

FFWPU UK: Matthew Huish In Our Series Of Sunday School Teacher Reflections

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We profess to be the Family Federation, and yet how many of our events are suitable for young children?

May I make a confession? In spite of my best efforts, I struggle to recall any of the lessons I was taught while attending Sunday School up to three decades ago. While this may be in part due to the unreliably low resolution of my memory, this may also be a normal experience for most of us: Who can precisely remember the fables, facts and figures delivered by teachers in the classrooms of our childhood? Most of us had little to no choice in the matter: Either we sat with our parents in the main service where we lost our minds to boredom, or we joined the children in the Sunday School. And that's if we were fortunate enough to have such a service provided.

I want to make the case, however, that much went into my heart and mind, more than I can account for.

I remember some of the elder members - the uncles and aunts, as we refer to them fondly - who regularly missed out on attending the main worship services in order to not only supervise but also educate the little children. I was taught to sing holy songs and colour in pictures depicting Bible stories by Rosemary H and Roswitha C. As a teenager, Mary F would host Sunday School in her own home each week. She established a Scouts-like initiative by which we could earn badges during each week for completing various tasks. The card badges would be pinned to a sash we each received which had been made by Mary. She invited Chris F to teach us the Korean language - a noble effort, even though virtually none of us became even remotely conversant - so that we could connect with the language of Father and Mother Moon. What I do remember from these experiences, however, is the emotion of safety and security, of being looked after by people who loved me. I might not have liked the taste of the squash provided, but at

least someone made the effort to provide refreshments to keep my thirst and hunger sated.

I'm sure that I'm neglecting to mention many others, whom I cannot recall in this moment, and if by chance someone is reading this and they remember a snotty-nosed boyhood version of myself under their care, I wish to express gratitude and commendation.

As an educator in my professional life, I have the opinion that I can only teach a student who wants to learn: You can take the proverbial horse to water, but you can't force it to drink. Institutionalised education faces the limitation that unless the student is inspired by the lesson, they come away with very little in the form of learning. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge another important element to Sunday School, the social aspect, as this is the arena in which many important friendships can be forged between blessed children and young people growing up in our community. Many of us who attended the same Sunday School share a bond which connects us, even if our paths have diverged in the interceding time. Many of these precious relationships have matured into lasting brotherhood and sisterhood, cultivating a love about which we rarely teach yet which is so helpful in buttressing a life of faith. If Sunday School teaches us nothing other than how to be good friends, then it is still enormously valuable.

Am I concluding, then, that the education provided in Sunday School is irrelevant, and that it plays second fiddle to the fostering of fellowship? On the contrary, I demand that the quality of not only Sunday School education be taken very seriously by our families but also all the events and activities we host.

We profess to be the Family Federation, and yet how many of our events are suitable for young children? I'm heart-broken to admit that I have heard it said that we should keep children away from our events so that the adults can have an uninterrupted experience: My heart revolts at this notion. I was deeply moved by the experience in Munich earlier this year at the Bloom Pentecost event, since the whole event was catered specifically for young families. My own children had a wonderful experience.

When I served as a pastor, I always wanted to speak to the children in the audience, for if I could speak in a way which made sense to them, it would make sense to everyone else in the room. I find that explaining things to children can be the most difficult thing, as you need to really understand what you're talking about in order to explain it simply and clearly. There is a tendency for people to talk waffle when attempting to offer spiritual guidance - we've all been on the receiving end of it, and perhaps we've even been guilty of dishing it out - and children are keenly perceptive to nonsense, perhaps more so than we'd like to admit. Their forgiving nature means that they don't hold a grudge against teachers who feed them spiritual twaddle, but if we want our children to grow in spirit and truth, we need to deliver education in a palatable and nutritious manner.

I teach Sunday School regularly, which is a privilege I thoroughly enjoy. I am convinced about the importance of making lessons entertaining for children, for it is only when the heart is captivated by a question or a story that the mind is truly open to learn. I also want my lessons to be down-to-earth and relatable, so it is incumbent on me to translate profoundly abstract ideas into the vernacular of childhood realities. It is tempting to skip the lessons that I think are tricky to teach, but I see it as an adventure to take a challenging topic and make it not only accessible but also practically implementable. I am also grateful that I work with a team of enthusiastic Sunday School teachers. We each have our own voice and personality, so it's wonderful that my own children can attend a Sunday School programme taught by a variety of teachers who rotate the teaching duties each week.

Three decades from now, you will still find me teaching Sunday School. By then, perhaps my children and even my grandchildren might be inspired to light a fire of spiritual curiosity in the hearts of the subsequent generations.