

Developing Your Sunday School Program

Providing a Vision

Parents and teachers who have raised and educated children know that it is important to give children food for spiritual growth, as well as tools for their spiritual lives. The purpose of creating a vision is to provide inspiration and unity of purpose by articulating goals for your Sunday School program.

Here is a list of Sunday School objectives to use as a springboard for crafting your own Sunday School mission statement:

- Inspire an affection for the Word
- Help children to see the application of the Word in their own lives.
- Instill the habit of reading the Word of God daily and worshipping regularly.
- Show that the Word connects us with the Lord, heaven, and people on earth.
- Teach the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Jerusalem.

Creating a Mission Statement

Try working with parents and teachers to create a Mission Statement that expresses your vision. Here are a few sample mission statements to get you started:

[Name of your Sunday School], Where the Word of God is taught with affection so that children may seek and find Him in their own lives.

[Name of your Sunday School], Serving families through inspiring life-long commitment to the Lord's Three-fold Word.

The mission of the [Name of your Sunday School], is to serve the Lord God Jesus Christ by teaching the truths of His Word and preparing children for life in this world and in heaven.

Using Your Mission Statement

- Post it in each classroom.
- Keep your vision alive among your teachers, affirming the work they do each week.
- Use it as a header or footer on communications to teachers and to parents of your students (whether sending emails or sending mailings on stationery you design).
- Renew your purpose by reviewing and affirming your mission statement when you hold an annual Sunday School teachers' meeting.

Planning What to Teach

Here is a brief overview of ways to approach the content of your lessons:

1. Use the Message of the Worship Service for the Lessons
2. Use Existing Sunday School Lessons (Curriculum)
3. Take a Thematic Approach
4. Study Stories of the Word in Sequence
5. Use the General Church Religion Curriculum
6. Use Multi-level Lessons for Family Groupings

For additional help in finding an approach that will work for you, contact us at sundayschool@newchurch.org. To order any of the resources mentioned below, contact us at oed@newchurch.org.

1. Use the Message of the Worship Service for the Lessons

One of the first things to consider is whether the pastor or the Sunday School teacher will deliver the lesson to the children (reading a story from the Word and helping them understand its meaning and personal implication). If your Sunday School lesson directly follows the children's talk in a church service, the pastor's message may be considered as the main lesson for the day. You can then use Sunday School as an opportunity to take the lesson to the next level, discussing the story to make sure the children understand it, and introducing an activity to bring the message home. This approach makes it easy for teachers to prepare, but requires advance planning with the pastor or lay leader, and good communication.

Resources to Help You with This Approach:

- Search **New Church Vineyard** online for resources for all ages at www.newchurchvineyard.org.
- **New Church Vineyard Educator's Collection** (CD-ROM) allows you to search over 4,300 resources for all ages by scripture passage, type of resource, age group or topic.

2. Use Existing Sunday School Lessons (Curriculum)

We offer programs using a variety of approaches. Some are organized to explore one theme in-depth. Others cover a number of topics which can be taught in a flexible sequence. **Sunday School Resources for All Ages** highlights existing curricula currently available for each age level.

3. Take a Thematic Approach

Plan group lessons around themes in the Word, such as Creation, the Lord, Heaven, *etc.*

Resources to Help You with This Approach:

- **New Church Vineyard** online with teaching resources organized around a monthly topic.
- **The Glenview New Church Program** (for ages 6-9) offers a three year cycle of lessons on the following themes: (1) The Life of the Lord (2) Creation, Life After Death, and Revelation (3) The Story of Israel.
- **New Church Vineyard Educator's Collection** is a searchable CD-ROM with over 4,300 documents. The search function enables you to find lessons on your chosen theme for people of all ages.

4. Study Stories of the Word in Sequence

Studying selected stories from the Word in chronological order helps children develop a sense of progression from Genesis through Revelation.

Resources to Help You with This Approach

- **Bible Study Notes** by Anita S. Dole supports in-depth study of major stories in the Word for all ages and offers a plan for studying selected stories from Genesis through Revelation each year.
- **Bible Stories and Their Inner Meaning** by W.L. Worcester, a Bible study course for all ages, is available online at www.swedenborgdigitallibrary.org.
- **New Church Vineyard Educator's Collection CD-ROM** provides many activities relating to stories of the Word.

5. Use the General Church Schools Religion Curriculum

A complete religion curriculum for children ages 5-14 is available in PDF format.

Resources to Help You With This Approach

- The **Jacob's Ladder Religion Lessons** adapts this curriculum for weekly lessons at home and also works well for Sunday School. Includes a teacher guide, student lesson with color illustrations, and several activity choices for each lesson.

6. Use Multi-level Lessons for Family Groupings

If you have a small group with children of varying ages in your class, this approach may work well for you. Children of all ages focus on the same story in the Word and then respond with different age-appropriate activities to bring the message home.

Resources to Help You With This Approach

- **Family Lessons** are designed for groups with a wide spread in age. Lessons consist of a worship talk followed by activities at five levels for children ages 4-18.
- **New Church Vineyard** online offers resources for all ages on 60 different topics.

New Church Vineyard Educators' Collection (CD-ROM) includes the *Family Lessons* and many other resources.

Setting up Classrooms

Sunday School teachers teach lessons in a variety of spaces. Some use a space that is rented each week, so the entire classroom needs to be set up and put away. Other congregations own their facilities, giving Sunday School a more permanent space. Sometimes teachers share classrooms with a group that meets on other days of the week. No matter what your situation, it is wise to consider how you can set up your classroom to help students focus on the Lord and His Word.

The Word As the Center

If you plan to start your Sunday School lessons with worship, set up an appealing worship area. Choose a simple stand for the Word, an attractive Word cover, a decorated tablecloth, and nice candlesticks and candles, *etc.* If you have a permanent worship center, consider using materials from the natural world—large rocks, shells, beautiful stones, *etc.* Let the children contribute to the altar by arranging small items to make it look beautiful.

Displays

Use displays to introduce or review lessons and to showcase students' projects. If you set up your classroom weekly, consider using a collapsible display board that can be stored flat or a folding easel. Ask your church about getting a Sunday School display board for the lobby or hallway. Keep it current and use it to share and promote the program. If you have permanent classrooms, use the walls to extend your teaching. Consider displaying a timeline of the Old Testament around the room. Put up key pictures illustrating the main stories. Alternatives may be a timeline of Jesus' life, or the sequence of the books of the Word.

Creating a Classroom Environment

If you have a permanent facility, consider making age-appropriate themed rooms. If you have different levels of Sunday School, use different themes for each age level. Here are a few ideas:

- **Noah's Ark:** Paint the ark, Noah and his family, and the rainbow on a central table or the walls, and decorate each chair with a different animal.
- **Prophets:** Give each chair the name of a prophet and decorate with a picture illustrating details of his life. (This could lend itself to activities while you are teaching about the prophets: e.g. sequence the chairs around the table to reflect the historical order of the prophets; have the students tell you one fact about the prophet whose chair they are sitting on; name a story or miracle that is associated with each prophet, *etc.*)
- **Garden of Eden:** Decorate the walls of the room with the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the river, and the beautiful flowers and birds, *etc.* Decorate each chair with something that happened on each day of creation.

Finding Teachers and Nurturing Them

There are a variety of ways to approach this. Some congregations may arrange for one or two experienced or qualified adults to teach consistently. Other groups may choose to involve the parents of students participating in the program by asking them to take turns teaching. The confidence of teachers may vary depending on the age levels of each group and the number of students involved.

How Many Adults Are Needed?

Most Sunday Schools assign one teacher per week for each age group. Two adults or an adult with a teenaged helper may be needed for handling groups of preschoolers. This gives one adult the ability to focus on teaching at all times, while the helper takes care of toilet needs, separation issues, *etc.* It is also marvelous to have an extra set of hands to help with glue, scissors and clean-up. Growing concerns about legal issues and child safety have led some church groups to schedule two adults for every Sunday School group each week.

Ideas for Increasing Your Pool of Teachers

In order to prevent teacher burnout, here are a few ideas to help increase your teaching pool.

- Work to expand your church's awareness of the Sunday School mission. Encourage the church group as a whole to see the importance of this use.
- Approach potential teachers and let them know that you are confident they will do a good job. Assure them that you will provide support, giving them lessons to follow and helping with any discipline issues that may come up.
- Pair a new teacher with an experienced teacher. Invite new teachers to observe several lessons at first and work up to teaching when they feel ready. As an interim step, have the new and experienced teachers teach together several times if this would be helpful. This approach works especially well when children are young.
- Ask older teenagers to teach or help another teacher with a large group. Give them support with lessons. Knowledgeable teens as young as 15 or 16 years old can be capable, energetic teachers of young children.
- Ask single men or women to teach the older groups. Teens often respond well to young adult teachers.
- Consider asking "newcomers" who have been attending consistently for some time. They may feel confident teaching younger children the stories of the Word—especially if they have young children of their own. Pair them up with an experienced teacher. Make sure they have a well laid out lesson with New Church ideas incorporated.
- If your Sunday School program has some community service weeks built in for older children or teens, this may be a good time to encourage participation by newer members.
- It is probably best to avoid scheduling "newcomer" teachers on Festival weeks, such as Easter or Christmas. Teachers need to have a good grasp of New Church doctrine before they teach these important lessons.

By finding even a few more teachers, the burden is shared and so is lighter for all.

Nurturing Sunday School Teachers

It is important to recognize and affirm people who take on this use. One way a program coordinator can show support is by visiting the Sunday School classrooms each week as the children leave and asking the teachers how their lessons went. It is a good time to debrief about challenging students and lessons that may not have gone as well as expected. This brief interaction can help dispel feelings of inadequacy and frustration. It can also be a good way to celebrate a lesson that has gone well.

If a teacher has come up with a wonderful new project idea, please suggest that they send it to the Office of Education, Box 743, Bryn Athyn, PA, 19009, U.S.A or via the internet to sundayschool@newchurch.org so that it can be shared with others. Simply photograph the project or send a sample, along with a brief description of the lesson.

Communicating with Teachers and Parents

The strength of any program depends on how well people work together. It is helpful to have meetings with teachers once a year to discuss how the program is running, if changes would be helpful and if there are problem areas that have gone undetected. It may also be helpful to solicit feedback from parents.

You may consider meeting as a teaching staff, a parent group, or a combination of the two. Parents may want to be involved in decisions such as which age group to put a particular child in. This is especially the case if you have a smaller Sunday School and you find one or two students that are “loners” in their age group.

If busy schedules prevent you from meeting in person, try writing a letter and handle the input on an individual basis. Or use email to keep in touch and solicit feedback.

It is often good to plan for the entire year ahead about a month before you actually start teaching. If you take a break in your teaching schedule, such as the summer, teachers will start a fresh year with new energy.

A break may also help teachers gain more perspective on the challenges they have felt when teaching.

When setting up a new year, contact each teacher and find out which age groups they would like to teach. Also ask related questions such as whether they would prefer to teach a series of consecutive weeks (to allow for a long project) or if they would prefer to have their dates spread through the year. If a mother is having a baby, try to give her plenty of time off afterwards. Ask her when she may be ready to start teaching again. Check to see if husbands and wives like to teach on the same weeks, or on different weeks. This is a great time to contact potential new teachers too. (See Finding Teachers and Nurturing Them section.)

When you have talked to everyone and set up the schedule, send it to all of the teachers. Make sure to include the following information:

- Sunday School dates for the *entire year*
- Weekly lessons to be taught
- Schedule of teachers
- Policy for finding a substitute (in case of illness or vacations)
- A list of all anticipated students in the class
- Other helpful information, *e.g.* child who has a severe allergy or special needs

It can also be helpful to have scheduling information repeated in your church newsletter each month.

If you have teachers who are very busy or forgetful, it may help if you call early in the week to remind them that they are on duty (or you may find a person in your congregation who is happy to make the reminder calls—perhaps someone who doesn't volunteer as a teacher in the Sunday School.)

Sharing the Sunday School Program with Your Church Community

Parents and teachers see the fruits of Sunday School, but it is beneficial to share them with the entire church community as well.

Display banners, *etc.* to let grandparents, singles and newcomers see what you do. This will also communicate an important message to any visitor in the building, be it a newcomer to a church service, or a Scout Troop that meets in your building during the week. These signs let people know that you care about families and education and that you have programs to meet these needs.

You may also want to invite the congregation to watch a play that a class has prepared, or to eat some food that a class has cooked as part of a lesson.

Look for a permanent space that you can use for Sunday School displays. Keep it current each week or display a theme for the month. If there are no projects to put up one month, display pictures of stories from the Word or quotes around a special theme (such as Easter).