

A Handbook for Small Sunday School Leaders



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Introduction

This handbook was designed as a resource for small Sunday School leaders to assist with self-assessment, goal-setting, and program planning. Developed for the MNO Synod Christian Education Committee, this handbook can be used by anyone involved in small Sunday School planning, such as teachers and leaders, Sunday school superintendents, Christian education committees, and pastors.

The reflections, ideas and suggestions in this handbook were generated in part by participants in "Spicing Up Your Small Sunday School", a synod-wide workshop for small Sunday School leaders hosted by the MNO Synod Christian Education Committee (April 14, 2007 - Winnipeg). The Committee would like to thank all who attended for sharing their ideas and contributing to this handbook. The Committee would also like to thank Sunday School teachers throughout the Synod for their commitment to this important ministry. May God bless and inspire you as you teach our children about Him.

Handbook Purpose

The **purpose** of this handbook is to:

- affirm and encourage leaders and teachers in small Sunday Schools.
- inspire leaders to reflect upon and recognize the strengths, possibilities, and challenges of their small Sunday School.
- explore suggestions for curriculum development and learning activities appropriate for a small Sunday School setting.
- offer a list of educational resources for leaders that are useful and appropriate for small Sunday Schools.

Handbook Contents

The **contents** of this handbook include:

- **Blessings and Challenges** - reflections on some of the gifts and obstacles unique to the small Sunday School experience. This section also includes some practical strategies and “solutions” for specific challenges.
- **“Here’s What We Do”** - inspirational ideas that have been used with success in small Sunday Schools (shared by small Sunday School leaders from the MNO Synod).
- **Educational Resources** - links to professionally-developed curricula, teaching materials, and other educational resources for small Sunday School leaders.

Blessings and Challenges

Like most things in life, small Sunday Schools are characterized by a combination of strengths and weaknesses. At the MNO Synod's "Spicing Up Your Small Sunday School" workshop, we asked small Sunday School leaders to identify what they considered to be the blessings and the challenges in their own small Sunday school settings.

The following lists were compiled on the basis of their responses, and may be helpful to your own reflection and planning.

Blessings of the Small Sunday School

- Teachers can make close, personal connections with children.
- Teachers can build on the close relationships they've made with the children and tailor curricula to the specific needs, learning styles, and dynamics of their group.
- Children of various ages can connect with each other and enjoy lasting, "intergenerational" friendships.
- Teachers are more likely to work closely together with one another, building good working relationships and friendships.
- Teachers can more easily "fill in" for one another when necessary.
- Group activities can be easier to supervise.
- Lessons can be pursued to a greater depth.
- Crafts can be more involved, intricate and rewarding with a closer supervisor-to-student ratio.

Food for thought: Does the list above reflect the blessings of your own small Sunday School?

What are some additional blessings that you have experienced?

Challenges

- (Unpredictable) fluctuation of attendance affects lesson planning and group dynamics.
- Available resources/curricula are often designed for a larger Sunday School setting.
- Lots of creativity is required to adapt lessons to a smaller, multi-age setting.
- Teacher recruitment is often difficult (specific challenges included: overextended schedules, volunteer burnout, "red-tape" issues like criminal background checks, etc.).
- A smaller group of teachers can be problematic for scheduling and arranging for substitutes.
- Sunday School budgets are often restrictive.
- Certain activities can be limited with a small group of children (e.g., Christmas Program).
- Imbalance in boy/girl ratio or age ratio can negatively affect group dynamics.

Food for thought: Does the list above reflect the challenges in your own small Sunday School? What are some additional challenges that you have experienced? Can you think of how you might overcome these challenges?

Challenges	Solutions

Building on our Blessings/ Facing our Challenges

After assessing the Blessings and Challenges in the small Sunday School, "Spicing Up Your Small Sunday School" workshop participants brainstormed strategies in order to address some of the challenges experienced in the small Sunday School.

Below is a list of some **practical solutions to important challenges** that may be useful for your own planning.

Challenge: Our small group has a wide range of ages. It makes it impossible to divide the children into "classes".

Solution: Teachers can work together to develop "intergenerational" lessons and activities in which children of all ages can participate.

Challenge: We can't recruit very many teachers.

Solution: Take a "team teaching" approach in which leaders can teach on alternating Sundays.

Challenge: We don't have enough volunteers to help teachers supervise crafts and activities.

Solution 1: Invite Youth or older Sunday School children to assist adult leaders by acting as helpers for lesson activities, crafts, and games.

Solution 2: Invite the children's parents to participate in Sunday School. They can serve as an "extra pair of hands" or even occasionally as substitute teachers (Having parents involved can also help ease "separation anxiety"!).

Challenge: On some Sundays, we do not have any teachers, substitutes, or other supervisors available for the children.

Solution: Have "activity bags" with bible-themed picture books, colouring pages, crayons, and other appropriate (and "quiet") materials available for those Sundays when it is not possible to schedule Sunday School teachers/subs.

“Here’s What We Do”

Participants in the Spicing Up Your Small Sunday School workshop were asked to share an activity, lesson, game or idea that had been used with success in their own small Sunday School. Below is a list of ideas that “worked”; go ahead and use or adapt them in your own small Sunday School!

In fact, we challenge you to pick at least one idea from the list below that you have never used before, and try it out in your own small Sunday School!

1. The Human Board Game

Description: The Human Board Game is a fun and easy game that lets the children act as human-sized “playing pieces”. Instead of a board, create spaces for children to “jump” on by taping squares of paper on the floor. Create a large game “die” out of a square box that can be “thrown” to roll a number. Base your game on any bible story, which you will tell prior to starting the game. On some of the squares of paper where the children might land, include questions based on the story that must be answered before moving ahead. You can also create “roadblock” squares based on the story that make the player move back, lose a turn, or stay on the spot until they roll a certain number.

For Example: Create a “Prodigal Son Human Board Game”. First, tell the story of The Prodigal Son in your own words, or read a picture book based on this parable. Create your board game based on what happens in this story. Questions might include: “What does God do when we say we are sorry? If you answer correctly, roll again”. A roadblock might be: “You are angry that your father would forgive your sinful brother when you’ve been good all along! Lose a turn”.

Playing tips:

- Play in teams so that it is easier to keep track of whose turn it is.
- Play the game until everyone finishes so that everyone can “win”.
- Tell children to invite their parents to play the game with them after worship!

2. Connect With the Community

To strengthen a sense of community between the Sunday School children and the rest of the congregation, schedule intergenerational activities open to *all* members of your congregation, from the youngest to the oldest. Ideas include:

- bowling tournaments with mixed-aged teams.
- a tour of Christmas light displays in your neighborhood in December.
- Easter and Christmas plays that involve multi-generational participants.

3. Foster Sunday School Traditions

Traditions bind children and teachers together in a special way. Ideas for traditions that you can start with your own small Sunday School:

- **Plant tulips bulbs** on the church grounds in the fall—look forward to watching them bloom in the spring!
- **Blessing of backpacks:** At the beginning of the school year, invite children to bring their backpacks to church for a special blessing. This tradition reminds us that our daily lives should be dedicated to the Lord, and that the Lord goes with us wherever we go!. (Adults can participate as well by bringing their laptop bags, purses, briefcases, etc. for a blessing.)
- **Bake pretzels together** on the First Sunday in Lent and share them with the congregation.
- **Make “stained glass” cookies at Easter time.** Use broken up bits of hard candies to decorate cookies shaped like flowers or Easter eggs.
- **Organize an Easter play.** We often think of dramatizing the Christmas story, but we can also put on a play about the Easter story! Reach beyond the Sunday School, and get youth and adult congregation members to participate as well!

4. Crafts: Beyond the Family Fridge

What would Sunday School be without crafts? Here's a fresh take on the idea: instead of making crafts for mom and dad, have your children make their craft for a member of the congregation that they are not related to. Ask them to think of someone who might like to receive their gift – perhaps someone who is sick, elderly, or lonely.

5. Lively Story Telling

Bring a favorite bible story picture book to life with props, noisemakers, costumes, etc.

For example: While one teacher reads the story of the Exodus from a picture book, another teacher hides behind a "screen" and gently tosses various props at the appropriate times (e.g., throw plastic bugs for the locust plague, shoot waterguns for the crossing of the Red Sea, pass out crackers for the gift of manna, etc. – get creative!)

6. Plan a VBS with Another Congregation

Vacation Bible School is a great way to get families in your community interested in Sunday School, and to let them know that they are welcome in your congregation! Congregations with Small Sunday Schools may wish to team with another congregation or two nearby to plan a VBS– another great way to create community!

7. Make "Offering Time" Come Alive

Instead of taking a monetary offering one Sunday, ask children to think about what non-material things or deeds they can offer to God. To make this exercise come alive, pass around the traditional offering basket. Instead of coins or bills, ask each child to place their hand or foot inside the basket as they tell the group what they will offer to God.

8. Serving Each Other

At Sunday School, we can teach children that we are all called to serve God's people and to care for His creation through concrete acts of service. Think of ways that the Sunday School children can work together to serve in the congregation and community. Examples include:

- Prepare a post-worship lunch for the congregation.
- Do a spring litter clean-up on the church grounds and in the nearby surrounding community.
- Pack food hampers for the needy.
- Participate in a Global Hunger and Development Appeal (GHDA) or a Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR) service project.
- Do some Christmas carolling at a personal care home in the community and for shut-ins in the congregation.

Food for thought: What are the three most successful lessons, activities, crafts, or ideas that you've used in your own small Sunday School?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How might they be adapted to different lessons so that you can use them again?

Educational Resources for the Small Sunday School

In the following pages, we've included a reference guide to resources and materials for leaders in small Sunday Schools. As you already know, you can never have enough creative ideas for Sunday School!

The first list is a compilation of **Christian Education Internet Resources**. These websites are chock-full of lesson resources, craft ideas, tips—some even have newsletters and blogs to ensure a constant supply of creativity. Go ahead—check them out!

The second list is a chart comparing commonly used Sunday School curricula that may be useful for your small Sunday School. The chart compares curricula in a handy, side-by-side layout, and evaluates them in a number of areas, including Age Levels, Cost, Teacher Resources, Cautions, and more.

Christian Education – Internet Resources

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Lift Up Your Hearts – God’s Children Page

<http://www.worship.ca/>

- along left column, click on Additional Resources, God’s Children

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Christian Education Home Page

<http://www.elca.org/christianeducation/>

- four sections: Form Faith, Deepen Discipleship, Equip Educators, Plan Programs

Association of Lutheran Resource Centers

<http://www.elca.org/alrc/index.html>

- this site supports links between the resource-producing units of the ELCA, Augsburg Fortress, other publishers and producers, and local congregations, both leaders and members

Augsburg Fortress (Publishing House for ELCIC, ELCA)

www.afcanada.org

- can sign up for an electronic newsletter, sending regular updates of new/seasonal Christian Education products
Phone: 1-800-265-6397

Faith Inkubators

www.faithink.com

- includes information about their own products, and ways of looking at Christian Education
- can sign up for an electronic newsletter, which includes a blogging section

Anglican Book Centre

Christian Formation & Education Home Page

<http://www.afcanada.com/store/category.jsp?clsid=190896&productgroupid=0&categoryid=3378>

Cokesbury (United Methodist Publishing House)

Curriculum Home Page

<http://www.cokesbury.com/curriculum.aspx>

Teaching Helps

<http://www.cokesbury.com/forms/DynamicContent.aspx?id=59&pageid=366>

Phone: 1-800-268-1168

American Episcopal Church

Educators: Ministries with Young People Home Page

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/50534_ENG_HTM.htm

- has a section on 'Lesson Plans for Small Congregations'

International Network of Children’s Ministries

www.incm.org

- has an electronic newsletter, with links to Kidology (www.kidology.org) discussion forums, great ideas for seasonal events/activities/crafts