The Sunday School and Church Education

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The first Sunday Schools, two hundred years ago, were quite separate from the church. Although there is indication that Robert Raikes wanted the clergy to adopt the movement and make it an integral, if not official, part of the church, there was much opposition. Some Christians thought that this school, held as it was on Sunday, was a desecration of the Sabbath, while others of the privileged classes believed that educating those working children would cause them to become dissatisfied with their station in life, ultimately causing new social problems, perhaps worse than those already existing.

In 1799, Sarah Van Doren was instrumental in the opening of a Sunday School in the First Reformed Church of New Brunswick, New Jersey. Fifty years later Sunday Schools existed in almost every Reformed Church congregation. In 1828, the Sabbath School Union of the Reformed Dutch Church was organized but official recognition by the General Synod was denied until 1839. Synod stated several guidelines among which it urged the use of church catechisms "...provided such use of catechisms in Sabbath schools be not permitted to interfere with, or take the place of, the regular weekly catechetical instruction by the pastor."1 Perhaps the fact that Sunday Schools were somewhat outside the church and largely conducted by laypersons may have fostered the attitude still in evidence today that Christian education is a secondary and possibly unimportant element in the life of the church.

Although the Sunday School was begun in England to educate the illiterate children of primarily non-Christian parents, it soon became a school for children of both church families and families outside the church. Its purpose was two-fold: evangelistic and educational. The following description of a Sunday School in 1903 reveals a form of session which is still evident in some Sunday Schools in the 1980's. "In a typical session there was first an opening period of worship, with emphasis upon singing. The children then divided into classes for a twenty- to twenty-five-minute lesson period. This was followed by a closing period, in which the superintendent added some remarks, papers were distributed, and library books were given out....It helps us to realize how early an independent Sunday School tradition developed and how static it has been. Generation after generation of leaders have felt duty-bound to carry on the tradition as it was originally established, and some have regarded any deviation from it as the death of the Sunday School."2

Those who undertake reform of educational practices in a congregation become very aware of the rigidity of existing forms. This rigidity perhaps betrays an insecurity which is the consequence of the isolation of the church school and Christian education from its context in the total life of the church. The church as a whole has failed to accept education as one of its primary functions. Members who demand that their children have the benefit of every advance in educational theory, technique, literature,
and equipment in community schools, allow the church school to remain much as it has been in past generations. They have not realized the importance of a thorough Christian training for their children. Sometimes the consistory makes provision for the financing of the church school but often the Sunday School pays all its own expenses and makes contributions to the church program besides. The staff of the school is expected to assume full responsibility for the planning, programming and financing of the Sunday School and to trouble the congregation's members as little as possible. There is often the tradition that educational materials must be inexpensive. Comparison of the Christian educational materials with those of secular education may lead to the conclusion that Christian education is not nearly as important as secular education.

The church teaches. Why does the church teach? Since Christ's command to his church recorded in Matthew 28:19, 20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...," the church has seen its task as preaching and teaching. The church proclaims the good news of the redemption of the world by God in Jesus Christ. The new believers become part of the fellowship of the church. They are drawn into an intimate company of those who together confess the faith they have received. They realize that the living presence of Christ is with them to sustain and direct them. They are a part of the Body of Christ. "No person is automatically a Christian. Each is brought into Christian knowledge either through having been born into a Christian family that nurtures his spiritual growth or through conversion as an adult. In either case, his growth as a Christian is influenced by the surroundings and the atmosphere into which he is drawn by his association with the witnessing, worshiping community of the church."

Every organized group in society provides instruction for its members so that they may understand its purpose and develop skills to help in fulfilling the task of the group. The church also must teach its faith, doctrine, and practices until they are consciously understood and until they are related to the demands of Christ on the whole of life. One's whole life must be turned in faith toward Christ.

The goal of Christian education has been stated in many different ways often reflecting a particular philosophy of education and/or a theological stance. Some recurring phrases are: to teach persons Jesus' way of life and lead them to accept him as their personal Savior; to enable persons to understand the biblical message and its meaning for today; to enable persons to understand the heritage and faith of the Christian community and to experience it in its present reality; to teach persons Christian codes of conduct and instruct them in the morally right way to live; to enable persons to become increasingly committed to, equipped for, and experienced in carrying out God's mission.

Most parents and church members look at the Sunday School as the organization of the church which should meet these goals. The teachers in the classroom are seen as the prime means of accomplishing these goals. If frustration, despair, and even failure becomes evident in a Sunday School, new curriculum may be sought, teacher training emphasized, better buildings and equipment provided.
Theological study. In the last twenty years, leading church educators are suggesting that rather than seeking quick solutions to problems in the area of Christian education some basic theological studies of the total mission and ministry of the church should be undertaken by the congregation. Rachel Henderlite writes: "The crisis of education in the main-line Protestant churches calls for stringent self-examination: for asking the most basic questions about the church’s nature and mission, for assessing the congregation’s current program and its present organizational patterns in the light of that nature and mission." She suggests such questions for study as: "What is distinctive about the Christian church? What peculiar beliefs and practices give us our reason for being? What is distinctive about this congregation? What do we believe about God? What do we understand as our history and destiny? To what end has God called us? Does this congregation have responsibility for the community in which God has placed us?" John H. Westerhoff, III, encourages considering the theological issues of the nature of God, revelation, and authority; the nature of persons, conversion, and nurture; the nature of the church, discipleship, and individual-social life. Randolph Crump Miller writes, "Unless the local congregation becomes aware of what it means to be the Church, we cannot expect genuine Christian nurture to take place. . . . The Church has a total ministry, which includes its educational responsibility; the Church has a body of belief to be communicated; the Church has a relationship to the world; the Church must come alive in the local congregation, for we find the church of Christ through out membership in a Church."

Only when the congregation is clear about its understanding of the church’s nature and mission should question about the educational program be addressed. Henderlite poses such questions as: "How can we equip our people for becoming responsible members of this congregation of called people? How is faith elicited in another? What facts of our heritage and culture do these people need in order to understand and accept their own identity as ‘children of the covenant’? What skills do they need to become and continue to be responsible, committed disciples of Christ in a world of crisis and revolution?"

It seems, however, that seldom does a congregation undertake self-examination unless concern heightens about such problems as young people dropping out of the church, declining Sunday School attendance, difficulty in enlisting teachers and church leaders, or general apathy among church members. It is then that the administrators of the Sunday School or the leaders of the youth or the officers of the organizations begin to look for solutions. Often the predicament appears so crucial that those who are in responsible positions quickly turn to an approach another congregation has found successful or they return to practices which were found useful in the past. The urgency of the situation appears to preclude a careful examination and long-range planning.

Wholistic approach. However, more and more, congregations are challenged by their denominational structures, consistories, or pastors to undertake a study of their church from a wholistic approach. Such an approach recognizes the integrated nature of congregational life, goals, and leadership. There is an emphasis on a purposive,
future-focused, goal-oriented approach to growth and change in individuals and organizations in contrast to focusing on the problem-oriented past. Robert C. Worley writes in *Dry Bones Breathe*: “But how can a congregation get hold of itself—its purpose and directions, the quality of its own life, and its relations to the community around it? What is it that leaders and clergy need to activate, mobilize, and transform a congregation to enable dry bones to breathe, so that Christian faith is more profoundly expressed in congregational life? One thing leaders need is a mandate from the congregation to do just this. They also need a perspective on the congregation, and tools which will enable them to activate their congregation so that clear purposes are formulated and persons are identified who can work with leaders to accomplish these purposes.”9 Worley's book suggests ways of activating members and specific methods and tools to achieve that.

Staff in the Reformed Church Regional Centers are able to provide resources for congregations in the task of re-examining purposes, setting goals, diagnosing, planning, and evaluating. Although often this process initially may be undertaken for a particular area of the church's life, such as the Christian education program, it often becomes evident that the church is indeed one body and that each part of that body is closely related to the other parts. As the human body is a biological system, so it is helpful to see the congregation as a system where there should be interdependence, harmony, integrity, and coordination of all the parts so that the mission of the church is effectively fulfilled.

At first thought it would seem that there is little connection between the stewardship committee and the worship committee or the evangelism committee and Christian education committee. But as a congregation reassesses its purpose and sees that its task is to lead persons into encounter with God so that they may respond to him with their whole hearts and lives, it may become evident that any and all activities within the congregation's life contribute to the members' growth in Christ. “Every organization, every activity, every worship service, and every informal meeting is part of the impact of the Christian community on its members and on others who come under its influence.”10

Obviously, except for very small congregations, it would be too cumbersome and time-consuming to gather all leaders to plan and carry out all the aspects of the congregation's life, working as a committee of the whole. But a wholistic approach involving not only leaders but the congregation's membership can be used. It is extremely helpful to obtain the services of a consultant from outside the local congregation who will bring skills and resources as well as provide an accountability factor. But once the congregation has experienced planning, carrying out and evaluating together, local leaders can guide the ongoing process.

*Planning a task force.* For such a study, it is helpful to have planning guides or tools. Probably in each program area of church life there are guidelines available for assisting groups in discovering needs, setting goals, making plans and evaluating what takes place. Since the processes are similar, such a guide could be redesigned to encompass all the areas of church life. Christian Education: Shared Approaches,
which is a project of Joint Educational Development, has prepared three planning guides. The one entitled *Creating the Congregation's Educational Ministry* is particularly adaptable to involving the whole church in planning. Whichever tool is used, a group of ten to fifteen persons should be recruited, each member of that group making a commitment to be involved in study and planning over an extended period of time—perhaps up to one year. This "task force" would include some members of the consistory, especially the chairpersons of the councils/committees, leaders of organizations, an administrator of the church school, and the minister. It is advisable to have all age groups represented—youth, young adults, etc.

At the outset there should be ample opportunity for the members of this task force to begin building a working team. Each person would identify him or herself as a person and also as a representative of a particular segment or organization of the church. Then an overview of the planning process which the group is beginning might be presented. It is essential that the task of the group be clearly defined and that the willingness expressed by each person as s/he accepted appointment to the group be reaffirmed. Everyone participating in a Bible study centered on the church being the Body of Christ would highlight the fact that this task force working as a team on a common task is one way of experiencing the Body of Christ. In one of the first sessions the group might begin to wrestle with questions such as those suggested above, i.e., the nature of the church, the meaning of discipleship, how nurture takes place and the congregation's responsibility to the community. If the congregation has a written statement of purpose, that purpose should be examined in light of the Bible study and theological assumptions of this group. If there is no written statement of purpose of the congregation, one might be developed.

Early in the planning process the entire congregation should be made aware that this task group is meeting and what they are intending to do. This information should be passed on in as many ways as available—at group meetings, through regular printed communication channels and person-to-person. The minister might be asked to involve the worshipping community in a study of the nature of the church. As the task force works—studying the Scriptures, considering the needs of persons and the needs of the community, reflecting on the congregation's situation—input from all persons involved in the life of the congregation should be actively sought.

After overarching purposes and goals are established, more specific objectives of the various aspects of church life should be developed within the framework of the established committees, councils, and organizations. These would be shared within the task force so that avenues of cooperation could be established as well as areas of duplication identified. Denominational resources should be studied, many of which are outlined in the yearly RCA *Plan Calendar* or are included in the *General Mailing*. Perhaps one or two themes for the coming year would emerge. A special emphasis such as family life might be planned for a particular season of the year; an aspect of outreach or stewardship might be developed throughout the church in a coordinated way. Programming plans, calendar dates, and the planned use of resources would be charted.
As the task force members survey the overall plans, it may be evident that a particular age group is overlooked, that certain leaders will be too heavily involved, that financial resources need to be redistributed, that facilities need to be used more efficiently, or that certain aspects of programming must be revised. As the plans begin to be carried out, there should be periodic meetings of the task force. At these times, each member would report the activities of the group he or she represents and avenues of continuing coordination in the total church's life would be considered. A date should be set near the end of the planned year for extensive review and evaluation of the entire planning process.

**Faith communication.** What does this wholistic approach to planning in the church have to do with the Sunday School and Christian education? John Westerhoff says of those who in the 60's spoke out for a broader understanding of Christian education, "They boldly attempted to make the case that effective programs of Christian education needed to be planned in the light of the total mission and ministry of the church. They acknowledged that the church teaches most significantly through nurture in a worshiping, witnessing community of faith, and they clearly explained that explicit instruction in the church schools was only a small part of Christian education. Nevertheless, even they placed special emphasis on the church school and on instruction; few heard their call for a broader perspective."

Now in the 80's it may be more evident that to leave instructing and nurturing almost completely to the Sunday School is to place too heavy a responsibility on the teacher-classroom model of transmitting the faith. "Faith is communicated by a community of believers and the meaning of faith is developed by its members out of their history, by their interaction with each other, and in relation to the events that take place in their lives."

This "community of believers" through which the faith is communicated must be unique in the quality of its relationships. The New Testament observers of the early church said, "behold, how these Christians love one another." As the members of the Body of Christ relate to each other in love there is openness, trust and honesty as well as acceptance, caring, support, and affirmation. Without a climate such as that, growth in Christian faith is inhibited. Every member of the Body has been given gifts by God enabling contributions toward the growth of each other and ministering to each other. In close relationships we not only see how others live out their commitment to God and his word, but we feel a sense of belonging so that we are motivated to share in the commitment of the community.

Adult Christians, when asked what or who was the primary source of nurturing for them in their church life, often speak of a particular teacher in the Sunday School. It was through the relationship built between teacher and pupil that the Christian faith became real in the life of the learner. It was the "love relationship" which taught more than the curriculum. The learner had opportunities to come to know that teacher in a close, personal way. The teacher, not only through words but by example, became a model for those growing in the faith.

Lawrence O. Richards writes, "In the social sciences studies of identification and modeling have focused on relationships between adults and children. Yet studies have
pointed out also that for adults as well, social anchors to personality and behavior are important. For all Christians, children and adults, who are learning to live in the culture of Christ's Body and who are developing new, Christian personalities as they move toward his likeness, the existence of models and a close relational identification with them is important. It also is important that the models be provided not only by the individual, but also by the Christian community itself. The existence of multiple models of faith's life is essential." He then describes factors in the educational situation which enhance the teaching/learning of the Christian life.

"1. There needs to be frequent, long-term contact with the model(s).
2. There needs to be a warm, loving relationship with the model(s).
3. There needs to be exposure to the inner states of the model(s).
4. The model(s) need to be observed in a variety of life settings and situations.
5. The model(s) need to exhibit consistency and clarity in behavior, values, etc.
6. There needs to be a correspondence between the behavior of the model(s) and the beliefs (ideal standards) of the community.
7. There needs to be explanation of life style of the model(s) conceptually, with instruction accompanying shared experiences."

These factors point out that there needs to be a variety of life settings and activities in the congregation with "multiple models" participating. The relationships depend on personal, long-term situations where instruction, explanation, and sharing are all consciously interrelated.

Settings. Recognizing that the total life of the church educates individuals and the fellowship as a whole, most congregations could quickly list both formal and informal settings where there are potential opportunities for positive nurturing. Some formal settings are: worship services, Sunday church school, youth groups, women's and men's organizations, church membership classes, baptism seminars with new parents, weekday church school (released time), expanded or extended sessions for children in connection with the congregational worship service, catechism classes, youth clubs, Vacation Bible School, weekday church nursery school, Bible study groups, prayer services and groups, parents groups, family clusters, camps, conferences, retreats, leadership training workshops, growth and action groups.

The list can continue with mention of settings where the educational intent is not stated as being primary but where nurturing certainly takes place in the Body: family workshops centering on points of the Christian Year, intergenerational events, the choirs of the church (especially if there is intentional study such as of hymn origins and the place of music in worship), and fellowship groups for various age groups. Then there are those informal times of relating where the christian life-style is also modeled—the coffee time after the church service, work days at the church, family Christmas caroling at the homes of shut-ins, church picnics, congregational fellowship suppers, recreational church teams, prayer chains, phone calls expressing interest and concern, greetings at the church door and on Main Street—the list could go on and on.

There are some other settings where educational opportunities are often missed. Church libraries and those who serve there can encourage lifelong interest in Christian
literature and study. The consistory, stewardship, evangelism, worship and education committees, Sunday church school staff, executive groups of organizations—all could set aside the first twenty minutes of their meetings as a time not only to build a spirit of community but also to engage in biblical study. This study would relate to the area of their responsibility in order that their decisions and plans regarding the action of the church would be based on a firm theological foundation.

Worship. Many of the above nurturing settings are in fact rather small groupings based on age, interest, task, or function. It is the congregational worship services which bring the entire church family together. They are the center of the church’s life. “The gathering of believers to express their belief through prayer, song, reading and explanation of Scripture, to confess their sin, and to celebrate the sacraments is the very essence of the Christian faith. In these acts of worship we express our commitment to God... To see a person you know kneel in prayer is to have his testimony that God is, that God is available for guidance and strength, and that the believer recognizes the contingencies and limitations of his life in the total scheme of things. Worship springs from levels of our being deeper than our reason. It is motivated by sentiment more powerful than our will. That is why worship communicates; it is the whole person demonstrating what faith is.”

Some of this is communicated to even a small child and, as that child grows in understanding of the elements of worship and is provided with many opportunities for active participation in worship, the church as the significant community of faith becomes a personal reality.

An extremely useful resource for Reformed Church congregations is the Heritage and Hope Series. Focus Two on RCA worship has lesson plans for seven sessions to be used in such settings as church school classes, catechism classes, or study groups. Based on the sourcebook, A People at Worship, by George Crumley, Jr., the learners focus attention on the Word of God—written, spoken, and enacted—on the physical setting of worship, on prayer, the order of worship, music, worship preparation aids, and the action on the part of the worshiper following worship. The plans, written in accordance with the educational abilities of the learners, kindergarten through adult, give opportunity for better understanding and therefore richer participation in the worshipping community. Other materials in the Focus Two Pak on Worship are four intergenerational events, a congregational life resource and seven family worship experiences.

The family. “The family is a part of the church. When Christians leave the house of worship, they do not leave the church. If the church has become a reality to them as a fellowship of believers, that fellowship will be remembered every day of their lives, whether they are in contact with their fellow Christians or mingling with others who are not within that fellowship. Just as the first Christians, according to Acts 2:46, met in homes for prayer and the breaking of bread, so the fellowship extends its influence into the homes of church members today... Nothing in the world can compare with the influence of the Christian home in the fashioning of Christian character.”

In a congregation where overall program planning takes place, where a common study is shared by all age group classes, where a concerted effort is made to highlight a special
emphasis throughout the church program, where all members participate in the worship service, there is opportunity for rich sharing among all the family members in the home.

*Adult education.* Particular attention should be given to the continual nurturing of adults. Parents are adults who first serve as Christian models for the children in the home and family. It is adults who are the teachers and leaders in the church and the community. Persons stand in need of Christian nurture throughout their whole lives. Since every believer has a gift for some ministry and since the layperson is no less a part of the ministry of the church than the pastor, adults must be given the opportunity for study and the encouragement to minister as far as their abilities and their time permit. Adult education must include both nurture in the faith and equipping for ministry and mission. Nurture in the faith requires a program of study for adults which "makes each congregation a kind of theological seminary, to the extent that people are taking the Faith seriously, and studying it biblically, historically, theologically as though their lives depended upon it—which, in all reality, they do." Upon that foundation and within that context, adults are equipped for each individual's specific and concrete area of ministry in the mission of the church.

Of course, adult education also takes place not only in a "school" atmosphere but in each and all gatherings of believers as Christ's body. Therefore there must be conscious attention directed toward the "critical nonformal elements of a meaningful adult education ministry. We need to look at the services and activities of the church which involve adults. We must see how in each setting we can gradually change those nonformal elements which constitute the hidden—but most powerful—curriculum and thus bring the present generation to a full experience of transformation."

*Curriculum.* By "hidden curriculum" Lawrence Richards means "all those elements of every setting in which believers interact which support or inhibit the transformation process." There must be harmony and congruence between what is presented in formal settings and what is experienced in the life of the home and the church. For example, "if we really believe that ministry is the responsibility of all, in every gathering of believers we will demonstrate that conviction so that mutual ministry will be the lived experience of believers, not just a theory propounded from the pulpit. If we really take seriously the relational context which Scripture portrays as appropriate within the Body, and important for the exercise of spiritual gifts, then in every gathering of the church (whether in official boards or as believers gathered to pray and share) we will work to express and to experience oneness and love." Therefore those involved in planning a wholistic approach to Christian education must be sensitive to hidden curriculum issues and elements. They also must base the decisions about curriculum resources used in formal settings on the goals of education developed locally and the learning experiences needed at the particular time for the various persons and groups in the congregation. Integrating the curricula of the various church education groups will help to insure good balance as persons are nurtured and assume responsibilities in mission.
Leadership. However, “the primary concern of any congregation should be for selecting, equipping, and supporting committed, vital persons to serve as leaders who will cultivate meaningful relationships with learners. The congregation’s greatest need is for leaders who will be living illustrations of what it means to be a disciple of Christ—growing in commitment, understanding and skills for living responsibly in our world... It is important that the church’s educational leaders be adequate representatives of the community of faith, lest the educational ministry be at odds with the life and faith of the congregation.” That statement is from Developing Leadership for the Church’s Teaching Ministry by Margee and Jim Adams, a step by step leadership manual to be used in the local church. As much of the training needed by teachers is the same as that needed by leaders in other aspects of church life, two of the twenty-two exercises in the manual deal with systematic planning: one centered on examining the possibility of a wholistic plan for congregational leader development and the second identifying common needs of education leaders/teachers. The exercises of Part III of this manual are based on John Westerhoff’s emphasis on the unique character of the church as a faith community. Therefore the Adamses write: “we can also presume that the idea of leadership in the church will also need to be refocused. ... As generations learn together we can presume that “teachers” will be of all ages; particularly young people need to be recognized as having gifts to share in the community. ... When the focus of our attention is not on the question ‘How can we teach someone else the Christian faith?’ but on “How can we be Christian, individually and corporately with others in the world?’ we all become leaders.”22 We all become leaders, not in an autocratic style of leadership but in a shared leadership style. “Though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body. So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us.” Romans 12:5,6.

Pastors. “He appointed... others to be pastors and teachers. He did this to prepare all God’s people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11,12). How does the pastor of the local church contribute to preparing all God’s people?” The minister is the primary Christian educator in the local congregation since in seminary he or she has been biblically, theologically, and educationally trained. The pastor/worship leader, having great congregational impact and visibility, through enthusiastic cooperation and participation, can elevate the priority level of the educational task. He or she may have varying roles depending on the setting. These roles may include clarifier, theologian, advocate, interpreter, and evaluator. The pastor, as clarifier, should be clear about the purpose of the church and its educational goals in order to help others to see how learning experiences fit into the total mission of the church. As a theologian, the pastor can stimulate the people’s continued and continual growth as together they explore their biblical and theological heritage and find relevance to the present. By providing continuing leadership training, by supporting and encouraging, the pastor is an advocate for the importance of education in the midst of the congregation. The pastor’s role as interpreter fosters a broader, more inclusive understanding of the church. He or she assists the congrega-
tion to sense its relationship to society and helps to integrate missions, stewardship, social issues, and evangelism into the total program of the church. And finally, the pastor can promote an on-going process of evaluation in the church.\textsuperscript{23}

The minister needs to give priority to educational ministry—equipping Christians for the work of ministry. There is an urgent need for a unified approach to the educational task of the church on the part of the minister. “At some point in theological education the occasion and the guidance should be provided for the process of integrating and interrelating one’s thinking and the various disciplines with which one has worked. This would enable the minister to emerge from formal education with a somewhat unified thought.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Significance of the Sunday School.} The wholistic approach for nurturing and equipping for mission does not lessen the importance of the Sunday School, (although the study might indicate that other educational models should be explored), but rather it defines the church school’s function more precisely and makes it more significant. It provides the setting where study of the Bible, of the history and heritage of the church, and the challenge of the Christian life can take place in a systematic way using creative teaching techniques, discussion, audio-visual reinforcement, and dialogue not usually possible in the congregation’s worship service. The cognitive learning becomes meaningful because the learner also is a part of the “community of believers” which is communicating the faith relationally in the home, in worship, and in multiple other settings. There is intentional correlation and reinforcing. As administrators and teachers of the Sunday School actively take part in setting goals and objectives both in the planning task force and in the church school staff meetings, they see their teaching ministry within the context of the total church. Their participation in selecting and using curriculum resources is done in the light of the statement of purpose of the church and the goals set.

Special emphases and themes in which the whole church is involved can be explored and supplemented in Sunday School classes at the understanding-level of the class/group. They can engage in the biblical foundation work so necessary for getting on the “same track.” Being specialized and homogenous groups, more appropriate study illustrations and applications can be used. There is opportunity to engage in personal reflection and to dialogue together about mutual experiences in the “community of faith” and in the world. Classes may serve efficiently as ready-formed working teams and action groups. They also may be “learning laboratories,” making preparations to act out the faith in the world, supporting those actions and reflecting on them.

The smaller groupings in the Sunday School also provide an opportunity for a “community” feeling of personal contact, which would be especially important when the church has a large membership. Two hundred years ago Sunday Schools had a two-fold purpose—evangelism and education. The Sunday School today still has an impact on church membership and growth. “The Sunday School is an important means of bringing new people into the membership of the church through confession of faith... (It) is unique in its appeal to the entire family. Bridges can be built to any member of a family through the Sunday School. For most present members, their first
contact is through a friend who brings them along to his or her class. Studies further reveal that parents will often choose to attend a church for the sake of their children." The close relationships in Sunday School classes are helpful in integrating such new members into the mainstream of the life of the church and increasing the level of their commitment. In this setting teachers and class members are models of the Christian lifestyle, nurturing and discipling each other. Often informal support groups will develop from relationships established in these class situations.

The church school can also provide numerous situations where interaction of the total church may take place. Classes of disparate ages can meet together for sharing and study—small children with older children, young with adults, adults with children. Classroom "open houses" encourage others as well as parents to become acquainted with the learning taking place throughout the church school. Classes can enrich the current all-church educational thrust by creating displays, banners, bulletin covers, worship litanies, and prayers. The minister, consistory members, persons involved in the ministry of music and in other areas of the church can relate personally by participating at appropriate times in the classroom situation. And leaders of the church school can provide specific materials and suggestions to be used for sharing and involvement in learning in the home where Christian education is a continuing day-to-day experience.

Education into faith and mission. When the congregation is able to articulate its own faith and demonstrate that faith in its life it comes to the realization that "education into faith" is the function of the whole congregation as that congregation is moved by the Holy Spirit. A personal faith is most effectively elicited through "inclusion in a community of faith where the whole life of the community is shaped and governed by the community's commitment to its Lord." So the Sunday School has a specialized and significant part in equipping individuals to be effective witnesses to the Christian faith, both in word and in action, moving them to use their God-given gifts in response to Christ's command, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always..."

FOOTNOTES

5 Ibid.
8 Henderlitte, op. cit., p. 201.
10 Miller, op. cit., p. 75.
11 Westerhoff, op. cit., p. 4.


14 Ibid., p. 85.

15 Nelson, op. cit., p. 102-103.

16 Cully, op. cit., p. 87, 88.


18 Richards, op. cit., p. 234.

19 Ibid., p. 321.

20 Ibid.


22 Ibid., p. 56.


26 Henderlite, op. cit., p. 204.