

Challenges for the Sunday School Teacher in the 21st Century

And How to Overcome Them

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I Peter 4:10, 11 New International Version- “Each one should use whatever gifts he has to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ...”

I feel this verse is very relevant to us as teachers. We have a God-given assignment to serve children in the realm of Sunday school. When we use our talent and use them as God directs, to help children, then God will be glorified in all his majesty. That is creation’s ultimate purpose...to bring glory to God, to allow his character to be expressed in and through all things.

Today’s topic is “*Challenges for the Sunday School Teacher in the 21st Century and How to Overcome Them*”. We face many challenges every day- in our jobs, home, school, relationships with family and friends, challenges with our spiritual life, etc... You can face these challenges in one of two ways: you can either view them as inhibiting and **choose** to complain about it or you can see challenges as opportunities to grow and develop to be the person God made you to be. God uses these circumstances and challenges to help us develop our character.

Nine challenges will be discussed in this presentation and several ways to overcome those challenges.

Challenge #1: Teaching From the Book and Making the Curriculum Relevant

As a teacher, there is so much knowledge we are capable of imparting to the kids. However, when we’re a part of Sunday school, we cannot teach whatever we want. If you have made a commitment as a Sunday school teacher, then the responsibility of following the prescribed curriculum is mandatory.

We use the Sunday school book as a guide and it’s our job to creatively impart that knowledge and provide understanding based on the level of our kids. The kids today are modern,

inquisitive, sharp, very open and challenging. The concepts in the book are fundamentally the same concepts that are relevant to students today, so saying the book is outdated, difficult to understand or not “kid-friendly” is not accurate. The challenge lies in taking those concepts and creating meaning out of it that is appropriate for students.

Most of us are here because you hope that the information you hear today is going to be relevant for you as a Sunday school teacher. If I came and spoke here without knowing my audience and without making this presentation relevant to you, it will be of no interest. The students may feel the same way when you give a lesson. Even if you think the lesson from the book sounds fairly relevant to the kids (i.e. they’re able to read it on their own and understand all its meanings), the reality is they may not know how to connect it to their life and their experiences without guidance. You must explain it in their terms and their ‘language’.

Overcome it!

Revamp the curriculum, take the time to research effective ways/strategies to teach lessons for your particular age group and know their developmental age.

What physical, emotional, social changes are they going through at this age? What are some things they deal with at school, with friends, teachers, parents, and in the home? What are their thoughts on God, the Bible, their prayer life and their faith? What is their personality like? Observe them with their friends and family. You must get some background information on each of your children so you know how to care for and teach them. How can you use this information and tie it into the lesson? How can you use this information and tie God into their lives?

What I did on the first day of Sunday School (as most teachers may do) is I asked each student to tell the class a little about themselves- school, challenges they currently face, what they like, dislike, etc... They instantly realized that by taking an interest in each one of them, I’ve already shown them I care. They may not know this, but I’ve already won most of their attention.

Teachers...will best communicate truth when they are willing to go into the worlds of their students (Shepherding Ministry Resources, 1999).

Challenge #2: The Ability to Make the Spiritual Curriculum Interesting

The kids live in a very dynamic world, full of video games, fast cars, fast Internet, cell phones, music devices, movies, TV, sports, etc... They’ve experienced excellent teachers in the public education system who are passionate about students and teaching. For this reason, many students love coming to class. They have so much entertainment around them; even school is entertaining for them.

Then they come to Sunday school where they listen to a 45 minute lecture from a teacher who pretty much reads the lesson from the book with a few occasional personal interjections. When during these 45 minutes do 2nd grade students get to act out a story? When during these 45 minutes does the 11th grade class get to conduct a live debate? When, during these 45 minutes are

the students truly interested in what's being taught? Has God come alive to them? Can they see YOUR passion for Christ and for teaching God's Word?

Overcome it!

It's very difficult to compete with the fast-paced, 'exciting' world outside of Sunday school. However, our God isn't dull or lifeless. He is exciting! The Bible is exciting! When we talk about Christ others, He should come alive!

Take in interest in the subject matter. Research it and find depth in the subject. Know more than your kids!

Allow your tone of voice, body language and non-verbal cues to communicate a sense of excitement. It's quite brutal to listen to someone who is monotone and doesn't convey a sense of passion, especially for God. Break the monotony of the class in creative ways by stretching, engaging in an activity, singing a song, or allowing someone else to teach for a day (even a student).

Sunday school is not merely rote memorization of Bible verses and stories, rather, it is teaching the Bible in such a way that lives are changed. That is the true ministry of Sunday school.

Challenge #3: Worldy vs. Christian Values

Our kids come to us with many worldly influences/values and they're looking for knowledge and understanding about how to deal with the issues they face. They don't just correspond with their parents anymore. They are seeking to find answers from their teachers, counselors, peers, etc...The Sunday school teacher is also an essential part of the child's sphere of influence.

How you influence others depends on the values you have to impart. How do you view your life? From what and whose perspective do you look through? To fulfill God's plan and purpose for your life, you will have to see life from HIS point of view. We are living in a very material world and we value worldly possessions- big houses, cars, money, jobs, status in the community and status in the church. Kids are also bombarded with the sights and sounds of this world; a world with behaviors and customs that are often selfish and corrupting.

Overcome it!

First and foremost, our own values must be in line with God's values. Otherwise, we have no right to teach values to anyone, especially children. We must consider important what God considers important. It must also show in our actions as well as words.

In Romans 12: 2, Paul gives us guidelines for how we should live:

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed [changed] by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is- His good, pleasing and holy will”.

Ask God to help you with this. He will if you are sincere in wanting to change.

Then and only then is it our responsibility as a Sunday school teacher to continually put into perspective what is worthy and good in God’s sight and to see it from HIS point of view. We must teach kids to go beyond merely refusing to live according to the world’s customs and behaviors (do not steal, do not kill, etc...). *Jesus said even the pagans can do that.* We must teach children to be “changed” in their mind through the help of the Holy Spirit.

Teach the children how to pray (use the A.C.T.S. acronym- adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication); demonstrate it yourself. Pray for your kids so they have the strength to *see beyond this world.*

Challenge #4: How to Cover All Lessons in 35 Sundays

You begin class with a prayer, take attendance, talk to the kids about their week, fumble through the Sunday school book to find out where you left off from last Sunday, read it with the kids, interject your ideas and maybe ask the kids what they think about it. The discussion goes off on a tangent and before you know it, the bell rings and you’re complaining, “Man, we didn’t get to finish again”. You assign the kids to read the remainder for homework. The cycle repeats next Sunday.

Lack of time is often a common complaint/ challenge as we strive to cover the entire book. Some lessons may require more than one Sunday to complete. However, that is not the case with most lessons.

Overcome it!

If you plan ahead and come prepared with a lesson with time allotted for discussion, activity, quiz, lecture, etc...you should be able to complete the lesson in a 45-minute to one hour time frame. Of course there will be times when the discussion will get off topic. You have to gage whether it is a “teachable moment” and address their need to be heard OR realize very quickly that kids just like to get off topic. You are the adult and must stay on course with the lesson plan.

Prayer and preparation is the only way to be certain that time is being used efficiently. Realize how important that one hour is with the students so make the absolute most of it. Set aside

regular time (choose a specific day and/or time and stick with it!) during the week or weekend to prepare the lesson for class. You are truly doing the students a disservice if you don't.

Preparing a lesson for them shows that you care about their spiritual education. **They know when you don't come prepared.** If you have truly prepared a lesson and still didn't get to complete it, assign it as homework and enforce it. Follow through on the homework or students will not take you seriously. Don't assign homework for the sake of it. It must be assigned with the notion that it is for educational reinforcement.

How can we hold high expectations from our students if we don't practice what we preach? We want them to be prepared by reading the lessons, bringing their materials and attending class timely. However, you must first model those same expectations. The teacher needs to be prepared with a lesson plan, show up on time, and attend staff meetings. You must be ready to do God's work, not be asleep on the job. Jesus told the parable of the loaned money by teaching that each servant receives talents according to their abilities. It was *their responsibility* to *multiply their talents*, not hide it away. Will he say to you...

Matthew 25:23- "Well done good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness".

Challenge #5: Lack of Resources to be an Effective Teacher

We do not necessarily have a "lack of resources" rather those resources may not be readily available. We have many avenues we can take to find appropriate resources to supplement the curriculum but we must take effort to find it.

Overcome it!

A variety of resources are readily available to us. There is a Sunday school workbook for all grade levels and it should be utilized at least for younger students. This may eliminate some problems you have with parents feeling like they're in the dark. The individual teacher can also create a workbook or worksheets to supplement the book.

Everyone's on the Internet, why not search it for spiritual resources? For subject matter relating to Orthodoxy, visit www.indianorthodoxchurch.org.

Use books to supplement the curriculum as there are many books available at Christian bookstores as well as through the Sunday school Association of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church American Diocese.

Invite knowledgeable church members (vicar) or parents to co-teach with you. Utilize the strengths of the substitute teacher or co-teacher.

Sunday school, being the largest organization in the body of the church, should start a resource library accessible especially for teachers and students.

These are only supplemental resources. Of course, the BEST resource is the Bible, which is God's Word. Ask Him to make your heart receptive to teach you great insights into His Word.

Challenge #6: Lack of Training Available to Learn How to be an Effective Teacher

For those of us who've never had formal training to teach, we create our own meaning of how to teach. We use the experiences we've had as students watching other teachers, parents or from a few conferences we've attended to make sense of pedagogy.

We certainly appreciate conferences and workshops we currently have for teacher training. Most teachers have a desire to learn more and become better teachers. However, there is a lack of help and training to understand how to teach effectively. Being a Sunday school teacher is a great responsibility assigned by God. How could we not take that seriously and ensure teachers opportunities for growth and development? Teachers need to know what is expected of them and how to carry out those expectations.

The passion to share the Lord is within us. We just need the means to deliver it effectively.

Overcome it!

Periodic mandatory training sessions should be conducted *regularly* throughout the year. Invite experts from the church community or sister parishes to make relevant presentations. A future Sunday school teacher should serve as a "helper" or as a part of a teaching team before they are thrown into a solo teaching situation. Learn through observation- by observing other master teachers at work. Conduct a 'share-a-thon' and invite sister churches to share ideas as a grade level. Bring photocopies of lesson plans and activities. Learn from each other by inviting Sunday school teachers who are doing great things with their classes to share their ideas during staff meetings or short workshops.

**The *greatest resource* the teacher has is God Himself and the Bible. Who is better to mentor the teacher on how to shepherd students than the Chief Shepherd? Let His example guide you (Shepherding Ministry Resources, 1999).

Challenge #7: Student Attendance and Apathy

This becomes an issue as students become older. There exists a great discrepancy between what the student needs and what we as a Sunday school teacher can deliver. When they're young, parents can force them to come to Sunday school. However, as they get older, it can become a matter of choice. When they're young, they're eager to please the teacher and their interest is easily sparked. We hope and pray as they age, they develop a passion for Christ and attend Sunday school for that reason, not to please someone else.

There are many reasons why students attend Sunday school- parents force them, it's tradition, everyone does it, they love to see their friends, they get a chance to talk to an adult who listens to them and understands, etc... There are also many students who attend because they love Sunday school and have a true desire to learn about Christ. However, it can be frustrating when students attend haphazardly. With some students, there is no rhyme or reason for their random attendance. Of course, parents have a great responsibility in bringing their kids but we can't just dismiss a child that has poor attendance as "it's the parents fault" and do nothing about it. These students are entrusted to us by God and we are accountable, in part, for their attendance.

Once in a while, you may come across a student who is so indifferent to anything related to Sunday school no matter how exciting you try to make it for them. This is the student who sits in class, hardly participates, does not bring a Bible or book, never takes notes, or studies. Basically, they look like they'd rather be somewhere else, and you're just wasting their time. This is the 'hard to reach' student.

Overcome it!

Always keep the child in your prayers because do not have the power to change anyone or any situation without God's hand in it.

John 15:5 says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; *apart from me you can do nothing.*"

Pray also with the children in class for the students who are not in attendance that day. If attendance and/or apathy are problems, first communicate with the parents and your principal. Communicate with the students through weekly emails or phone calls. Find out if any of the kids live close enough so they can carpool. Find out if this is a possibility for you.

Bottom line- become a confidant for the student. Become someone who cares. Let them know you care, not because it's your job to as a teacher or adult, but because God entrusted them to you.

Jesus said in Mark 9: 37- "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Jesus taught the disciples to welcome children and not regard them less important than adults.

For a child who does not seem to care, care for them instead by:

- Using the time before and after class to talk
- Praying with the student when they share struggles

- Visiting them at home

A teacher who wants to not only teach the class but also be involved in the personal lives of students must be willing to **invest time and energy into keeping in contact with them (Shepherding Ministry Resources, 1999).

You may not see dramatic changes in that child that year or for years to come but continue to pray for them because God is doing something GREAT in their life. During their time with you in class, praise and encourage even when they make the smallest strides. It will bless their heart. Sometimes it only takes ONE person in a lifetime to make a change. You may be that person. Don't lose the opportunities God provides you. You are doing His precious work.

Become a servant-leader, just as Christ is to us. People seem ready to serve those who are in high positions or those with money but what about our service children whom Jesus considers as humble? Let Jesus be our guide and role model.

**Teaching truth *within the context of relationship* will have the greatest impact and enable you to effectively minister to them (Shepherding Ministry Resources, 1999).

Challenge #8: Communicating Effectively with Parents

One of the greatest challenges *you may think* teachers face are parents. It is a fact that some can be competitive, not interested, unmotivated about SS, overly involved and sometimes, just plain obtrusive and belligerent. Ultimately, they want the best for their child and they should.

Overcome it!

Have a good attitude. View the parents as an ally, rather than an enemy. First, get rid of the "we" against "them" mentality. They are one of our greatest resources in helping to shape a child and train them up. Their views on training up their child are very different from yours. *Respect that.*

Some practical ideas include: conduct parent-teacher conference on individual basis, conduct parent-teacher meetings as a Sunday school with open forum, or invite parents to sit in class. Have them teach a lesson if possible.

Confront them lovingly as Jesus taught. When your heart's attitude is right, God will give you the right words to say and the right way to say it. I have been a teacher for seven years and have taught close to a thousand kids. To this day, I've never had a parent act belligerent or argumentative with me. It happens each and every day all around me to my closest friends and co-workers but I truly believe because my heart is right with God, my heart is right with the children, and my intentions are good with the parents, He keeps me safe from trouble. When I was young, my mom made me memorize many Bible passages and verses for competition. I reluctantly memorized Psalm 34 and only recently did I understand verse 15, "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry".

Challenge #9: Losing Sight of the Real Purpose

Sometimes when things are hectic, administration is not what you expected it to be, or you have done this for so long, you've lost count of the years and the number of lives you've impacted, it's easy to lose sight of the real purpose. You become stale.

Overcome it!

Regain a new perspective; refresh yourself by teaching a different grade, or teach the same thing but do it in a different way. Turn to the Lord in prayer to give you a fresh, new outlook and attitude on teaching Sunday school. Ask God to help you deal with difficult people and situations. If you ask, He will listen. Don't quit when you become tired and discouraged...be faithful in your task. "If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done". Be the change; don't wait for someone else to do it.

The biggest challenge you have is with *yourself!* Having a poor attitude, resentment, unforgiveness, complaining, and assuming personal gain, all go with you into the classroom. The negativity will affect how you handle your preparation, the people around you, but most importantly, your students. So walk with the Lord yourself throughout the week. You can't give out to others, what you don't have. Pray for wisdom, and help (James 1:5,6) in your preparation to teach and in teaching.

So today, as we're in attendance for this conference, let's renew our commitment to a very worthy cause as we are entered into another new Sunday school year.

Resources

Shepherding Ministry Resources (1999). Retrieved September 21, 2006 from <http://mintools.com/sunday-school-3.htm#networking> (Shepherding Ministry Resources)

Warren, R. (2002). *The Purpose Driven Life*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan.