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Study guide:

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# Reinventing Sunday school

*A reformation in faith formation*

By Robert C. Blezard

As with other areas of church life, Christian education has changed dramatically with our nation's social shifts over the last generation. The bad news is that traditional Sunday school no longer works as the primary way to teach the faith. The good news is that congregations are finding creative, innovative and exciting ways that not only educate but also form people and communities of faith.

## Exercise 1: Great Commission

Read Jesus' "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:16-20.

- What's a disciple? What does it mean to make disciples?
- What are Jesus' two specific instructions that go along with making disciples? Which one takes more time, effort, planning and money?
- Does your congregation put sufficient time, effort, planning and money into teaching as it should?
- What grade would you assign your congregation on education (A, B, C, D or F)? Why? What can you do about it?

## Exercise 2: Formation

What is faith formation? Working together, draft a definition that fits your context. Discuss:

- How is faith formation different from Christian education? How is it similar? How do they interrelate?
- Which has received more emphasis in your congregation?
- What is the appropriate balance, and how can your congregation achieve it?

## Exercise 3: Teach

Putting the word "teach" into an online Bible concordance yielded 323 matches, with most of them (181) in the New Testament. What does this say about the importance of education in the life of faith? As a study group, break into teams and survey the usage of the word in certain New Testament books or in broader categories such as the Gospels (and Acts), Pauline letters and general letters. Have the teams report: What does each say about teaching?



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## Study guide: **Reinventing Sunday school** *continued*

### Exercise 4: Your formation

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how well formed in the faith do you consider yourself to be?
- How were you formed in the faith? What were the highlights?
- What could your parents/congregation/pastor have done better?
- How do you continue to grow in the faith?
- What role does your congregation play? What could it do better?

### Exercise 5: New ideas

The article "Reimagining Sunday school" lifts up a number of new approaches for education and faith formation. Discuss each and select three you like most.

- Why did you like these approaches?
- Would they work for your congregation? Why or why not?
- What necessary assets does your congregation have and what would it need?
- Draft a proposal on education and faith formation for your congregational leaders.

### Exercise 6: Innovation

Each of the ideas described in the article came from creative, faithful people like you who asked, "How can we do better?" As faithful, creative people, brainstorm 10 innovative ideas—no matter how impractical or outlandish. Then hone in on two that might work for your church, develop them and report to your congregational leaders.

### Exercise 7: Disconnected

- What roles do worship and faith formation/education play in your congregation?
- How do they complement one another?
- Is there a disconnect between the two?
- With fewer people attending educational activities, why is it important to better incorporate faith formation/education into worship?
- What would be the benefits to worshipers and the congregation?

### Exercise 8: Lifelong learning

List 10 reasons why Sunday school/Christian education/faith formation is vital for children and youth.

- Do the same reasons apply to adults? To senior citizens? To families?



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## Study guide: **Reinventing Sunday school** *continued*

- Why should faith formation be a lifelong endeavor?
- What would a cradle-to-grave faith formation approach look like for your congregation?
- How would it affect the congregation?

### Exercise 9: Integration

Do you learn best by hearing something explained and reading? That's a traditional model of education. How much better do you learn by observing firsthand, experiencing or doing?

Innovative Christian education and faith formation approaches integrate learning about the faith with observation and hands-on experience. What opportunities exist for you to integrate faith formation into your congregation's efforts in evangelism, outreach, stewardship, worship, service, pastoral care, etc.?

### Exercise 10: Changes

Discuss the impact on your congregation's life that the following changes have made in the last generation: television, the rise of Sunday shopping and employment, school activities on Sunday, increasing secularization, women's employment, cellphones and smartphones, the squeezing of the middle class, the busyness of God's people, and decreasing church attendance and offerings.

- How have these affected traditional Christian education?
- How can innovative faith formation help churches continue to reach God's people?



# Reinventing

A reformation in faith formation

By Cindy Novak



For a study guide see page 22. To read “For faith formation, play, hands-on learning and digital resources,” find this story at [www.thelutheran.org/feature/september](http://www.thelutheran.org/feature/september).



To help teach faith at home, Terry and Suzi Hansen do “Home Huddles” each night with Sofia, 14 (left); Emily, 12; and Joseph, 4. Faith Lutheran Church in West Fargo, N.D., encourages the Hansens and other families to use the huddles to share their highs and lows, read Scripture, talk, pray and bless each other.

ANN ARBOR MILLER

# Sunday school

Amey Kippen tells visitors they can choose a church where they can drop off their children at Sunday school or they can make a commitment that will pay off in ways they could not even imagine.

“It will literally change who your kids become when you are involved in their faith life,” the director of faith formation at Faith Lutheran Church, West Fargo, N.D., tells parents.

More than 15 years ago, Faith replaced traditional Sunday school with GIFT Family Ministry, using Bible Song curriculum from Faith Inkubators. Parents attend each week with their children and practice Home Huddles (Faith Inkubators’ Faith5) each night at home with their children, sharing highs and lows, reading Scripture, talking, praying and blessing each other.

“Instead of faith being just another something we do for an hour every week, it becomes a shared experience,” Kippen said. “Parents come to see the church as their partner in raising faithful kids, and kids learn that church is not just what we do, but who we are.

“If parents choose another church to call home, we accept that. We are not the church for everyone. We are the church where families stay together.”

## New models, approaches ... realities

If you attended Sunday school, your parents likely brought you to a classroom where you spent an hour listening to a teacher present a Bible story, lead music or direct activities.

Today children and families prefer a more participatory style than the “expert model” of yesteryear, said Paul Lutz, adjunct professor in Christian education at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and a pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Lansdale, Pa.

“The success of Sunday school happened at a time when people were satisfied relegating religious things off to experts—pastors or Sunday school teachers,” he said. “The expert model doesn’t satisfy people the way it used to. Fortunately for us Lutherans we have this concept called the *priesthood of all believers*. We can help people identify their spiritual gifts and help them participate in ways they couldn’t before because [the experts] took over those responsibilities.”

Mary Hess, professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., said, “Right now we are living in a time of great experimentation. What is interesting to me is to watch churches try different approaches [in faith formation].”



**Justin Coleman, 6, and Nancy Tuttle** listen to a children's version of the creation story, read by Karen Rodriguez (not pictured), deacon of Bridge of Peace Community Lutheran Church in Camden, N.J.

SUSAN FARLEY



**Aniya Coleman** gets something to drink at a free dinner before Bridge of Peace's Tuesday night "Family Bible School." Giselle Coutinho, pastor, and other members create their own curriculum and connect it with living in Camden, N.J., one of the most impoverished and violent communities in the U.S.

SUSAN FARLEY



**Sirah Coleman** (left), Hannah Watkis, Benjamin Watkis, Dinah Coleman and Carlos Ortiz practice a "Genesis Rap" to be performed during Sunday worship at Bridge of Peace.

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SUSAN FARLEY

These approaches include:

- Equipping families to carry out rituals at home.
- Combining Christian education with mission and service.
- Incorporating faith formation into the worship service.
- Holding classes during the week, rather than on Sunday morning.
- Creating curriculum.
- Offering cross-generational programs.

These approaches come at a time when Sunday school attendance in ELCA congregations has seen a 60 percent drop between 1990 and 2010, according to ELCA Research and Evaluation. Church leaders cite a variety of reasons for the decline:

• **More competition, like travel and sports.** "The culture no longer respects Sunday morning," said Diane Hymans, professor of Christian education, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio. "It used to be Sunday mornings were for church. Now our kids are

involved in all sorts of sports on Sunday mornings and oftentimes sports win."

• **Fewer children.** The number of married couples with children in ELCA congregations dropped from 41 percent in 1988 to 26 percent in 2013. In addition, child baptisms in ELCA and predecessor congregations dropped 52 percent between 1970 and 2012, according to ELCA Research and Evaluation.

• **Changes in the family.** For example, children of divorced or separated parents may spend weekends with a parent who doesn't attend church or who is a member of another congregation, Hymans said.

In addition, more mothers work full time today. "After working all week, running errands and cleaning their houses, they are exhausted by Sunday morning," said Diane Shallue, adjunct instructor at Luther Seminary and director of Christian education and small group ministries at University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis. "We have more exhausted mothers who struggle to get their children up and off to Sunday school or church."

Despite the challenges, Shallue remains optimistic: “I am not dispirited about the statistics at all. We have great opportunities to start thinking about new ways to do faith formation, rather than trying to do the same old [programs] harder and better.”

### **‘Nurture faith at home’**

“Sometime in the 1950s or ’60s, churches communicated to parents that they should let the church do all of the education and faith formation for their children,” Hymans said. “And parents were often happy to do that because they often didn’t feel well equipped to do it.”

But research shows that parents are the primary influence in their children’s faith, she said, “so more churches are equipping and empowering [them] to nurture faith at home.”

For example, congregations can teach families to worship every Sunday, no matter where they are. “We need to find simple ways to engage parents who are exhausted,” Shallue said. “That could be small rituals like reading a Bible story, singing and praying. One of our young moms had been doing that at home because it was hard to get to church with her little ones.”

At Faith, Kippen tells parents that if they have to choose between attending GIFT on Sunday mornings or doing Home Huddles every night, “never come here.”

“That’s how powerful I think that connection at home is around your faith life,” she said. “When I think about the depth of faith our confirmation students have when they enter our program, it’s incredibly different than it was 10 years ago. I can’t help but think that has to do with parents living out and practicing faith with their children every night in their home.”

### **Forming faith by serving neighbors**

Involving families in mission and service provides another way to do faith formation. “A lot of people are motivated to visit a nursing home or work in a community garden or homeless shelter because they are used as contexts for telling the stories and practices of the faith,” Hymans said. “Before you go, you can have a meal, read Scripture and talk together.”

Trinity provides such an opportunity through “Feed and be Fed,” which includes an intergenerational, participatory 30-minute worship service followed by a project in the community. For example, they assembled snack packs for a local charity. Before delivering them, they talked about caring for their neighbors.

“It’s an experiment for those who don’t want to just sit in worship,” Lutz said. “We have 3-year-olds work-

ing with 80- or 90-year-olds assembling sandwiches or planting flowers and vegetables. That’s one way we do faith formation, and it doesn’t look like traditional Sunday school.”

### **Faith formation in worship**

In the ELCA there has been a disconnect between worship and faith formation, Shallue said. “That’s a huge challenge and a huge opportunity for pastors and worship leaders,” she added. “Yes, we are praising God and proclaiming the word, but we also are shaping people’s faith in really significant ways.”

Shallue cited some ways to engage children in worship: have them place hand-drawn pictures in the offering plate, include them in processions, allow children to lay offerings or artwork on the altar, and let them help pass offering plates.

“Worship might be one of the only times when everyone is together,” Hess said.

“One week congregations might introduce the creed—what it is and how it functions. The next week they might preface the intercessory prayers with basic information to help people understand things they might not have known before.”

### **Creating curriculum**

As faith formation has seen changes, so has curriculum. Today educators can download a “remarkable” amount of resources, Hess said.

Through its 5-year-old “sparkhouse” arm (<http://wearesparkhouse.org>), Augsburg Fortress, the ELCA’s publishing ministry, works with leaders from a variety of denominations to offer Christian faith formation print resources, videos, Web-based subscription content and downloadable single lessons.

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## **Comment**

*Diane Hymans, professor of Christian education, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio:*

For more than 200 years, Sunday school was the place where women could take on primary leadership in the church. But once women [joined the workforce] that changed. Now they can take on every role, including that of pastor. Sunday school is not the primary place where they can be involved. With women working now they are not as ready to take on a long-term commitment like teaching every Sunday.



**Children serve communion** to each other after serving worshipers at Trinity Lutheran Church, Pembroke Pines, Fla., during a weekly intergenerational worship service that doubles as Sunday school.



**Christina Gray** and her daughter Sarah, 4, put their heads together at Trinity to create a wind chime during an intergenerational, highly interactive worship service that provides faith formation. The chime's components were selected to symbolize Christian beliefs.

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"We meet people where they are: using technology, language and active learning concepts that match our 21st-century lifestyles," said CEO and President Beth Lewis.

More and more congregations are creating their own materials. "Congregations aren't purchasing as much as they used to," Hess said. "People are writing their own materials to gear it to their situation."

Giselle Coutinho, pastor of Bridge of Peace Community, Camden, N.J., and members create curriculum for the congregation's "Family Bible School," which meets on Tuesday nights preceded by a dinner for the 25 to 45 children who attend.

For example, after a young person was shot and killed near the church, they talked about how afraid the disciples were while in the upper room. The discussion allowed children to voice their fears of living in one of the most impoverished and violent communities in the country.

## Comment

*Karen Matthias-Long, associate of the bishop for youth and family ministry, and curator of synodical resources for the North-eastern Pennsylvania Synod:*

One of the things that really bothers me is [that church] is one of the few places where all generations come together. And what do we do after we enter the doors? We separate children and put them in classrooms. That's not helpful because we can learn from someone older or younger than us.

"How do we speak to that and proclaim the resurrection in the middle of scary stuff?" Coutinho asked. "So we are always creating curriculum, which is exhausting. It requires pulling from many resources. You need very creative people to do that. There are no materials that really address what it means to be in a setting like this."

Faith formation also takes place during worship. "There are probably just as many or more children in worship than adults sometimes," she said. "There are a lot of kids who come to church alone. For me it's about being present, giving them boundaries and letting them know God loves them and Jesus is their Savior."

"I don't always like the phrase *this church is a family*, but that's what members say. They consider themselves a faith community, the body of Christ."

### 'Flips Sunday school on its head'

Two years ago, Trinity Lutheran Church, Pembroke Pines, Fla., replaced traditional Sunday school with "Worship Together," a participatory blend of intergenerational worship, family faith formation and Sunday school for children, youth and adults.

"Parents can't afford three hours [to attend church and Sunday school]," said Keith Spencer, pastor. "[Our congregation] absorbs Sunday school into worship and wraps up in one hour."

They put on puppet shows, re-enact radio-theater, create artwork, and write haikus and lyrics as ways to learn Bible stories. Eighty-year-olds share highs and lows with teens. Parents do skits with their children. And 11-year-olds train 5-year-olds on how to distribute communion.



"It's a relational experience, unlike traditional worship, which can be passive and unengaging," Spencer said.

Like Faith, Trinity uses Faith Inkubators' Bible Song curriculum.

"It has revitalized the congregation," Spencer said. "Instead of three or four kids in Sunday school, we average 15 to 25 people per Sunday. It flips Sunday school on its head. It has empowered our lay and young people. It has been exciting to see them take ownership of the service."

### Congregation conversations

Congregations facing decline in Sunday school attendance can explore new approaches rather than hold out for success of the Sunday school of bygone days. "I always tell my students there is nothing sacred about Sunday school," Hymans said. "It has been in existence since the 1780s, and we have been passing on faith from one generation to the next for much longer than that."

Talking with other congregations can help, said Karen Matthias-Long, associate of the bishop for youth and family ministry, and curator of synodical resources for the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

"You can share resources and ideas," she said. "But be careful not to replicate what is working in another congregation. People will be different and the situation will be different. Rather, look at how you can use resources in a new way and in a new context."

Hess added: "What works in one congregation is not guaranteed to work in another. People often ask me what curriculum they should be using, and I tell them, 'I can't answer that because each congregation is different.'"

Listening to children can provide valuable insights, as well. "Don't be afraid of letting young people in your congregation share their faith in new ways, like using digital portfolios, stories or music videos," Hess said. "Young people can be incredibly powerful missionaries for the rest of the congregation."

God doesn't differentiate between a child's baptism and an adult's, Spencer said. "We are all equal under God's eyes. We can learn from each other," he said. "It isn't just about adults passing on faith. It provides a sense of humility that kids have things to teach us." □



#### Author bio:

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## Perspective

# The show is over

Young people now won't just sit and listen

By Richard Melheim

**W**e live in a post-television, Internet era—any kid who was a 10- or 12-year-old in 2005 is arguably a different generation than their older brothers and sisters. In 2005, Internet time surpassed television time for American kids.

The Internet generation mindset is much more active, engaged and conversational. They won't just sit and watch someone else's show.

We need to provide a much more active and engaging approach to worship and education. But churches continue to use the television model in faith formation: when professionals put on a show, you watch and don't have any input.

You might say that the show is over. Yet most of our churches are still trying to put on a good show. Those who do a great show will still have some audience, but it will be smaller and smaller as time goes on.

Starting with Johannes Gutenberg and the printing press, media became the delivery system for information. Educated, wealthy and literate professionals produced the content. Everyone else consumed whatever was provided.

Anyone under 25 today is expecting an entirely different experience when it comes to worship, education and fellowship. And if the church does not provide the form and format they understand and feel most comfortable with, we are going to be saying goodbye to most of the post-television generation. Maybe we already have.

What we do in the future has got to be much more engaging than just sitting in the pew and watching a show up in front.

Faith Inkubators is holding a national "Killing Sunday School/Birthing Cross+Gen Worship" conference in Boulder, Colo., Sept. 29-Oct. 1. For more information, call 888-55-FAITH or 888-430-0762 or visit [www.faithink.com](http://www.faithink.com).



#### Author bio:

*Melheim, an ELCA pastor, is the founder of Faith Inkubators Foundation.*