

THE BODY PARTS

It is important to note that Sunday School was the entry point for many of us as we entered into the church of our youth. When I grew up in Danbury, even if we did not go to church (worship) we went to Sunday School. I would wager that many of you share those same memories. That was then. Now, in 2015 - our Sunday School is lacking.

In 1983, with a 3-year-old daughter and no worshipping congregation in Danbury, but 5 vacant church buildings, a group of young moms, sitting around the kitchen table, wanted our young children to have the biblical foundation afforded us, and so we dreamed, and planned for the beginnings of what is now – Danbury Community Church – a union church of Presbyterian and Methodist traditions. In our minds if we could just have Sunday School for our children, that would be great. However, as we planned and prayed, God took the helm of the ship and a church was born that has been the anchor of religious life in the county-seat of Stokes County for over 30 years.

Sunday School - Why is it necessary? Why do we bother? Why do busy adults work throughout the week to develop interesting and attention holding lessons, only to come on Sunday morning and have 2 or three, maybe 5 children in attendance? Or, on really trying Sundays, no one comes through the door of the classroom?

Sunday School? Many of you who attend worship don't bother coming earlier, giving Sunday School no thought at all. Some of you claim no class as your place to belong, choosing instead to "put in your church time" in this one hour of the week. Recent studies have shown that churches that are thriving have one thing in common - every member is connected to and engages with small groups within the congregation. These small groups are often Sunday school classes that may be similar in age or hold common interests.

There was a time in the history of the church and in the United States when Sunday School served a major role in our society. In fact, it was Sunday School that taught children to read – not Dick and Jane but the Bible! The Sunday school movement began in Britain in the 1780s and spread to America in the 19th century. But the Sunday schools of that day were nothing like we have today; they were schools very much like our public schools, only with the Bible as a core component. They were established to provide an elementary education on Sunday for children who were employed in factories, stores, and farms the rest of the week. Eventually, child labor laws were instituted and the institution of the public school was created, relegating religious instruction to the churches. The American Sunday School Union, a cross-denominational national organization founded in Philadelphia in 1824, published curricular materials and children's books that were used in many Sunday schools in that day.

Sunday School is not mentioned in the Holy Scriptures. However, we are instructed in Psalm 111, "Praise the Lord! Give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation." Thereafter there follows a listing of all that God has done, and then v. 10 tells us, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding." However, how are people to come to that good understanding if they are not involved in a group that studies the scriptures?

The story is told that a new pastor decided to visit the children's Sunday school. The teacher introduced him and said, "Pastor, this morning we are studying Joshua." "That's wonderful," said the pastor. "Let's see what you are learning. Who tore down the walls of

Jericho?" "I didn't do it!" said Johnny shyly. Taken aback, the pastor asked, "Come on now, who tore down the walls of Jericho?" To which the teacher replied, "Pastor, little Johnny is a good boy. If he says he did not do it, I believe he did not do it."

In a Pew survey conducted in 2010 the results were astounding and sad. On average, Americans correctly answer 16 of the 32 religious knowledge questions on the survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. Atheists and agnostics average 20.9 correct answers. Jews and Mormons do about as well, averaging 20.5 and 20.3 correct answers, respectively. Protestants as a whole average 16 correct answers; Catholics as a whole, 14.7. Atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons perform better than other groups on the survey even after controlling for differing levels of education.

One of the questions I ask churches I am working with to consider is "What are the entry points for people to easily enter into the life of your church? Frequently one answer given is Sunday School. Indeed, it has long been assumed that when it comes to reaching people and effectively assimilating them into the life of the church the Sunday School ministry is one of the most effective tools, even some 200 years after its beginnings. "America's fastest-growing churches demonstrate that Sunday School groups continue to be the premier small-group growth model in the nation" (Byrd, 1994) However, I am not at all sure that Sunday School is a viable point of entry for visitors at FPC.

Former President of the Union of Sunday Schools of the Baptist Church in America, Harry Piland identifies the Sunday School as playing a key role in the health of a church accomplishing its mission. "Because of the nature and mission of a church revealed in the Scriptures, and because of the centrality of the Bible in Sunday School, the Sunday School is at the heart of the mission of the church. It is central – not a side issue; it is major – not minor"

In recent years, across denominational lines, there has been a sharp decline in Sunday School attendance. There are many contributing factors: finding teachers whose personal schedules allow them to commit the time, the trend of some churches to close SS classes for some ages, the hectic pace of some families to name a few. Some theologians believe that the shift in focus plays a role in the decline in SS attendance. There was a time when the primary focus of SS was for Bible study and teachers were certified to teach the classes. Today the primary focus is on fellowship, according to Rick Harton, Chief of Education, Richmond, VA. After all, we don't have many exhibiting the kind of dedication to come to Sunday school as the little girl, dressed in her Sunday best, running as fast as she could, trying not to be late for Bible class. As she ran she prayed, "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late! Dear Lord, please don't let me be late!" As she was running and praying, she tripped on a curb and fell, getting her clothes dirty and tearing her dress. She got up, brushed herself off, and started running again. As she ran she once again began to pray, "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late...but please don't shove me either!"

Shortly after I arrived here, Gene Moore met with me to discuss Christian Education issues. In that discussion she shared that, indeed, identifying persons who would commit to teach was one issue here. We discussed the expectation for the pastor to teach. As Interim Pastor, it would be unwise for me to teach every Sunday. Although none of us know what the future holds, we do know that I will be leaving when the interim work is completed. Instead, one of the 5 tasks of interim ministry is to identify persons who have the gifts for teaching and leading.

Not one of us is here by accident. God has placed each of us here for a divine purpose. Each one of us has been gifted by God to a particular purpose. I know, I can hear some of you saying, "I've done my thing. I kept the nursery when my children were small. I taught Sunday school when I was younger. I have pulled my time as" As surely as you live and breathe the air of this earth, God has a purpose for you. God is not finished with you. You have gifts given you by God and you are called to use your gifts to the glory of God for as long as you are able.

We live in an individualistic society. Many Christians think that it is really about me and my God. However, since day one, Jesus has been about relationships among his followers. In every instance Jesus was in community with disciples and with the community at large. We are a community of believers, the Body of Christ, the Church. We are in this together. If one has a problem, we all have a problem. If one has a need, we all seek to meet that need. Jesus was and is a team player and we are all part of the Jesus team.

Hear these verses again: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way."

After an accident in which she lost her arm, Jamie refused to go to school or to church. Finally, the young teen thought she could face her peers at church. In preparation her mother called the Sunday School teacher and asked that she not call attention to Jamie. The teacher promised, but then she got sick on Saturday and had to call a substitute. At the conclusion of the lesson that day, which was about inviting friends to church, the substitute teacher led the class in doing the hand motions to the familiar children's poem:

"Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the doors, and see all the people."

Jamie's eyes filled with tears. A thirteen year old boy sensed Jamie's pain and knelt beside her. With one arm, they supported each other, making the church, steeple, and people. Together they illustrated what real church is.

Here, in this community of believers each one has a unique opportunity to model what church really is. Each one a part of the body of Christ; each one with gifts given by our Creator God; each one with needs to be met. Will you say "yes" to God's call? Amen.