

## To Those Who Can't Imagine Teaching Sunday School

By Lori Soneson Odhner

Recently I put my name on the list for bringing flowers for the chancel. That shocked me. You see I don't do flowers. Other people do—women with lovely centerpieces gracing their dinner tables and collar-lines that flatter their faces. I consider it an accomplishment to have six plates and forks on the table, much less a centerpiece, and I'm too distracted by my four-year-old's choice of socks and shoes on Sunday morning to notice what my own collar is doing.

I do Sunday school. That's part of my self-definition and I had stopped re-defining. But I realized that if I meant what I had said at a Sunday school teacher's luncheon about wanting and valuing all kinds of people and talents, no matter how unqualified they felt, then I had better be brave enough to arrange flowers. So I signed on the dotted line.

Probably one reason I feel comfortable doing Sunday school is that my mother had me doing it before it occurred to me I might be doing it wrong. And in all the years since then there have been very few witnesses old enough to testify. So where true talent and ability are lacking, willingness and experience step in.

Sometimes I feel annoyed that the Heavenly Doctrines don't give more specific examples of how children are taught in heaven. There are so many of us ready to pounce on those project ideas, photocopy them by the thousands and confidently mold our curricula around them. But have you ever tried to describe a wonderful experience to someone, only to realize that even the few details you elaborate on fall sadly short of what it really meant to you? Then, if the person latches on to the little that you have described, thinking she understands completely, you wish you hadn't tried at all. Could it have been that way for Swedenborg? He himself seems so amazed at the variety in heaven that I wonder why our Sunday school programs have not managed to respect or reflect that. The possibilities are quite literally endless.

I have learned from my husband to begin with goals. In exploring possible goals for Sunday school I get a little glimpse of what eternity might have in store.

1. Build relationships between adults and children. There is a little girl I know who had seen me, heard my music, played with my children, and been in my home, but I still hadn't been proved innocent in her eyes. But after the first time together in Sunday school she ran to her mother and said, "I wasn't shy!" The reality is I don't pay attention to or get to know the children in the society after church. I'm talking to their parents! The same is true for my own children. One of them was even moved to write a thank you letter to a Sunday school teacher who, by the way, told me he didn't think he had "taught much." Of another teacher my son said, "Mr. Schneider is lucky." "Why?" "He has Mrs. Schneider."

2. Build relationships between children and children. When going to church means getting up early, wearing uncomfortable clothes, or long rides in the car, it is even more important to have someone special there waiting for our children. Growth studies indicate that if newcomers don't have six friends after six months their involvement in a congregation will decline or stop altogether, whereas if they do have six friends they stay active. I wouldn't hesitate to apply this to our children's needs for a sense of community as well.
3. Help children learn the stories of the Word: This is probably the least-neglected of Sunday school goals. Fortunately, we are aware of the importance of the letter of the Word and have a rich supply of resources to teach it. But even when we successfully convey this to children the hells can still undermine our confidence by accusing, "But you didn't teach the internal sense." I have been humbled by the Lord's ability to do magic with this tool alone.
4. Help adults learn the stories of the Word. My sister Wendy and I both readily admit that the only time we've ever cracked the book of Ezekiel was when preparing for Sunday school. And we didn't learn the menu of the Passover from table conversation. The Lord can use almost anything to get you to read the Word, including a handful of wiggling six-year-olds
5. Help children apply the stories to their lives. When my daughter overheard a disagreement I was having with my husband, and she pointed out that this would be a good time to use the Golden Rule and give Daddy what he wanted, part of me was thrilled. (Part of me wasn't.) Looking back I can't remember what the argument was about; but I can remember that she connected something she'd learned from the Word with her daily life.
6. Help adults apply the stories to their lives. Once during a particularly prickly time in my life I was teaching the story of David and Goliath. As I was describing this miraculous victory over seemingly insurmountable odds, I began to listen myself. The Lord was clearly speaking to me. "I conquered Goliath, I can conquer your problems," I heard.
7. Create an affection for the stories by making projects. I was speaking recently with someone about a project we had made together at a church camp. The murals were still beautiful in my mind, and apparently in hers as well. The camp was over twenty years ago. The Lord in His Divine efficiency is still using those projects to touch me every time I encounter those stories. Do you think the people teaching me dared dream of such results?
8. Learn songs. For children not in church schools there is precious little time to sing worship songs as a group. Knowing even one song in a service can make the difference between feeling lost in the ritual and having a sense of belonging. I still remember a four-year-old who knew but one line in the order of service. He waited anxiously, then joyously belted out, "He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last!"

9. Provide quiet worship for other adults. While we might like to achieve more than one goal at a time, this use is valid all by itself. As a mother who has been out of church more than I've been in since my first child was born, I am very grateful just for the chance to sit through a sermon.
10. Give thanks together. Of all the ways we can get to know the people in our congregation, one of the sweetest blessings has been to hear the things they are thankful for. That's a bounty over and above the miracle of listening to myself count my blessings.
11. Self-examine together. Parents often go to great lengths to provide their children with piano lessons, soccer practice and Spanish classes in an effort to expand their choices and abilities as adults. Imagine what an impact it could make on their happiness to learn the skills of self-examination early in life. *True Christian Religion* 563 suggests that it is not a difficult task, if we only practice.
12. Pray together. Our family prayers have expanded to include five specifics. Each person includes an "I'm sorry for..," an "I hope for..", a "Thank you for..", a "Please help (someone in need)," and "I love you." (This last is not a fill-in-the-blank. I consider it worthwhile simply to say "I love you" to the Lord daily.) Not long ago a relative joined us for our evening prayers and halfway through the second child I realized our guest was crying. Later I asked her why and she expressed how precious it was to hear these children's prayers. Don't rob yourself of the waiting gift of eavesdropping on these angelic conversations. Don't deny them the manna of hearing what adults ask of their Maker.

Certainly this is only the beginning of the list of worthy goals, and only hints at the variety spoken of in the Writings. But having clarified some of our goals, and acknowledged that we can't expect to achieve all of them all of the time for all of the people involved, we can begin to explore some methods.

## Methods

1. Art Projects. This is one I naturally incline to and has many possibilities. But it is not the only one available.
2. Act out the story. I have explored this method not because I have any theatrical experience or confidence, but because preschoolers and medium-aged boys crave it. As for learning the story, it's fabulous because we inevitably have to cast every child in every available role at least once, and the repetition does the rest.
3. Tell the story with dolls, puppets or flannel boards. We have a fine collection of worship dolls and they have brought many stories alive for many children. (This is not without its price; one doll was beheaded by a two-year-old.)

4. Books and pictures. There are quite a few lovely children's books written, and just as many large pictures available. I had a three-year-old once who could name the stories for fifty pictures in a row!
5. Games, puzzles and toys. Fishing games, the Correspondence game (designed by Wendy Soneson, see *New Church Home* July-Aug 1983), the "Heaven" game (designed by Grant Odhner, see *New Church Home* May-June 1984), wooden Noah's arks, Jacob's ladders—all are vehicles for the Lord to do His miracle called remains.
6. Activities. When the story is the five loaves, try baking. To teach the story of the Sower, plant a garden. To learn the story of washing the inside of the cup, wash dishes. At Easter time, wash each other's feet.
7. Visuals, touchables. When you describe the land of Canaan, serve milk and honey. Bring a sheepskin when you talk about Gideon. Try to borrow an oil lamp for the story of the 10 virgins.
8. Music. Whether it's recorded or live, music is a lovely addition to Sunday school.
9. Recitations. In *Arcana Coelestia* 2896 we read that the angels have the Lord's Word written on their hearts. Recitations can be a wonderful beginning for that inscription.
10. Real live use. Wouldn't it be ironic if we told children that use brings happiness and never gave them useful things to do? Have the class write Get Well cards for the sick or send Happy Baptism cards for new members. Get ready for a soapy floor and let them clean the church kitchen. Make toys for the nursery, or jump in a car to sing at a nursing home. Bake cookies for after church, or do a cross-stitched altar cloth. Have older children make June 19th gifts for younger children. Start a children's choir. Paint the bathroom. (And if you don't think they'd be thrilled to do that you've never painted with a five-year-old.)
11. Discussion. I am as guilty as anyone of assuming that children always understand what I mean, and have been startled to find that that is not always the case. After a talk about "As the heavens are above the earth, so my ways are above your ways" (Isaiah 55), I had a discussion in Sunday school. "What did the minister talk about?" I asked. An eager six-year-old threw up her hand. "That the Lord is very, very far away!" she answered. Another time I asked a preschooler who had seen dozens of pictures, dolls, puzzles and flannel board pieces representing the Lord, none of which were life size, "Is the Lord big or little?" "Little!" was the jubilant response. Now I don't mean to imply that the discussion is exclusively for their benefit. I have learned precious things from the mouths of babes. Once when I asked for a written response about the Lord, I was enlightened to find out that "Hy is owese hapee!" and "He made everything but cardboard, mosquitoes and aluminum foil."