

Why we're not interested in your Sunday school

Young adults seek new forms of Christian education.

BY ANDREA HALL

Battered by a constant torrent of news stories, online media, and social networking feeds, millennials have grown up with a “super highway” of information. They also are on track to be the most educated generation in history.

Millennials no longer need (or believe they need) experts—including those in the church—to pass information from on high. They can listen to a TED talk for cutting-edge information on a wide variety of topics. Christian education, therefore, has to offer something that no YouTube video can: whole-life transformation.

Regrettably, many congregations continue to employ the traditional Sunday school model—designed to transmit information that millennials no longer seek. Maybe it's not incidental that many congregations are experiencing declining participation, especially among millennials and their children.

The Sunday school model may no longer be the most effective way to reach young people in the United States. Here's why.

1. Through the Global Outreach Fellowship, students at Presbyterian-related Austin College serve and learn in communities across the globe.

2. Austin College students log 16,000 hours of community service each year. Service-based “adventurous learning” is a hallmark of the college's approach to education. | 3. During Stony Point Center's Farm the Land, Grow the Spirit summer-long program, students learn by “doing,” live in an intentional, multifaith community, and explore faith, social activism, and earthcare.

Yesterday vs. today

In many congregations, Sunday school is the main opportunity, aside from worship, to share faith with adults and children. Congregations spend a great deal of time, money, and energy on that hour, with the hope that their curriculum, volunteers, and excitement will convey all that anyone needs to know to live as a Christian.

Decades ago, there was little need to learn how to apply faith in the surrounding culture, because everyone (at least outwardly) shared the faith. So, the church set aside a time for individuals to learn more about their tradition's understanding of the Bible and doctrine.

Today, many different values, lifestyles, and beliefs *visibly* pervade our culture. Christians now face having to integrate their faith in work and social environments that often bear few signs of Christian influence. One hour of Sunday school does not transform their lives; it segments their lives. Millennials wonder, “If the gospel is true, shouldn't it saturate every area of life and not occupy our minds for only an hour each week?”

Church vs. home

It used to be that children learned about Jesus at home and in public schools. Slowly, teaching about Jesus became less common in school and, sadly, at home.

Many millennials would like to see that latter trend reversed. They

seek training to be educators in their respective contexts. They don't just want to be taught; they want to be taught to teach. Millennials want to be empowered to learn on their own and shepherd their children.

Hearing vs. experiencing

“The Western church has more information about Jesus and the Bible and the church than we've ever had,” says BJ Woodworth, pastor of the Open Door, a missional Presbyterian worshiping community in Pittsburgh that consists largely of millennials and their children. “And yet we're not seeing deep, soul-level transformation happening in people's lives.” Millennials do not see the value in memorizing information that is available at their fingertips. Instead, they want to know why something matters and how it affects them and the world around them.

New models

It might be difficult for churches to break their Sunday school habit. The following examples, while not blueprints, may spark ideas for more effective models for millennials and their children.

1. All-encompassing

Nathan Van Patter, 26, attends the Upper Room, a PC(USA) church plant in Pittsburgh. Recently, he led a weekly Bible study on Mark with 8 to 10 other young adults. To put what they learned into action, the group brainstormed ways to



PHOTOS 1 & 2 COURTESY OF AUSTIN COLLEGE; PHOTO 3 COURTESY OF STEVE WORTH

bring Mark's Gospel to bear in their community.

Like many millennials, the group wanted to connect the study with their everyday lives in a truly meaningful way. They wanted the group to become a place where they could be Christians together and make an impact in their community. This shows that educational endeavors within the church must convey meaning or impact. Millennials have little interest in programs that seem to have no effect on God's kingdom.

2. Focused on everyday practices

At the Open Door, all are encouraged to adopt rhythms and practices for their everyday lives. Woodworth says congregations need to create a situation where millennials, rather than being "dependent on the church for the program to feed them, to nurture them, to transform them, . . . become self-dependent, independent, interdependent."

In addition to keeping the Sabbath, everyone is challenged to do the following each week: set aside one time of silence to listen to God; read Scripture at least once; eat with at least two people with whom they do not live; encourage two people through words, gifts, or actions; and look for ways to give time, money, and skills to others.

The community also is committed to being intergenerational in worship and does not emphasize specialized children's programs. "The less program-dependent we are, the more moms and dads can raise their kids in the way of the Lord," Woodworth says.

3. Multisensory

Millennials are accustomed to educational experiences that are interactive, and they expect similar spiritual experiences.

Rodger Nishioka, associate professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, says millennials

connect their experiences of God with times when more than one sense is engaged.

In the past, he says, we knew God "by just having someone tell us about God. Well, I don't think that's how it works anymore. . . . Congregations have to be thinking about an *experience*." Nishioka recalled a time when a student at Columbia preached on the potter and the clay. The student placed a pottery wheel in the chapel and threw a pot while she preached.

Congregations need not be so creative. A simple recovery of regular celebration of the sacraments may be all that millennials need to engage their senses in worship. But for those congregations looking to be creative, options abound: think about ways to incorporate tastes and scents into a lesson; invite questions after a sermon (either voiced publicly or tweeted); encourage movement in worship; incorporate ancient or cross-cultural contemplative practices or liturgies that include silence; or structure a class to be a conversation rather than a lecture.

It shouldn't all change

Taking even small steps away from the traditional Sunday school model may be met with resistance. It might help to remind the congregation about what must *never* change.

"What shouldn't change? Jesus Christ as the center. No question," Nishioka says. "We are the church of Jesus Christ. That's who we are. Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, thanks be to God.

"But that doesn't mean that our teaching about Jesus Christ or our worship of Jesus Christ is going to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow," he adds. "It's going to be different, because we are a people who are given imagination and who are given a call by God to lead into that. And so, things change, but Christ doesn't change. And that is the good news for us all."

IDEAS FOR SMALL STEPS

1. Offer flexible scheduling. Sunday morning may not always be the best time for young adults.
2. Capitalize on Advent, Lent, and other seasons of the church year to encourage at-home practices.
3. Put the resources out there. With so much information available, it's hard to know the good from the bad. Recommend books, devotionals, apps, and websites. For the PC(USA) Daily Prayer App: pcusa.org/dailyprayer. For more resources: pcusa.org/education
4. Take advantage of technology. Websites and emails are useless if they are outdated, and they are outdated if communication only works one way. Communicate with millennials on their terms.
5. Promote Sabbath observance. Discuss what it's about and what forms it might take.
6. Think about all five senses when planning educational experiences. Emphasize application: what can they *do* with this information?
7. Encourage small groups, making sure they remain mission-focused.
8. Offer short-term, low-commitment opportunities for leadership.
9. Develop a mentoring ministry.

Andrea Hall is a certified Christian educator in the PC(USA) who resides in Greenville, Pennsylvania. She is an alum of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and is working on a doctorate in educational ministry at Columbia Theological Seminary.