

My Experience of Teaching Sunday School in Sweden

I moved to Sweden in 1992, together with my wife. I was involved in teaching Sunday school over a period of 23 years. During that time I developed a curriculum with over 300 lesson plans for children between the ages of 3 and 14. This experience was the most inspiring, creative and fulfilling time of my life. In my opinion, the system we created in Sweden is a good model for others to follow. I learned many valuable lessons, which I now have the opportunity to share.

Children are the Future

The most important people in our faith community are the children. They are the future. Without them there is no future. Blessed children are precious in God's eyes. We as adults have the sacred responsibility to love, guide and educate them, so they may know their identity as God's children. Therefore, what they learn in their early years is investment for the future and will impact their whole lives.

'It takes a Village to Raise a Child'

Parents are the primary educators of their children, but passing on our values in a secular society means that our children are vulnerable to negative influences. As the African proverb says, 'It takes a village to raise a child'. In that context, our faith community is that village and Sunday school plays an important role. To be effective, the joint efforts of parents, teachers and children are all needed. Sunday school is much more than a place parents can leave their children while attending Sunday Service. The more they take an active interest in what their children are learning the better. In addition to studying God's word, it gives children a sense of belonging to our community and that there is something meaningful for them to do. It is also a place where other children outside our community can feel welcomed.

Education must be Continuous

In regular school, education is structured and age appropriate, from infant school all the way up to university. When it comes to children's spiritual education, for it to be effective, children also need structured, age appropriate and continuous study. This is why Sunday school in Sweden was divided into three age groups; 3-5, 6-8 and 9-11. Each group covered a 3-year cycle of lessons appropriate for their level of maturity. After

3 years, each child received a diploma for having successfully completing their group. Through this they felt a sense of pride in their accomplishment. They knew exactly where they were and where they were going. For this to work we needed three rooms, one for each group. Without three rooms it would not have been possible to organise it as we did. We also needed to have enough teachers to teach, otherwise the burden on individual teachers would have been too great. Often, those who volunteered worked in pairs, to share responsibility and support each other. Later, when there were less children and I had more time, I created a three-year curriculum for 12 -14-year-olds. And of course, our movement also needs a curriculum for 15–18-year-olds and beyond.

For learning to be effective children must attend school regularly. The same applies to Sunday school. Attendance becomes a habit and a normal part a child's Sunday routine. Meeting every week also develops friendships with other children and their families, which can last a lifetime. Here in Sweden, because most children attended Sunday school the friends they made then, have continued until today, whether they are still part of our community or not.

How to make Sunday school Joyful

How can we make Sunday school an enjoyable experience for start to finish? From the moment parents leave their children until they pick them up there should be something for them to do. With this in mind I created a schedule in four parts.

- 10.30 -11.00: Parents dropped off their children.

We had books, drawing paper, coloured pencils, board games, table football, miniature snooker, and an ice-hockey game that were available to use, during the half hour before we started.

- 11.00-11-45: Everyone gathered in the large room

We began with prayer, sang lively songs and I gave a short message. Then we played games that involved a lot of action and laughter.

- 11.45-12.30: Lesson time for each group

The children broke into their respective groups, ready to sit down and focus on their lesson, which usually had a story, a discussion, followed by some activity, such as completing a worksheet, or doing some art and craft.

- 12.30-13.30: Parents arrive

During this time each group ate the snacks they had brought, tidied up and played games if they wished. It meant that parents didn't need to be in a hurry to leave Sunday service. The time we spent together was a very enjoyable time for everyone and the high point of my week.

What should Blessed Children Learn?

The Bible and moral stories are a good foundation, but blessed children also need to know something about the Principle, True Parents and our traditions. With this in mind, I created a curriculum covering nine years of work

Group 1 - My Book of God

Group 2 - The Old Testament, The New Testament and My Journey in Life

Group 3 - Principle Workbook and True Parents' Lives & the Early Church

In Sweden most children completed this nine-year programme. I believe this was the foundation for many to attend workshops in Europe, 40 days in Korea, study at GOP in Korea and join STF. With that background, 33 attended the Blessing out of a total of 56 second generation. However, once our young people received the Blessing, many no longer continued to be part of our movement. If they had received age-appropriate education during their teenage years, I believe many more would still be connected. One issue was that when they came back home, from Korea or STF, there was no follow up to help them integrate their experiences into their daily life and develop their own life of faith.

Creating Lesson Plans

I am a trained and experienced teacher, but I was a pioneer when it came to creating teaching material for blessed children. It took many years to develop. Although parents helped in the beginning, it was difficult for them to know what or how to teach. I wanted to create a bank of material that could be used again and again and make it easy for

anyone to teach. This led over time to detailed lesson plans with clear instructions. Later, older 2nd generation volunteered to teach and all they had to do was follow a ready-made lesson plan. This was a great way for them to contribute, develop their character, gain teaching skills and invest in their younger brothers and sisters. Over many years, 24 of them became Sunday school teachers. Without lesson plans it would have been much more difficult for them to volunteer.

Training Teachers

In addition to lesson plans I also created a teacher's manual as a guide.

In the manual, among other things, I explain how to teach a lesson. Here is a list of teaching points from the manual.

- Create a learning environment
- Focus on the aim of the lesson
- Have a clear structure
- Keep the lesson varied
- Relate the lesson to children's lives
- Repetition
- Have a sense of humour
- Be enthusiastic
- Check their work

For details refer to the teacher's manual.

From time to time, I organised a teacher training day, where experiences could be shared. For 2nd generation in particular, teaching can be very beneficial for their own spiritual development. One of the best ways to learn anything is to teach and those who taught had an overwhelmingly positive experience.

The Role of One-Day Seminars

One of the best ideas I had outside of a regular lesson was one-day seminars. Every six weeks, instead of Sunday school we had a seminar for 8–12-year-olds. I discovered a way to teach children the Principle in a child-friendly way. I bought a book called ‘The Book of Virtues’ by William J. Bennett. It contains stories under different types of virtues, such as self-discipline, honesty and courage. With each virtue you can teach children the ideal, our fallen attitude and how to restore our true nature. Learning virtues is all about character development and the First Blessing. Apart from teaching, each seminar included sport, games and some creative activity. Spending the whole day together helped create bonds of friendship and a break from the normal Sunday routine. Over a period of 9 years, we had a total of 67 seminars.

Conclusion

As explained earlier, our children are the future and what we invest in them during childhood makes all the difference. We have many frontline activities in our movement, but for me teaching the next generation is the frontline and our priority both as parents and as a faith community. Let us do all we can to make sure we have the resources, the teachers and the facilities to give children the best possible start in life.

