

The Life Benefits Of Regular Church Attendance

Article by Neil MacQueen

What if I told you there was a well-researched and statistically proven program that can:

- increase the average life expectancy of your children by 8 years
- significantly reduce their use and risk from Alcohol, Tobacco and Drugs
- dramatically lower their risk of suicide
- help them rebound from depression 70% faster
- dramatically reduce their risk for committing a crime
- improve their attitude at school and increase their school participation
- reduce their risk for rebelliousness
- reduce the likelihood that they would binge drink in college
- improve their odds for a "very happy" life
- provide them with a life-long moral compass
- and get them to wear their seatbelts more often

Is there such a program? Yes, there is. And it is supported by research from Duke University, Indiana University, The University of Michigan, The Center for Disease Control, Barna Research Group, and the National Institute for Healthcare Research.

How much would a program like this be worth to you? What if I told you it was free, and only took about 2 hours a week. Take a look at the list again. It's not a dream. The program is called "active church participation."

In study, after study, after study, children who actively engage in a faith community on a regular basis are rewarded with SIGNIFICANTLY reduced likelihood of problems and risks, and significantly improved odds of a happier, healthier, longer life. These studies show the same results for adults as well.

To increase the odds of receiving these results, you can't wait. According to a Barna Research Group study, adults who attended church regularly as children are nearly three times as likely to be attending a church today as their peers who avoided church during childhood (61% to 22%, respectively). In other words, parents who truly want the best for their children should get their children involved at church now and regularly.

Our secular culture has taken up preaching "parents (as) the anti-drug," promoting D.A.R.E. programs, school uniforms, after school programs, and athletics as solutions to various ills. And yet, a whole host of problems plaguing young people have only become worse over the last 30 years. Perhaps not so coincidentally, Sunday School attendance has fallen over that same period. The latest tremor to rock the "what works" lobby has been several studies that indicate D.A.R.E. and its 700 million dollar budget doesn't work.

In a search for "what works," researchers keep turning up "active participation" in a "faith community" as the one consistent potent factor in raising up children in the way they should go. It's time for the Christian Church to speak up on this matter, beginning with our own Christian parents.

To paraphrase Jesus, "What parent, knowing that it is bread that really works, would give their child a stone?"

Are Kids Too Busy These Days for Sunday School?

"Kids these days are involved in so many things that they don't have time for Sunday School." Go ahead... take a nickel for every time you've heard that excuse for why kids don't come to Sunday School or fellowship. The question is: IS IT TRUE?

I decided to see if there was research to support this popular excuse. I came across all sorts of anecdotal 'evidence' that "kids these days are overscheduled." That "travel teams and sports are taking kids away from the church." Several newspapers around the U.S. have run stories about how sports on Sunday are pulling kids away from church. Interestingly, many of those articles are wire reports, picked up by local papers and run with a local anecdote. That's how many papers get their "news" ...from other papers. No research, no statistics, no investigation. We live in an "ain't it awful" world where pet theories about *why this*, and *why that* are turned into FACT by reporters, talk show hosts, and authors with books to sell. Churches have been guessing at the reasons for the decline in their Sunday Schools without a serious investigation of the facts. Even among well-attended programs, there is often a perceived gap between "what we have" and "what we hope for" in attendance, Bible literacy and parental support. And many seem content with their pet theory of "why."

Depending on who you talk to the problem is "busy kids" or "parents not spending time with their children," or a general decline in church attendance. "The Secular Culture" is often blamed. A few will date the decline to the removal of prayer from schools. Lately it has been "sports on Sunday."

But do "*busy kids*" or "*kids playing sports*" really translate into *unchurched kids*?

The problem is that up until now we have only been waging a war of words and anecdotes in the church. As easily as some can cite dramatic examples of families trading church for sports and sleeping in, I can counter with my own personal anecdotes. My kids are busy, but they go to church. My older teen works at the mall, takes honors courses, and has a boyfriend, -but she goes to church. My youngest plays select travel soccer with its practices and travel game schedules, but she goes to church. I'm busy, I work a 50 hour week and part of every weekend, and I go to church. And there are more in my congregation just like my family. So who's examples are right?

I began this investigation with a simple Google on the internet. I wondered if there were any statistics about how kids spend their time, including on Sunday. Lo and behold, there were. And as I answered one question, I Googled other questions.

So What Are Kids Doing with Their Time?

In 1997 a study was conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research on 3,500 children nationwide to determine how they spent their time. This study was widely quoted in venues such as Newsweek, Time and the Associated Press. Excerpts from it can be found all over the Internet.

Here's a simple chart of the results.

"A breakdown of the estimated average number of hours and minutes children spend weekly in major activities."

Activity	Age 6-8	Age 9-12
Sleeping	70 hrs, 44 minutes a week	67:34
School	33:54	33:50

Playing	11:26	8:44
Television	12:38	13:36
Eating	7:58	7:54
Personal care	7:58	7:54
Household work	5:05	6:06
Sports	4:38 !	5:14 !
Visiting	3:25	3:41
Other leisure	2:32	3:34
Studying	2:03	3:37
Church	1:21	1:28
Reading	1:14	1:16
Art activities	0:45	0:56
Family talks	0:32	0:28
Hobbies	0:04	0:09

This chart suggests we should be ranting about television, not commitments to sports teams. It also suggests that some kids and families have MANY options to adjust in order to make more time for church.

So is the problem with sports on Sunday?

Not for most kids. According to a 2003 study by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 61.5% of children aged 9--13 years do not participate in any organized physical activity during their non-school hours and that 22.6% do not engage in any free-time physical activity. This means if you're going to complain about sports in general as your church program's major competition, you can only use it as an excuse for 40% of your kids.

Ok, in your hyper community --maybe 50% are participating in organized physical activities after school. But are all 50% playing every Sunday morning? Of course not. But let's assume for the sake of argument that HALF of your "participating" athletic kids are unavailable for HALF of the Sunday mornings due to other commitments (or lack thereof). That means that the "*they're playing sports*" excuse can only explain why 25% of your kids miss 26 weeks out of the year. So much for the "they're playing sports" excuse.

By contrast we know for SURE that 43% American adults do not attend church in a typical weekend. (Barna Research, 2002 Survey). Why then the backlash against kids in sports? In some ways, kids are an easier target to blame. But rather than complain about sports, some churches are creating sports ministries. They are trying to meet the needs of their student-athletes, and helping young athletes see their sportsmanship as an opportunity to demonstrate Godly values.

Aside: Four times a year my daughter's soccer team joins with dozens of other soccer teams and descends upon a community for a weekend tournament. Never once have I seen a church set up a tent next to the concession stand and offer Sunday morning services for traveling families.

If it's not sports, what's to blame?

Maybe it's "all the moms working outside the home that we have these days." Nope. Chew on this statement:

"Contrary to popular belief, the increase in female labor force participation has not led to a decrease in the amount of time children spend with their parents," says John Sandberg, sociologist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR), the world's largest academic survey and research organization.

"Even though parents, and especially mothers, may be busier than ever, many seem to be managing to fit in more time with their children than an earlier generation of parents did."

<http://www.umich.edu/~newsinfo/Releases/2001/May01/r050901a.html>

Maybe its a general lack of parental involvement in the lives of children? Nope. According to the University of Michigan study, children between the ages of 3 and 12 in two-parent families spent about 31 hours each week with their mothers in 1997, compared with about 25 hours in 1981. Time spent with fathers increased from 19 hours to 23. In general, parents and kids are spending MORE time together these days!

OK, so maybe the issue is all the "single parent families" we have these day... The answer depends on where you live and the income level of your single parents. In the year 2000 Census, 19 million kids lived in single parent households. In 1970 8.4 million kids lived in single parent households. The proportion of children living in single-parent homes doubled between 1970 and 1998—from 12% to 28%. *However*, if in your area the standard of living/income is at or above the national average, you probably have fewer single-parent households than these overall statistics reflect. Why? The sad truth is that nearly half of single-parent families live in low income neighborhoods and low income rural areas. 4 of 10 children living with single parents are living below the poverty line. If you're from a white, middle-upper middle class church, an "increase in single parent households" is probably not much of a problem.

Well, more kids are living in split-families these days, right? Not really. According to the US Census, there were roughly one million divorces granted in 1975. In 1998 there were 1,135,000. Yet in 1975 many Sunday Schools were well attended.

Yeah, but nowadays there are fewer children than there used to be, -- right? No. In 1960, 36% -or roughly 63 million out of a total population of 177 million was under the age of 18. In 2000, there were roughly 70 million people under the age of 18 in the U.S., but they made up a smaller proportion of the total population (26%) because people are living longer and having fewer children.

Maybe it's the TYPE of sporting activities kids are engaging in these days? Think again. The National Sporting Goods Association did a study in 1986, 1990 and 1994 to determine the percentage of children ages 7 and older who participate in various types of sports during that year. They were undoubtedly looking for changes in the culture that would signal a need for different products. Bicycle riding, camping and swimming were the top three sporting activities engaged in by children and youth in '86, '90, and '94. Soccer was *9th* on the list after volleyball. Furthermore, the relative percentages of which sports they did

the most changed very little from '86 to '94 --suggesting no great cultural swing in what children and youth do for activities. (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/yi/y9641a.asp>)

Maybe it's all the HOMEWORK kids have these days? Not according to the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy. In their reported titled "Do Students Have Too Much Homework?" they concluded, "most American students spend less than an hour a day on homework, and that workload is no bigger than it was half a century ago." "There is this view in the popular media that there has been this terrible burden of homework on children, and that the homework is increasing," said Tom Loveless, the director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution. "That is not the case."

Likewise, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a congressionally mandated set of exams given to nationally representative groups of students, shows that the percentage of students who said they had done an hour or more of homework the previous night dropped slightly from 1984 to 1999. By 1999, only a third of the 13- and 17- year-olds in that survey reported doing an hour or more of homework.

The same was true of the 282,000 college freshmen surveyed last year by researchers at UCLA. Only 34 percent of that group reported spending more than an hour each weekday on homework during their senior year of high school. That's the lowest percentage since the California researchers first put that question on their surveys in 1987.

According to a RAND study, high school students' homework loads have not increased much since 1948—except for the decade after 1957, when the Soviet Union's launch of its first Sputnik satellite spurred a push for more rigor in U.S. schools. "There was no golden age for homework that we could find," said a social scientist in RAND's Pittsburgh office. "Even at the peak, no more than one in four high school students were studying more than two hours a night."

Has suburbanization been at the expense of city and rural area churches in the last 40 years? Not really. The 1960, 1980 and 2000 Census data shows near static growth in the numbers of people living in rural areas. The numbers of people in their towns to draw from has stayed the same for most areas. The growth has been in the cities and suburban populations. Surprisingly, the "depopulation of rural areas" is something of a myth. What *has* happened is that suburbs have grown, and some populations have shifted to other states. <http://www.umass.edu/ecologicalcities/documents/pop.htm> (for an inkling of why rural church membership has shrunk for some churches, look further in this article at the "competition from other churches" statistics.)

Is the issue that parents of children don't volunteer as much these days like older members? Apparently not. According to data from the 2000 US Census younger mothers and fathers DO volunteer.

Age Group	Percent of that age group saying they volunteer	Average hours volunteered per month
25-34 years of age	40.5	15.9
35-44 years	50.9	16.1
45-54 years	47.9	14.7
55-64 years	42.9	12.1
65-74 years	41.4	14.1
75 years and over	39.0	19.5

According to a large US Labor Dept study, unemployed women are far less likely to volunteer with an organization than part-or-full time working women. Working women volunteer more than stay-at-home moms. Chew on that one! (Source: http://lmi.ides.state.il.us/lmr/winter_2002/table_1.htm. Read it and weep.)

Sorry, mom, the problem may be you... According to U.S. Dept of Labor Statistics, the number of women who worked full-time year-round more than doubled from 27.5 percent to 50.2 percent over the past 30 years. Gains were particularly dramatic for married women and for women with children. For example, women with children between the ages of 6 and 17 had a 34-hour *average* work-week between 1969 and 1998. The percent women working full-time year round rose from 25.8 percent to 48.6 percent.

Interpretation: Mom has less free time to get kids to and fro and be a volunteer. She's exhausted during the weekend (just like dads), and had to compress more of her household responsibilities into the weekend.

The problem may also be "more work." According to that same U.S. Labor Dept study, the number of men and women working *more than* a 40 hour work week has risen between 1979 and 1998. For men, the percentage rose from 35.1 in 1979 to 40.2 in 1998; for women, the proportions were 14.0 percent and 21.6 percent over the same period, respectively. The study noted that the higher the education of the worker, the more likely they were to work *longer* hours. Take that.. you college educated suburbanites.

Because the number of hours in the day has NOT increased, these numbers tell us this: "available non-working hours" have shrunk in the past 30 years. That means more competition for less time.

Are we competing with dad? According to the *National Study of a Changing Workforce* study done over several decades, children of working parents today are getting more time with their fathers and about the same time with their mothers as in 1977. Working women spend three hours with their children, and men 2.3 hours, each workday, compared with 3.3 hours for women and 1.8 hours for men in 1977, resulting in a net gain in parental time.

Put this study and the US Labor study together, and you get a picture of working families -working more, at their peak volunteer years, but still carving out time to be together.

So where are they getting the extra time from? For some, it could be the church. If the sports-participation statistics are right, and most kids aren't on teams, then we may indeed be seeing what some call the "cocooning" effect. Families staying home to be together, especially now that mom and dad work a longer work week than in 1977.

The competition may also be "OTHER CHURCHES." According to the ongoing Harvard "Pluralism" study, in 1997 there were an estimated 163 million people who were members of a church in the U.S. The Roman Catholic Church accounts for 60 million of those adherents. According to Barna Research there are 320,000 Protestant churches in the U.S. One hundred million "members" divided by 320,000 churches = one church for every 312 people in the U.S. Churches went on a building spree in the 60's, 70's and 80's. New denominations popped up. There are more church buildings now than ever before in the history of our country.

And interestingly, the new churches, by and large, did not grow at the expense of the old mainline denominations. According to the Presbyterian Department of Research, when a member stops going to a Presbyterian church, they are most likely to go nowhere. They just slip into church inactivity. Demographically speaking, the Presbyterians have a birthrate and retention rate problem. And while some churches have closed, especially traditional churches in older cities, many others have opened in the cities.

In most areas of the country, and in a majority of churches, Sunday School attendance is at or near a 40 year low. This would seem to indict the culture (or the churches), but in fact, in poll after poll, Americans

have never scored higher on their general sense of spirituality or desire for spiritual understanding and healing. What some polls and pundits are suggesting is that many of church members and non-members are looking beyond the church for spiritual fulfillment, and that we are in a period of de-institutionalized spirituality. But I digress...

The competition may also be with Sleep Deprivation... According to the National Sleep Institute study, Seventy-four percent of us reported experiencing at least one symptom of a sleep disorder a few nights a week or more. That number was up significantly from 62 percent in 1999 and 2000, and from 69 percent last year. Further supporting this increase is the rise in sales of sleep aids. 15% of us report using them last year. Men get less sleep than women, and the older you are, the more sleep you get.

If you're Roman Catholic, you have another problem...

According to an ABC poll on Religion in America, Catholic men attend church only 29% of the time, compared to 42% for Protestant men.

The Competition also includes a shift in American attitudes about organized religion...

Despite widespread efforts to increase church attendance across the nation, the 2005 annual survey of church attendance conducted by The Barna Group (barna.org) shows that one-third of all adults (34%) remain "unchurched." That proportion has changed little during the past five years. However, because of the nation's population continuing growth, the number of unchurched adults continues to grow by nearly a million people annually. The research confirms that millions of unchurched people are spiritually active. For instance, one out of every five reads the Bible in a typical week; six out of ten pray to God each week; and during the past year 5% have shared their faith in Jesus Christ with people who are not professing Christians. In fact, nearly one million unchurched adults tithe their income – that is, donate at least 10% of their annual household revenue to non-profit entities.

The church dropout rate among people who define themselves as being somewhere middle-of-the-road on political issues is escalating faster than among those who are either conservative or liberal. And the numbers for Roman Catholics and those who live in the Northeast are even more pronounced.

"A large and growing number of Americans who avoid congregational contact are not rejecting Christianity as much as they are shifting how they interact with God and people in a strategic effort to have a more fulfilling spiritual life." This trend is very evident among Young Adults and is distinct from the Baby Boomer generation. --Barna.org, Summary of the 2005 Annual Survey.

Mixed Messages?

The competition may be our own changing attitudes and messages of what "Sabbath" really means.

According to a 1999 survey of Presbyterian pastors, elders and members, their definition of "Sabbath keeping" had evolved to include moments of Sabbath throughout the week (times of prayer and meditation ranking highest among those moments). About 25% practiced "Sabbath-like" activities 2 -3 days a week, and another 25% recognized they were engaged in Sabbath activities on a daily basis. (pcusa.org/research)

Most pastors (63%) said they very comfortable or generally comfortable with the idea of separating "Sabbath keeping" from Sunday.

Additional Factors to Consider:

1. Historical trends... Churches often compare today's attendance to a "Golden Age of Church Attendance" in the 50's through mid-60's. But for comparative purposes, the so-called "Golden Age" was rather short-lived. Sunday School as we know it, however, is barely a 100 year old phenomenon. Teaching our faith to our children has taken many forms over the centuries, and will continue to do so in

the future. And as will be mentioned below, Gallup Poll surveys of church attendance in 50's are surprisingly un-golden.

2. We are in a period of general church attendance decline. According to Gallup and Barna surveys, church attendance surged in the late 80's and early 90's after a number of years of decline, but began to decline again by the mid- 90's.

3. We are in a period of changing attitudes about church commitment and the concept of institutional loyalty. This period is sometimes referred to as the "post modern" period. It began in the 1970's.

4. AND YET, WE LIVE IN "RELIGIOUS TIMES"... according to 2002 Gallup Poll Data, Americans have never felt religion to be more important in their lives than right now. The numbers are virtually the same from 1982 to 2002. 61% of Americans rank religion as "very important" in their lives. This is up from a dramatic "low" in 1941. (Apparently there are atheists in WW II foxholes.) Actually, people's sense of the importance of religion has increased slightly since 1982. One interesting divide, however, is between women and men. Religion is important or very important to 69% of women, but only 51% of men. (And remember, Dad is spending more time with the kids these days than in past decades).

4. We are in a general period of "well being." Emphasis on traditional Biblical education and church attendance historically wanes during such periods. Similar patterns are seen in voting turn-out, hot-line ministries, and the historic waves of "revival" ministries. Does this mean that Sunday School could use a disaster of Biblical proportions? ;-)

5. Churches of the post-modern era no longer preach *the gospel of attendance* as a path to piety. Simply put: attendance pins have gone out of fashion. The institutional church has promoted an institution-centered faith, and as the culture has shifted away from organized groups the church has paid the price (witness: lack of membership at Moose, Elk, the Masons, and the PTA).

6. The past experience of institutional religious education left a bad taste in the mouths of many kids in the last several generations who we must now deal with as adults. To put it bluntly, "Some of them are back, and not all of them are buying it."

7. The quality of many Christian education offerings and worship experiences seems stuck in the past. On this last item I have devoted quite a bit of energy and enthusiasm. In no way am I suggesting that Sunday School should disappear. I believe it must get better, and have worked hard through my efforts with the Rotation Model and Sunday School Software Inc. to make the experience of learning in the church better. The rate of change in our culture has quickened, but the church has not kept up. Musical tastes are a good example of this. Check your CD collection for organ music. Change is not the enemy, complacency is.

8. "Sleep overs" --odd as this might seem, are one of the trends CHIPPING AWAY at Sunday morning attendance. My evidence is only somewhat anecdotal, but I KNOW in the 60's and 70's that kids didn't have nearly as many sleepovers on Saturday night as they do these days. We didn't celebrate birthdays as festively either. But nowadays, it seems that many of our children have birthday party sleepovers to attend every month. Well then I ran across this tidbit from American Demographics magazine (www.demographics.com), "sleepovers are becoming more common at a younger age." It seems like such a minor trend, but coupled with other minor trends -it means a small percentage of your potential attenders are out of commission each Sunday. I'm looking for hard research to back this up, but "amount of sleep" is a relatively recent issue.

9. Average Bed Times -- And "The Advent of Bedroom Electronics." According to a Knowledge Networks/SRI study, 67% of U.S. children have TVs in their bedrooms. According to Belgian research children with a television set in their rooms went to bed significantly later on weekdays and weekends and got up significantly later on weekend days. Children with a gaming computer in their rooms went to bed significantly later on weekdays. On weekdays, they spent significantly less time in bed. Children who

watched more television went to bed later on weekdays and weekend days and got up later on weekend days. They spent less time in bed on weekdays. They reported higher overall levels of being tired. Children who spent more time playing computer games went to bed later on weekdays and weekend days and got up later on weekend days. On weekdays, they actually got up significantly earlier. They spent less time in bed on weekdays and reported higher levels of tiredness. Children who spent more time using the Internet went to bed significantly later during the week and during the weekend. They got up later on weekend days. They spent less time in bed during the week and reported higher levels of tiredness. Going out was also significantly related to sleeping later and less.

<http://www.journalsleep.org/citation/sleepdata.asp?citationid=2324>.

Why Teens don't make it to Sunday School...

A recent study of 3,120 Rhode Island teenagers conducted by Carskadon and Amy Wolfson, assistant professor of psychology at The College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., found that 85 percent were chronically sleep-deprived and accumulated a minimum 10-hour sleep deficit during the week. Forty percent went to bed after 11 p.m.; 26 percent said they usually got less than 6.5 hours on school nights. Research has shown that teens are wired to be night owls, but require as much if not more sleep than children. Sleeping in on the weekends is a matter of health for many teens. Psychology Today's editor states that, "High school kids average 6.1 hours of sleep a night when they need 9.25 hours to be fully alert all day long the next day."

The problem may also be our expectations and double standards.

Few cast aspersions on an adult member who travels for business or work an occasional weekend.

But God help the 10 year old travel soccer player.

The proportion of children attending Sunday School in most churches is routinely higher than the proportion adults attending adult education. But rarely do churches get bent out of shape about adult education. Where the kids are concerned, we seem to beat ourselves and lament.

For example: A church with 250 adult members and 50 children would feel good about counting 125 of the 250 adults and 25 of the 50 children in worship every week at 10:30 a.m. 150 total bodies in attendance would be considered rather successful in most 250 member church. And having an adult class with 25 adults in class at 9:15 a.m. would be WELCOMED by many of those small churches, even though it was only 10% of total number of adults. Yet imagine a Sunday School thinking 10% children's attendance was a "success." Even at 25% (13 of the 50 kids enrolled) would generally be considered "too low" by most churches.

The rise of "small group" ministries across the denominations has taught us that adults need small groups that meet a variety of scheduling and spiritual needs. Many churches offer a variety of study and fellowship experiences to adults. But the children are largely offered 9:00 a.m. on Sunday morning -take it or leave it. Most churches do not have children's fellowships, and those who do typically teach "Bible Lite" -if Bible at all.

It is much easier to join a church as an adult than as a youth. Prior to joining, an adult typically attends two or three optional "coffees & classes" led by the pastor. By contrast, a 14 year old may have a year or more worth of classes, attendance requirements, books to read, a statement of faith to explain, and an interview with the elders to sweat out.

We preach "obey the Sabbath" as a means of leveraging people into Sunday classes. But then go home to mow the lawn, garden, and do lots of other things Moses would frown upon as quite unsabbath like. A reminder of what Jesus said: "Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man." We need to be careful about pretending to occupy the high moral or theological ground on the "sanctity" of Sunday morning education.

Is the Problem a Lack of Faith?

I believe that's an easy answer offered by preachers and people without answers. "Lack of faith" does address some of the reasons why people don't support Christian education or Sunday School. But unfortunately, it doesn't explain why people in the 60's and 70's had higher Sunday School attendance. Few would look back at those decades as "decades of faith." The surveys done over the years do not give credence to such a view. Some have suggested that belonging to a church was more a part of the "American Dream" back then. It was what "good Americans" did. But those crowded churches and classrooms may, in fact, reflect a selective memory, and/or fewer church buildings at the time. As previously noted, it was NOT the "baby boom" which overcrowded the churches, because there are more children in the US today than in the 1950's and 60's.

Well, then, maybe people don't go to church as often as they used to "back then" ?

Sorry, another myth blown. Gallup Polls have asked Americans since 1957 if they have "attended a church or synagogue in the last week." In 1939, 41% said yes. In 2002, 44% said yes. In 1957, 47% said yes. The lowest % in the last 40 years was 1950.

Is it a diminishing of Institutional Authority over the years?

There are theories that "people respected institutions more back then." But the Gallup polls, Harris surveys and Barna Research tell us something quite different. They tell us that "the Church" is still one of the most respected institutions in our country. And a HIGHER percentage of Americans claim church membership nowadays than 30 and 40 years ago! (In 1950's Gallup survey just 49% of Americans claimed church membership. In 2000, 69% claimed church membership.)

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/wat/archive/wat011298.htm>

However, there is some conflicting data on this subject. In July 2002, Gallup reported that only 66% of American believe Protestant ministers can be trusted. "Confidence in Religious Institutions" in 2002 had sank to 45% - a 20-year low. Those 2002 Gallup results were: 26% had a "great deal" of confidence; 19% had "quite a lot;" 32% had "some;" 18% had "very little."

Annual Barna surveys show a growing Un-churched population that has a surprising degree of spiritual activity and expressed Christian faith. They're just pursuing their faith outside the institutions.

Gallup Polls do tell us that the "perception of relevancy" about the Church has changed. In 1957 only 7% thought religion was "old-fashioned and out of date." By 2002 the percentage believing that was 24%.

It is fair to say that "lack of attendance" is being aggravated by lack of confidence in the church's ability to make a difference in the lives of their children. In this respect I do know from personal experience, that one's OWN experience as a child in the church can inspire lack of confidence in traditional methods. Many parents may indeed be sub-consciously thinking "it wasn't that good for me so it won't be for MY children." In other words, we may be fighting the legacy of 40 years of boredom and mediocrity in the Sunday School and church in general.

Regarding the current level of Bible literacy.... (now here's a problem)

A 1997 Gallup poll found that 92% of Americans homes owned a Bible, but fewer than half could name the first book of the Old Testament. Fewer than half could name all four Gospels. According to a Professor at Wheaton College quoted in Christianity Today magazine, 1/3 of his incoming evangelical-leaning freshman class didn't know the Christmas story was found in Matthew, or that Paul was in the book of Acts.

...And these are the people we have to recruit to be Sunday School teachers. Oy Vey.

So what is it? Why is Sunday School in a funk in so many churches?

It's not one thing. It's many. Excluding the number of "funks" that are locally self-induced by uninspired leadership and a congregation's overall local decline, the evidence suggests we are losing ground on many fronts:

- 1) Changes in the culture. If you thought the Baby Boomers weren't completely in-tune with church, wait until you meet their children --the 18-30 year olds.
- 2) Increased competition from Media, Family-time demands, and other churches.
- 3) The growing un-churched but nominally Christian culture providing more "cover" for skipping out on church commitments.
- 4) A long standing general lack of Bible literacy (or desire for it) has been undermining Sunday School's main premise --that a Biblical education is important.
- 5) The Church's rather monolithic and unchanging approach to programming styles, timeslots and outreach.

These are not new problems. Things have not suddenly grown worse in the last 10 or 20 years. If Sunday School's goal was to turn children into faithful adults sitting in our pews, then even the "1950's and 60's heydays" could be considered an abject failure. Where are all those kids who sat in our churches in the 60's and 70's? A large percentage of them did not return to active membership in our churches. And they did not bring their children with them. In some very real ways, we are "*paying for the sins of our fathers*" (and mothers). The ministry they led did not lead to large numbers returning to the church in adulthood. And those who do come back, are finding the church largely unchanged from their childhood.

And those who returned are different than their parents generation because their world is different. They are working more hours, especially moms, and yet seem to be more intent on spending time with their kids. They are generally more tired on the weekends and they are more mobile. The movement from a manufacturing to service industry has meant more weekend work too.

Those who did return to the church with their children are more willing to "optionalize" commitments such as Sunday school, in part because they are less institutionally loyal than the previous generation. As a generation, parents don't think Sunday morning Sunday School is EXCLUSIVELY important to their child's spiritual upbringing. Waking up tired on Sunday morning with the prospect of attending a mediocre experience only helps make their decision to stay home that much easier.

The glass is half full, but the glass may be getting smaller.

In the first ever research done on Empty-Nest religious patterns, the Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religious Studies has released a report states:

Just as family cycle transitions into parenting roles among the baby boom cohort exerted an upward push on worship attendance for this cohort over the last 20 years and helped stabilize overall religious participation rates in the United States over this same period, the inevitable and relatively massive transition of the boomers out of active parenting roles should exert considerable downward pressure on overall levels of religious participation for at least the next twenty years. ... Regular attendance for empty nesters is significantly less than for persons with either preteen or teenage children. ...Social scientists refer to this phenomenon as "churches by choice" -as a matter of child rearing, not by conviction of faith http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/roozen_article1.html

That study was conducted in 1996. If they're right about the effect of the "Boomers who become Empty Nesters," the Church is in a SHAKING OUT period through 2016. The Baby Boom Generation is a triple threat. They spiked our attendance when they were young, they drifted back to the church with their own children -but with a different attitude about us, and as soon as their children have left the nest the Boomers will drift off again.

And the demographic groups coming after the Boomers have even less interest in religious affiliation and church attendance and lower rates of volunteerism. (See the findings from the Barna annual survey above.)

A note of caution: Some successful churches don't feel a sense of urgency about these issues, -particularly those in growing towns. Their numbers are growing, or at least not shrinking. But the fact of the matter is that the trends seen in multiple surveys are affecting EVERY church. Smaller churches feel those trends more significantly. And some of the remedies I'm about to suggest make great sense even in successful programs, because they address the needs of real people in your congregation, or just on the outside of it. Indeed, the time to change is WHEN you're healthy. The time to close the barn door is before the horse leaves.

Jesus said "let the little children come to me and do not hinder them."

But to carry that out in today's world and for the foreseeable future,
we cannot sit by Jesus' side and wait for the kids to come to us.

We need to remove the hinderances.

The last part of this article is not about how to make your Sunday School better by doing X, Y, Z. It's about rethinking the whole of our approach...

You can learn about what I think is the best way to teach Bible stories to groups of kids. Just read my book *Workshop Rotation ~A New Model for Sunday School*. But notice that even *my* book's title reveals an expectation about timeslot! When it's really about how to teach Bible stories to groups of kids.

I'd like to teeter on the edge of some new proposals...

Proposal #1 — Is Sunday morning before 10 a.m. the BEST time in the 21st Century to conduct children's Bible education? In some churches and places in the country, the answer is no. It's only ONE time during the week where we can conduct children's Bible education.

The goal of Sunday School may ultimately be this: to not just be on *Sunday*.

Proposal #2 — If we had no preconceived notions or schedules to hold us back, what would a program of events, classes and experiences look like that encompassed all the content we deemed important for our children to learn over a period of years? It might incorporate some special studies on Sunday morning, some special evenings, some special retreats, some family ministry events, some home groups, and some parent-led home teaching. It would not offer key content in just one format, place and timeslot. It would offer additional studies and experiences for those ready to go deeper. It would include "cast your net" events designed to attract the unchurched members in our midst and their children. It would include several "rite of passage" events to mark accomplishments and points of spiritual maturation. It would incorporate youth, confirmation, family and adult ministries in its design. It would view students as individuals with individual needs, individual schedules and individual preferences, not "take it or leave it."

Proposal #3 — I propose that each church have a branch of its Christian education ministry charged with the responsibility of *bringing CE to the kids*, rather than bringing the kids to CE.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that any church which is not actively working on a plan to reach children through their homes, their parents, through their siblings and neighbors in a personal "off-church-campus" way, is a program that is living in the past, and not addressing current and future needs.

The future of Sunday School may ultimately be to become "un-churched" itself.

And oddly enough, it's looks a lot like the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus traveled the roads, visited the towns, and went into homes. I'm not suggesting we abandon Sunday School on Sunday. Rather, I'm suggesting we find new ways to enact what Sunday School *is supposed to be doing*. Christ himself gave us the model and the commission.... *go out into the world, ...teach them all I have commanded you*. He didn't say "stay here and set up folding tables." Sometimes his teaching did look more formal and localized. Take the Sermon on the Mount for example, or the times where he is described as teaching in the Temple. But also look at the varied locations Jesus went. Why? Because he was looking for the sinners not the saints. If your Sunday School is looking for the sinners and not just the saints, it has to get up and get moving too.

The "look, feel, and shape" of such an "off-campus" approach is uncharted territory for most of us. It's simply not the way we were brought up or trained. And there are few published resources to help - especially if you are of the Mainline Church persuasion. But it must be innovated --or we will become increasingly irrelevant due to the many factors mentioned in this article.

Statistics And Trends Are Not Destiny If We Have The Courage To Invent Solutions.

In his article, "Innovating on the Fly," renown church growth consultant Bill Easum writes one of the most true statements about the church that I have ever read. And here I am applying it to Christian education and Sunday School.

"For the next fifty years, the ability to constantly innovate "on the fly" will present one of the most important leadership issues facing any organization.

Not since the Reformation has the need to discover new ways to achieve old things been as important as it is today.

Those not secure enough to innovate on the fly will be unable to effectively lead a church through the next twenty years."

You can read the full article and many other excellent Easum articles at
<http://www.easumbandy.com/resources/index.php?action=details&record=338>

Conclusion:

I am sure that there are some folks reading this article who will disagree with it. I am sure there will be some who shudder at the thought of "abandoning" a monolithic approach to children's Bible education. And there will simply be some who aren't interested in putting forth the extra effort required to change. But this article wasn't written for them. It was written to help me understand some truths, and to help clarify in my own mind some thoughts about "where do we go from here" as they relate to Christian education. If those have been your

Characteristics of a New Ministry to Children

I begin with EXPANDED versions of the modest proposals with which I concluded *Part II* in this series....

I'd like to teeter on the edge of some new proposals...

Proposal #1

Question: Is Sunday morning before 10 a.m. the BEST time in the 21st Century to conduct children's Bible education? In some churches and places in the country, the answer is logically "no." It's only ONE time during the week where we can conduct children's Bible education. Theologically speaking, Sabbath is for being with your family at rest and contemplation. Worship was reserved for just before and just after Sabbath (sunset and sunrise). So let's not get all worked up about Sunday School "has to be" on Sunday. Even the idea of Sunday School isn't very old... and it was originally instituted to get children off the streets.

RATHER... let's move the discussion of "*is* Sunday" beyond the question of "what day then" and make a larger observation:

The goal of Sunday School may ultimately be this: -- to not just be on *Sunday*.

Proposal #2 explains this 'larger observation' further...

Imagine if we had never heard of Sunday School. Imagine if we had no preconceived notions or schedules to hold back our thinking of what a Bible based education should be like for children, youth and adults. What would we create?

In the 'old' days of fewer churches and slower means of transportation, it made sense to create a program of study that "got them while they were already here for worship." The idea of Bible classes before or immediately after worship on Sunday arose as a matter of logical convenience. And there is still a good deal of truth -for some churches- for the argument of convenience. But there is nothing sacred about having classes before worship. It's merely a choice based on a prediction of the most convenient time to achieve maximum attendance.

I want to digress for a moment to attack one of the most prevalent attitudes among church staff today -- that members are somehow tainted by the "CONSUMER oriented society" --and the church shouldn't "give in" to that attitude. I've heard some preachers decry "people today" who want churches to be CONVENIENT like "Fast food drive throughs." Balderdash. Everything about the modern church is a matter of "logical convenience." Pews lined in rows to fit a maximum number of people in a room. Scripture Lesson Chapter/Verse printed in a handy bulletin. Pre-printed Pledge envelopes. Evening meetings scheduled "after work hours." Air conditioning. Precut communion bread. To those who want to blame the people, I say "judge not lest ye be judged."

One of the BIGGEST reasons many educators, pastors and volunteer leaders don't want to consider change is because it will inconvenience them. Further down in this document I'm going to propose a list of WAYS to do a NEW KIND of Children's Ministry. And almost every one of those ways is going to be inconvenient to the way we do things now. Change is inconvenient. And to put this back on a theological plane for a moment --God is inconvenient too. It would be a lot easier if God didn't care so much. "It would be a lot easier to go back to Egypt, at least there we had bread and water." Ok...so let's move on....

"Sunday School that's not just on Sunday" might incorporate some special studies on Sunday morning, some special evenings, some special retreats, some family ministry events, some home groups, and some parent-led home teaching. The Bible is far too important to teach in just one one format, place and timeslot. Our new approach would be to offer additional studies and experiences for those ready to go

deeper (I can think of about 10 elementary kids at my church who are ready for that --and shouldn't be held back by the "less-ready"). It would include "cast your net" events designed to attract the unchurched members in our midst and their children. It would include several "rite of passage" events to mark accomplishments and points of spiritual maturation. It would incorporate youth, confirmation, family and adult ministries in its design. It would view students as individuals with individual needs, individual schedules and individual preferences, not "take it or leave it."

Proposal #3... Change on the scope and scale I'm proposing will require new time & new leaders, not more time for the same leaders.

I propose that each church have a branch of its Christian education ministry charged with the responsibility of bringing CE to the kids, rather than bringing the kids to CE. In fact, I would go so far as to say that any church which is not actively working on a plan to reach children through their homes, their parents, through their siblings and neighbors in a personal "off-church-campus" way, is a program that is living in the past, and not addressing current and future needs.

The "look, feel, and shape" of such an "off-campus" approach is uncharted territory for most of us. It's simply not the way we were brought up or trained. And there are few published resources to help - especially if you are of the Mainline Church persuasion. But it must be innovated or we will become increasingly irrelevant.

STATISTICS AND TRENDS ARE NOT DESTINY. Not if we learn to invent.

In his article, "Innovating on the Fly," reknown church growth consultant Bill Easum writes one of the most true statements about the church that I have ever read. And here I am applying it to Christian education and Sunday School.

"For the next fifty years, the ability to constantly innovate "on the fly" will present one of the most important leadership issues facing any organization.

Not since the Reformation has the need to discover new ways to achieve old things been as important as it is today.

Those not secure enough to innovate on the fly will be unable to effectively lead a church through the next twenty years."

You can read the full article and many other excellent Easum articles at
<http://www.easumbandy.com/resources/index.php?action=details&record=338>

Conclusion to Part II:

I am sure that there are some folks reading this article who will disagree with it. I am sure there will be some who shudder at the thought of "abandoning" a monolithic approach to children's Bible education. And there will simply be some who aren't interested in putting forth the extra effort required to change. But this article wasn't written for them. It was written to help me understand some truths, and to help clarify in my own mind some thoughts about "where do we go from here" as they relate to Christian education.

Beginning of Part III

I should say first that many churches facing difficult challenges ARE doing well, or at least holding their own. My research was not to describe the decline in every church --but mainly to take away the crutches that failing --and even successful churches use to prop up their lack of growth, or lack of desire to change what seems to be working --thus ignoring the future. I've known several educators who have thriving

programs, but continue to blame sports or homework as the reason why MORE kids aren't coming. Part II should generally take care of that crutch.

There are many reasons why decline can happen in a children's program. In my experience, the #1 reason is leadership. (It's the same in business, and in families). And leadership in the church --like it or not, starts at the top --the pastor. If people feel good about the pastor and the direction he/she is leading them, they usually feel good about other opportunities in the church as well. It's not always so. Some churches with a "beloved pastor" use that love as cover for "don't rock the boat with new ideas."

I've also seen poor leadership kill children and volunteer enthusiasm. Recently I was at a school sponsored event where teams of children were being awarded in a science "Olympiad." As various teachers brought the enthusiastic children up front to announce names and awards, I was struck by the range of personalities and number of inappropriate/poor speakers who took the microphone. One leader of children made the parents cringe. You've seen them too. Some programs have a "vibe" about them that is infectious --either positively and negatively. In one of the churches I have been privileged to serve, our decline was due in part to worn-out leaders from the past still hanging on. So the first thing you will want to do is CHECK THE VIBE.

We are in an era where experimentation is needed.

The following guidelines are a first draft. After Parts I and II of this series led people to contact me about more details" I decide to offer a first glance at the notes I've been collecting on the subject of "what the future of ministry to children might need to look like."

Please note: I'm not going to explain the obvious, --which is that we are in the business of nurturing faith and biblical literacy. This is about "how" not "what."

Characteristics of a new ministry to children:

1. Do less "whole group" programming that is year-round and facility based. This will open up time for other opportunities to go out and be where the kids are. New venues will create new opportunities for interaction and keep us from offering only a classroom based model. (Example: a children's group I know pledged to attend events in which each member was already involved. The group would show up at soccer games to watch individuals play, dances, school competitions, etc.)
2. Think beyond Sunday morning. Organize opportunities to meet a variety of options and schedules. Provide opportunities that have defined start and end dates. Studies show that people find it easier to join newly forming groups, rather than break in to existing ones, and respond to defined lengths of commitment.
3. Create opportunities that include the children's parents at times, rather than viewing parents as "the ride to and from the program."
4. Have a one-on-one component where leaders go where kids live and play. Involve mentors, and youth as role models.
5. Seek to match each child with an opportunity to serve/help in the life of the church.
6. Expand the number of ritual/rites of passage which children/youth can pass through, rather than lumping it all into one Confirmation behemoth. Keep these "rites of passage" easy to participate in (no 10 week courses), but special enough to draw wide interest.
7. Individual churches will shape parts of their ministry to children in ways that capitalize on real strengths -not imagined ones. A real strength in the church might be it's tradition of camping, or service, or the presence of college students, for example. Such strengths present unique opportunities to those churches.

8. Use technology to "data-base" contact information about kids and their activity/interests. No more losing kids through the cracks.
9. Planning meetings will include focusing on the lives and needs of individuals, not just program detail.
10. Develop new standards for measuring success and failure. Five quality encounters a year can have a greater impact than 25 weekly attendances in a classroom.
11. Recognize that some children/youth are ready for exceptional commitment and provide a track for them to follow. (By analogy, schools have found that gifted students need gifted/extra approaches or they drift off).
12. All children's ministry in the future must be equally focused on family ministry, and in particular, encouraging and TRAINING parents to talk about faith in the home and in daily living.
13. Your thoughts here.

I welcome your thoughts and comments, and I invite you to keep reading in Parts I and III of this series.

Neil MacQueen

Revised November 2004

Neil MacQueen is a Presbyterian minister, Christian educator, President of Sunday Software Inc., and leader in the Workshop Rotation Model movement for reinventing Sunday School. Over the years he has written and published numerous articles and two books on Christian education and led numerous conferences and seminars on these subjects. Neil and his wife Malinda and their three daughters live in Columbus Ohio. This article was first published at www.sundaysoftware.com. Email Neil at neil@sundaysoftware.com. To view the sources of these statistics, visit www.sundaysoftware.com/stats.htm *This article may be reprinted provided that the author and website source of the statistics (www.sundaysoftware.com/stats.htm) are included*