emerging church, an Eastern Orthodox church, Synagogue, and Mosque.
 9. Replace the "Lock-In" with a "Lock-Out" and visit places that are open through the night—police station, county jail, newspaper, radio station, Harmony House or homeless shelter. The underlying strategy would be to expose children to poverty.
 10. Find a way actively to teach kids to pray, meditate, confess, fast, be silent, serve walk a labyrinth, meditatively read the Bible, and practice other traditional spiritual disciplines.