The Reformed Church and the Sunday School: The General Synod's Adoption of an American Movement

SONJA M. STEWART

One day [in 1846] the distinguished Reformed Church pastor, Dr. George Bethune, was trolling for black bass among the beautiful Thousand Islands when he asked his oarsman, “Tommy, where do you go to church?” “No where,” said he, “no church to go to.” “But do none of these people go to church?” “No, we used to have Methodist preaching sometimes at the Bay, but they seem to have given us up of late years.”

This excited the Doctor's sympathy. He had it published in the district school and among the neighbors, that he would preach at the school-house the next Sabbath, and form a Sabbath school. It was a new thing, and quite a wonder. The people turned out largely. After the sermon to the adults, the Doctor gathered the children to the front seats, and held a Sabbath school, greatly interesting them with his Scripture stories and remarks. “Now,” said he, “my friends, we must have a Sunday school here. Who will superintend it?”

No one volunteered. He then cast his eyes around the audience in this small but crowded house. It rested, after a moment, on the intelligent and energetic countenance of a middle-aged lady. “Madam,” said the Doctor, “will you take charge of this school?”

The woman tried to excuse herself, but finally consented, and for the whole season managed the school with great success, although she made no profession of religion, and was the wife of a tavern-keeper, an irreverent man.

The Doctor soon after sent a ten-dollar library... and the next season sent a missionary, Rev. J. A. Davenport, who maintained preaching and Sabbath schools, and was supported for three years by funds, contributed by the Doctor and his personal friends.

This account of the founding of the Reformed Church of the Thousand Islands is an apt and archetypical illustration of that remarkable and enduring institution, the American Sunday school. “The big little school,” as a recent historian calls it, was something of a stepchild in the Reformed Church's response to Christ's injunction “Feed my lambs.” It is a story of church persons trying to maintain the Continental heritage of discipling through catechetical instruction, as the parents of the Synod of Dort prescribed, while that American phenomenon, the American Sunday school, was superimposed on their lives. In nearly two centuries of relating to the Sunday school, the Reformed Church could neither live comfortably with the Sunday school movement, nor live without it.

The Sunday school in the Reformed Church was a movement of the laity, who worked interdenominationally not only to relieve the suffering of the poor, but to
inculcate religious and moral values for the welfare of this nation. Theodore Frelinghuysen, Reformed Church elder and United States Senator from New Jersey, spoke a common viewpoint when he said "that Sunday-schools, by laying the foundation of public and private integrity and intelligence, provide the best preservative of our rights and liberties, and the best guarantee for the peace and good order of society; and in this view they deserve the special patronage of the statesman and patriot."2

The Sunday schools were an essential component of the Reformed Church's westward expansion in the nineteenth century. Sunday schools served as an avant-garde, evangelistic agency to gather a nucleus of people who would later become a congregation. The Board of Domestic Missions working in the West reported that "religious influence is more effectually brought to bear upon the people through the Sunday school than any other means."3

This article, written during the bicentennial year of the Sunday school movement, attempts to survey the uneasy and ambivalent relationship between the Sunday school and the Reformed Church. For the most part, I have limited my research and the subsequent story to those official actions initiated and sustained by the General Synod. A richer and more definitive analysis of religious education in the Reformed Church has yet to be written. Hopefully, this preliminary survey will generate interest in a fascinating and significant aspect of our American religious heritage.

The origins of the Sunday school lie in eighteenth century England. Historians have credited the founding of this movement, two hundred years ago, to Robert Raikes, a printer and editor in Gloucester.4 Disturbed by the wretched conditions and behavior of slum-born boys turned loose on Sundays from their pin factory jobs, Raikes employed some women of their neighborhood to teach the ragged children reading, religion, and right behavior. Raikes' vision and efforts soon caught the attention of a number of philanthropists who were already involved in a variety of social reform movements in England. These persons believed that individuals must witness their salvation by engaging in acts of benevolence. This "Benevolent Empire," as it came to be called, soon stretched to America, especially to Eastern seaport cities.

Apparently, the earliest efforts of Reformed Church persons to establish the Sunday school movement in America occurred in 1816 in New York City. They joined with benevolent persons from other denominations to form both the Female Society for the Promotion of Sabbath Schools and the New York Sunday School Union Society. It happened when Joanna Bethune, educator, Scotch Presbyterian and mother of our fisherman, Rev. George Bethune, called a meeting of women from various denominations in New York City and organized the Female Society for the Promotion of Sabbath schools. Soon after, her husband Divie Bethune, was instrumental in persuading some men to establish the New York Sunday School Society. In three months the Female Society reported the establishment of 16 Sunday schools for women and girls, 200 teachers, and 2200 scholars. They had also a Sunday school depository to supply the books. The Bethunes helped in the formation of the Sunday School Adult School Union in Philadelphia in 1817. By 1824 the various Sunday school societies from New York and Philadelphia had merged to form the American Sunday School Union.
In 1826, two years after the formation of the American Sunday School Union, the General Synod of the Reformed Church gave official recognition to the Sunday school. In his address on the state of the church, Jacob Schoonmaker recommended that all ministers and congregations organize Sabbath schools, without delay, where such had not been organized, and give them their most cordial cooperation. He must have warmed the heart of every Sunday school advocate when he attested to the power of that promising reform movement. Sunday schools, he announced, were accomplishing what no other ecclesiastical agency had done.

When prayer meetings, and the preaching of the word, made no impression, the formation of one single Sabbath school, has excited the deepest interest of both old and young, while the whole moral face of that region has undergone a visible and glorious change; the Sabbath is no more so awfully profaned; the sanctuary of God is attended by those who rarely or never tread the courts of the Lord's house; the precious word of God is committed in vast portions, while the poor have the gospel preached. By this means, hundreds and thousands of children are receiving, every Sabbath, a regular course of religious instruction, and growing up for usefulness in the church and world. (MGS, 1826, 35).

In 1828 a group of clergy and lay persons of the Reformed Church met in New York and formed the Sabbath School Union of the Reformed Dutch Church. While governmentally independent of the General Synod, this Union sought to bring the Sunday schools of the Reformed Church under the direct care of the pastors and consistories. Specifically the Union sought to instruct children in the Bible as exhibited in the standards of the church and the Westminster Catechism. They promoted the use of the catechism that children might be taught right doctrine by teachers qualified to teach. When General Synod met it requested that Sabbath schools be taken under the Synod's ecclesiastical care, arguing that the responsibility for the instruction of children ought to rest with the church, not a voluntary union. This request was opposed by a number of Sunday school people, however, and the Synod judged it inexpedient to legislate on the matter.

In 1830, still not ready to take the Sunday schools under synodical supervision, Synod formulated a policy that is binding to this day. It declared that Sunday schools be placed under the care and supervision of local pastors and consistories. Stating that the schools would affect the style and character of the congregation, Synod further recommended that the catechism and standards of the church be introduced into the Sunday schools taking care not to interfere with or take the place of the regular weekly catechetical instruction by the pastor.

During the 1830's the influence of the national Sunday school movement permeated the Reformed Church. General Synod (along with the United States Congress!) endorsed The American Sunday School Union's resolution to establish Sunday schools "in every destitute place throughout the Valley of the Mississippi (the area west of the Alleghenys to the Rockies and Michigan to Louisiana). "The Mississippi Valley Campaign" had political as well as religious motivation. Andrew Yates' report to Synod in 1835 reiterated the conviction of the American Sunday School Union that the Sunday school would create a godly people and responsible citizens. The Sunday
school, said Yates, "is first in importance after the ministry of the Word in the formation of the intellectual and religious character and in the welfare and stability of society." Elsewhere Frelinghuysen, commemorating the eleventh anniversary of the American Sunday School Union, said the Sunday school "makes a sacred deposit of the soundest rules of life, of public duty, of private conduct; rules which form the faithful friend, the upright citizen, the godly man; rules that will... train up a generation that will defend the cause of truth and civil liberty."

While the Synod of 1835 heard of the remarkable influence of the Sunday school, it also heard Yates present what would become an ever common complaint, namely, that Sunday schools were not forming habits of "intellectual and devout attention to the word of God." Neither were there enough competent teachers who would volunteer to teach in the churches. Synod was reminded again that the Constitution of the Reformed Church required the proper instruction of the young. (According to the Synod of Dort, three modes of instruction are required: in the homes by the parents; in the schools by the schoolmasters; and in the churches by the ministers and elders.) No doubt it was becoming evident to many that the Sunday schools were filling the responsibility of the schoolmaster.

Finally, in 1839, eleven years after the first request, Synod took the Sunday schools under its care and proceeded to elect a Board of Managers for its Sabbath School Union. The Board consisted of twenty-four persons whose "power was advisory and exercised in concert with pastors and consistories." It was also auxiliary to the American Sunday School Union and submitted its reports and extra Sunday school money to them. Synod requested that all pastors ask their Sunday schools to place themselves under the Synod's board that the "purity and uniformity of Sabbath School instruction may be successfully maintained throughout all our churches" (MGS, 1839, p. 260).

The response of Reformed Church Sunday schools to the Board was minimal. For fifteen years the board sought to bring them under its influence. Apparently, they remained associated with the American Sunday School Union and by midcentury this embarrassing gulf was intolerable. In 1854, of the 434 Sunday schools in the denomination only 167 were related to the Synod's board and only eight submitted their annual reports. Rather than dissolve its own board, the Synod terminated its relationship with the American Sunday School Union. This action, however, brought only five more Sunday schools under its care and only twenty-five schools submitted Sunday school statistics.

Since 1840 the board supplied catechisms, "Bible Questions," hymnbooks, and other materials for the schools. In 1856 the board reorganized, giving the Board of Publication the responsibility for distributing all Sunday school materials. The Board of the Sabbath School Union then concentrated on an extensive mission program to establish Sunday schools in "destitute neighborhoods" both in New York City and the West. These mission Sunday schools were to form a community or nucleus to which the Board of Domestic Missions could go to establish mission churches. Many of the midwestern Reformed Churches started first as Sunday schools. In some of these
schools the Dutch folk first learned to read English using the Sunday school libraries furnished to them by the missionary offerings of eastern Sunday schools.

In 1858 the board appointed its first corresponding secretary, Robert B. Campfield, who had worked for the American Sunday School Union for twenty-five years. During the chaotic Civil War years Campfield visited the churches, raising money for the establishment of mission Sunday schools. This brought almost one hundred additional Sunday schools under the board. Relationships between Sunday schools and Synod had never been better. Unfortunately, by 1862 the board found itself with insufficient funds to continue its work and Synod relegated the Sunday school work which related to missions to the Board of Domestic Missions and that which related to Sunday school materials to the Board of Publications. After twenty-three years of service, the General Synod’s Board of the Sabbath School Union was unceremoniously dissolved. Not until 1885 would Synod have another committee on Sunday schools and it would be 1915 before another person was appointed to full-time work in Christian education.

For the next two decades the Reformed Church continued to establish mission Sunday schools and supply Sunday school materials. Local Sunday schools participated in state and national Sunday school conventions and teacher training institutes. The first interdenominational New York Sunday School Institute, for the training of teachers, was held at the Collegiate Reformed Dutch Church in 1867. In 1872 Reformed Church persons joined with the rest of the nation in endorsing the International Uniform Lessons. Two years later the Board of Publication printed expositions of the Uniform Lessons in the denominational periodical, the Sower and Gospel Field.

During the 1880’s and 1890’s Synod initiated a new organizational procedure for denominational Sunday school work which required the cooperation of Synod, classes, and congregations. Apparently, tension existed over at least two issues. One was the neglect or refusal of congregations to submit Sunday school statistics and the other was about the extent of jurisdiction of consistories over Sunday schools. Synod’s position concerning the issue of jurisdiction was highlighted in the president’s address to Synod in 1882. Concerning the Sunday school he stated, “We deem it essential that its organic union with the church be maintained and strengthened that it may not drift away as a separate and independent institution, but receive its vitality and direction from the Pastor, Elders, and members of the Church” (MGS, 1882, p. 70).

In 1885 Synod appointed a Standing Committee on Sunday schools and Catechetical Instruction and instructed the classes to do likewise. One function of these committees was to obtain the long sought after statistical information from the Sunday schools. Resistance was voiced from both congregations and classes but, after four years of persistence, Synod received reports from every classis in 1889. Later the classical committees were instructed to “arrange for classical Sunday-school conventions; to plant Sunday-schools in neglected neighborhoods and to exercise a fostering supervision over the Sunday school work of the Classes, with special reference to its denominational bearings” (MGS, 1891, p. 310).
To the best of my information, this was the first time Synod had specifically directed the classes to implement its directives for Sunday school work. Apparently, the strategy was effective, for in 1900 the Synod’s Committee on Sunday Schools reported that as a result of the classical oversight “a closer union has been established between the churches and the schools, and consistories have been made to realize that the Sunday school is under their fostering care” (MGS, 1900, p. 741).

At the turn of the century the Reformed Church assessed its Sunday school and catechetical work and developed a focus for mission in the twentieth century. In 1901 a major paper was distributed to all the ministers requesting that they critically examine their involvement in catechetical instruction and urging them to carry out the constitutional requirements for personally instructing their youth in Christian doctrine (MGS, 1901, p. 1090).

Another report asked the churches to enhance the work already being done in the Sunday schools by improving classroom facilities and either replacing or supplementing uniform lessons with graded lessons. By 1904 a committee charged with the responsibility of developing “a plan for raising the standards and improving the method of Sunday-school work” prepared a document entitled “Principles, Plans, and Curriculum of a Graded Sunday School.” This paper presented a comprehensive theory of religious education and set guidelines for Sunday school instruction for the next decade (MGS, 1904, pp. 697-709).

Two years later some startling information about Sunday schools became available. Among several findings was that sixty percent of Sunday school scholars did not become members or supporters of the church. Furthermore, many of the nation’s colleges and universities were not providing moral and religious education for their students. Synod believed that the time had come for a “comprehensive program of the moral and religious nurture of the young and of some scheme of such education which shall unify the many agencies at work among them” (MGS, 1907, p. 771). Synod elected a Commission on Religious Education to develop a plan for unifying the various educational programs and societies in the Reformed Church and to design ways for improving religious instruction. Through the persistence of this commission an educational secretary was hired in 1915. All the denomination’s educational societies were placed under the Board of Publication which was reorganized and renamed The Board of Publication and Bible School Work.

After World War I, a number of educational agencies related to the Sunday school appeared including Daily Vacation Bible School and weekday religious education. Several congregations had Directors of Religious Education and congregations were urged to appoint Councils of Religious Education to supervise their numerous educational programs. The theological seminaries also were providing instruction in pedagogy.

In 1935 a further consolidation occurred when Synod placed all religious education programs under the Board of Education where Sunday school work remained until 1968. From a staff of one in 1935 the Board of Education expanded to six programmatic divisions and nine staff persons by 1967.
The year 1955 marked not only the 175th anniversary of the Sunday school movement but the year the board began developing the Covenant Life Curriculum with the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The 1950's and 1960's marked a time for curricular development in mainline denominations with each attempting to produce materials that were educationally, and especially theologically, sound. The Board of Education told the Synod of 1959 that the Covenant Life Curriculum was "an excellent statement on the meaning of Christian education for the Reformed Church with its doctrine of the covenant. A curriculum based on these foundations and principles would be a major step forward in the defense and propagation of the Christian faith as understood by those of the Reformed persuasion" (MGS, 1959, p. 75).

In 1968 another change occurred in the management of the Sunday school when the denomination reorganized. The work of the Board of Education was placed in the Division of Church Life and Mission under the General Program Council. In 1968 the last impressive report of the Board of Education announced that "The Sunday school is in trouble today. For a century it has been the chief instructional arm of the church," the report read, "but it can no longer bear this responsibility alone" (Bd. of Ed., 1968, p. 3). Perhaps this is the case. Reports to Synod no longer use traditional ways of thinking about the Sunday school. In fact, I have yet to find the term "Sunday school" used in the General Program Council reports to Synod. This does not mean, of course, that Sunday schools are no longer a part of Reformed Church education, but rather they are embodied in the broader term Christian education. Whatever the term and whatever the program it appears that the policy of the Reformed Church in regard to religious instruction in the churches remains much as it was in 1839 when Synod first took Sunday schools under its care and supervision. In 1979 the report adopted by Synod stated: "The General Program Council continues to work with the assumption that the basic focus for decision-making and planning for Christian education is with the congregation. The General Program Council assists the congregation in various ways" (MGS, 1979, p. 342). Is this not a twentieth century way of saying, "The powers of the Board over the several schools of the Union, shall be advisory simply, and exercised in concert with the pastors and consistories"? (MGS, 1839, p. 261).

We watch now for the direction Sunday schools will take under the new structure of the General Program Council.

It is insufficient and only partial to reconstruct a history of the Reformed Church Sunday schools merely through the minutes of General Synod. But is is a place to begin. From that perspective, then, the following conclusions suggest themselves.

1. The most measurable contribution of the Sunday school to the Reformed Church may be in the area of missions. The Sunday school served as an evangelistic agent paving the way through those destitute and isolated places for the subsequent establishment of Reformed churches. Most of these mission Sunday schools were financed by the gifts or "missionary offerings" of other established Sunday schools.
2. The initiative for Sunday schools in the Reformed Church came from the laity who in turn looked to para-ecclesiastical sources for direction. Reformed Church Sunday schools seemed to have a stronger allegiance to the American Sunday School Union than to the General Synod’s boards. In other words, the laity looked to each other for direction (the ASSU’s board were all lay persons) rather than to professionals, including clergy.

3. The Sunday school movement was assimilated into the Reformed Church structure without a significant threat to Reformed Church identity. This was due in part to the sustained teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism but may also be due to a strategy that was expressed in 1900 when the denomination took the young peoples’ societies under its care. The report reads:

   In this plan we have avoided undue denominationalism by recognizing and recommending to the care of the church the present Young People’s organizations which we are glad to find are interdenominational in character. On the other hand we have conserved their great and growing power for running the machinery of our own denomination. (MGS, 1900, p. 750).

4. Historically, Synod’s policy in relation to its role in the Sunday schools has been to enable local church mission rather than unilaterally prescribing and monitoring its direction, that is, as long as the churches stay within the guidelines of Synod’s action of 1830. This policy, apparently still binding, states that the Sunday schools are to be under the oversight and care of the pastor and consistory; that the standard catechism of the church be used in the schools, “provided such use of the Catechism in Sabbath Schools be not permitted to interfere with, or take the place of, the regular weekly catechetical instruction by the pastor”; and that expositions of the Catechism are to be prepared for the benefit of Sabbath schools (MGS, 1830, p. 279). This policy, like the Sunday school in church life, is remarkable in its durability.

FOOTNOTES

2 Talbot W. Chambers, Memoir of The Life and Character of the Late Honorable Theodore Frelinghuysen, New York: 1863, p. 238.
3 Report of Board of Domestic Missions 1868, p. 11.
5 Chambers, p. 238.