

SUNDAY SCHOOL—A NEW BEGINNING?

When I began my most recent ministry in Craiglockhart Parish Church in Edinburgh, one of the questions asked of me by the Vacancy Committee concerned what I intended to do with the ailing Sunday School. It is a question that might in all honesty be asked in many a congregation in Scotland and beyond. For much as we can be thankful for the devoted services rendered and the solid instruction imparted in years now past, there is clearly a need for reappraisal of the church's work and mission to include a reappraisal of the methods we use to impart Christian truth to children. And such a need extends far beyond the normal thoughts of syllabus and programme.

In the experience of most of us, a Sunday School has been that part of the church's work which has tried to impart to our children the basic knowledge upon which faith is nurtured. Most conveniently, it has occurred during the hour of Morning Worship, when the children, after an initial period in the church, have gone to other premises with their teachers for instruction appropriate to their own ages. Sunday School has used its own hymns, has had its own readings, teaches its own lessons, and uplifts its own offerings. Viewed in this way, it operates like a "Junior Church", which, in fact, is what it is called in some congregations. And then, after Sunday School, there is the supposed progression through the Bible Class, Youth Fellowship, First Communicant's Class, and hence into what is called adult, or full, membership of the church.

Many adults today have gone through that system, and forever grateful for what it gave to them. They still remember with affection and admiration those who taught them. But whatever good experiences from the past, and whatever corners of the land where that sort of system still works, the truth of the matter is that the system is now failing. It is failing to bring children through in numbers into the church as adults, as the figures today only too clearly show us. And somewhere between the thriving Sunday Schools of primary children through to the late teenage years of First Communicant's Classes, there is a shocking fall-off numerically. And no pretence can cover up that fact.

It seemed clear to me, even before coming to my present charge, that something is required to be done. And whatever it was, had to be more than tinkering with an ailing system. It had

to be a total examination of the ethos, theology, and practice of Sunday Schools. It had to involve a new look at what we were trying to achieve, and what presuppositions lay behind such efforts. To this end, I engaged on a long and detailed examination with the Kirk Session, which began with an attempt to re-examine what was meant by membership of the church. For it seemed to me that the goal to which Sunday Schools were directed was to produce church members. And for years, that goal has been left assumed rather than regularly examined and substantiated.

There are two criteria to bear in mind for church membership. Firstly, and this is quite straightforward within the Church of Scotland, there is that aspect of membership which has a largely legal connotation. By this, I mean the right of members to exercise certain functions within the church, the most obvious of which is the right to have a vote in the call of a new minister, the right to be elected to and to serve on the Congregational Board, and the right to be nominated for and to accept service on the Kirk Session. These must remain with those of adult years, and under no circumstances can be transferred to include children. A parallel in secular terms might be the exclusive right given to adults to exercise a council or parliamentary vote, or to serve in such bodies.

The other aspect, however, which we, as a Church, have noticeably failed to examine is what in the end leads us to double-thinking and double-talking. And that is the spiritual dimension of church membership. If we pursue the secular analogy just given, our children, though they have no say in who governs them, are nevertheless citizens of the country, just as much as adults are. And in the spiritual sense, there can be no doubt at all that baptism is the one, single, vital act which confers membership of the church. Any attentive hearer to the Sacrament of Baptism must be aware of the fact that the minister, during the preamble to administering the Sacrament, says that by it (baptism), the child is solemnly admitted to the membership of Christ's Church. Now, either we accept that to be true, or else it is a vain repetition of words. I cannot believe that any of us would concede the latter to be true, and therefore it seemed to be that it was high time to look again at what was being said. That the child *is* a church member — from infancy, a church member. And it was so, not by any merit or self-justifying act on his part, but a member of the church through the sheer grace of God.

The moment, therefore, when adults "joined the church", was not the time when we assented to the vows at the traditional

Service of Admission of First Communicants, but the day that God admitted us, through the grace of baptism. It is this single, and theologically incontestable fact, which became my own and my Kirk Session's basic instructor in our view of what we are looking for in our Sunday School. For we realised that we were not dealing with children who had no standing in the church, nor were we dealing with children who have a sort of junior status, nor are we to encourage any view that makes a Sunday School an alternative, and by implication, a lesser sort of church. Our baptised children are as fully members as we are, and it is this that we have failed to take account of, and against which the present segregative nature of Sunday Schools militates. Somehow or other, we have to develop a system here in Scotland, where our children are made to feel far more fully part of the church, which they certainly are, and not mere juniors, whose presence in adult company, especially in the church building, is a tiresome burden.

With that overriding theological commitment, we then went on to discuss the practical issues involved. For it still remains true that we have to educate these young church members within a Sunday School. No one can reasonably expect that parents will be willing to sit with children who are restless, through a sermon which is, of necessity, directed to the members of adult years. Attempts that had been made in our own parish to have a Family Service, followed by another morning service, a practice which prevails elsewhere too, though commendable, and though trying whether deliberately or unwittingly to face the problem, proved to be wholly unsatisfactory, because they were simply divisive within the congregation.

The resolution that we reached, and which we have now been practising for a year, was bold and risky, and yet it met with the full approval of Sunday School staff, Kirk Session, and members. Our children attend church with their families as is a normal practice, for the first part of our Morning Service. The substantial change is what happens next. If one considers for a moment what happens next in a service, it is that central part which delivers the Word of God to the adult congregation — the reading from Scripture, a hymn which ought to be related to the Word, the sermon, and then a hymn which ought to be appropriate to the sermon message. It is the moment of proclamation, and together lasts for about thirty minutes. It is for adults, and is unashamedly directed towards adult minds, and adult abilities in a suburban parish.

Sunday School takes place in that half hour only. There is no assembly of children, no opening devotions, no collection and no

closing service. These items of worship can belong to the whole church of young and older members, and the Sunday School's proper task is to do what is being done in church in that half hour, namely to impart the Word of God to child members, in a manner appropriate to their ages and abilities. But their opening service is what happens in church, and their response to the Word that they hear is shared as well. This means that for the final part of the service, they return to the main church building, and there share in the intercessions, they hear all the intimations, including their own announcements, they help to uplift and give to a common offering, they share in the baptism of infants by their presence, and hopefully in time, they will be permitted to share quite naturally in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

That is a true Family Service — one where we have found that the idea, when put into practice, has worked immeasurably better than we could have dared have hoped. The church is becoming a natural place for children to belong — it is becoming a place where they can enjoy worship, and where they are learning the virtues of silence as well. On the other side, the adult members have warmed to the experiment, and the teachers have discovered that shorn of all the trimmings of a sort of Junior Church, they have ample time to teach and to allow handicraft work to be done.

I myself meet with the staff every three months to revise procedures and to arrange timetables. We don't yet know what the results will be, especially as the most beneficial ones ought to happen in a long-term perspective. But we have realised that perhaps in the past we have been too concerned with putting knowledge into children, and far too little concerned about imparting attitudes. An attitude towards church where it is a good and normal place to be, an attitude that might make it easier for the teenager to stay in the pew for the middle section of worship, and find that there is a very easy progression into membership as an adult of the church. A place where they are seen, and where they would never think they ought not to be seen. Maybe it will work, or maybe not. But there is a gross national problem to deal with, and perhaps with some grace, this could be one answer to a solution, or even part of an answer. We don't know, but we believe God has led us into this, and the matter rests not only in our hands now, but supremely in His. And that alone gives us the impulse to go on. That in the end, is our chief reason for doing it.

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