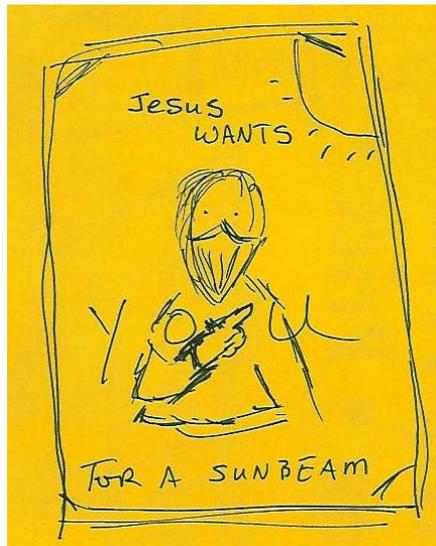


“Purposeful Living:” Images of the Kingdom of God  
in Methodist Sunday School Worship



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The history of Methodism in America is closely tied to the history of Sunday School<sup>1</sup> in America. And the history of Sunday School in America has been formed by the aims of Sunday School *worship* in America, although this connection often remains at the unconscious level. The aim of Sunday School from the beginning has been to communicate the Christian truth, particularly desired image of the Kingdom of God, in some form—and one of the most effective ways found to communicate and experience the outlines of that kingdom has been through the actions of worship.

This paper will outline a brief history of images of the Kingdom of God in Sunday School worship in (white) American Methodism, focusing on the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South Official hymnals, songbooks, published orders of worship, prescriptive literature, and oral history<sup>2</sup> have all formed part of this endeavor. Sunday school participants were at various times intended through their worship to be incorporated into the kingdom by being civilized, educated, uplifted, converted, challenged, molded, made into good citizens, enriched, deepened, enlightened, raised in consciousness, motivated, nurtured, and entertained—but they have never, ever been ignored.

### *1784-1844: Laying the Foundations*

*1790s-1820s:*

Theme: Assisting the disadvantaged

Aim: Civilizing as Christians

Orders and Resources: Simple hymns and prayers, otherwise unknown

Audience: Unchurched

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<sup>1</sup> The Sunday School movement has also been known as Sabbath school, church school, and Christian education, for varying theological and social reasons. I will generally use the term Sunday School throughout this paper for ease of reference.

<sup>2</sup> I interviewed nineteen United Methodists between the ages of 30 and 88 from various educational and geographical backgrounds. This study is not in any way scientific and would need to be supplemented, particularly by interviewing ethnic and working-class United Methodists and people from the Western Jurisdiction. Those interviewed are listed in the bibliography and will be referred to in this paper by initials only.

“Sunday Schools,” Ann Boylan writes, “began as schools for the poor.”<sup>3</sup> Although Methodists often enjoyed pointing to Biblical and post-Reformation historical examples of Christian education, the modern Sunday School movement was inaugurated in England in the 1780s.<sup>4</sup> Robert Raikes, who founded four Sunday Schools for working-class children in Gloucester in 1781, is traditionally hailed as the founder of the movement, although that claim has sometimes been disputed. He formed a plan to have poor, uneducated children instructed in reading and the Church catechism on Sundays—their only day off—by “decent, well-disposed women” in the neighborhood, as well as perpetually examined and disciplined by a local clergyman.<sup>5</sup> He was not the first of his era who attempted to teach poor children to read and write in a “Sabbath school” environment, but his example became the paradigm story for the later movement.<sup>6</sup>

Sunday Schools in American Methodism came into being in the 1790s. In a 1791-92 pastoral letter, Francis Asbury addressed the new denomination regarding his desire to have Sunday Schools on the Raikes model established by American Methodists. Children were to be given religious instruction consisting of lessons to memorize; additionally, boys were to engage in “manly exercises, as working in the garden or field, walking, reading, or speaking in public, or bathing [swimming],” and girls were to learn to “read, write, sew, knit, mark, and make their own cloathing [sic].”<sup>7</sup> Patterning his suggestions on the order of worship which was in the process of entering Methodism in the 1792 *Discipline*,<sup>8</sup> Asbury recommended that “the worship of God in the school-house, should be reading the word of the Lord, singing and prayer, every morning and

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<sup>3</sup> “Sunday Schools and Changing Evangelical Views of Children in the 1820s,” *Church History* 48 (Spring 1979), 321.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Walter Laquer, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. Hannah Ball, an English Methodist, is reported to have organized a school in 1769 to teach children Scripture (Laquer, 25; John Q. Schisler, *Christian Education in Local Methodist Churches* [Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1969], 14).

<sup>7</sup> Edward J. Wynne, “Bishop Asbury and the Sunday School,” *Methodist History* 18 (July 1980), 273.

<sup>8</sup> This consisted of singing, prayer, the reading of a chapter out of the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, and preaching.

evening.”<sup>9</sup> Apparently some followed this advice, for his 1792 postscript spoke of a school directed by “a godly woman, where all were solemn and quiet, and regular prayer both morning and evening.”<sup>10</sup>

Up into roughly 1820, Sunday Schools were mainly directed at “teaching basic Protestantism to children of the unchurched poor.”<sup>11</sup> In general, they aimed at civilizing their young charges, teaching “proper behavior, enforcing cleanliness, providing Sunday clothing, and reprimanding children.”<sup>12</sup> Reading, writing, and religious instruction were provided in this precursor to the modern idea of a public school offering free education to all at public expense.<sup>13</sup> Little is known of worship in the early days of Sunday School other than the instructions given in Asbury’s letter. We can assume that services consisted of singing,<sup>14</sup> prayer, and perhaps scripture reading and preaching, as adult services of Methodist worship did.

<p><i>1820s-1840s:</i> Theme: Passing on the faith Aim: Combating worldliness by grounding in faith Orders: Singing, prayer Resources: Hymnals, catechisms, Sunday School Union curriculum Audience: Unchurched and church children</p>
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Around 1820 a shift took place in the aims and purposes of Sunday School. Boylan attributes this shift to several factors: the rise of Protestant activism, the changing status of children beginning to be considered as “candidates for evangelization, perhaps even conversion” (15), the inclusion of church children among those welcomed into Sunday School (in order to minimize class distinctions in the spirit of republicanism), and finally the growth of the free public school as a place where poor children could receive

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<sup>9</sup> Wynne, 273.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>11</sup> Boylan, “Sunday Schools,” 322.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Wynne, 275.

<sup>14</sup> Presumably from *Selection of Hymns for the Sunday-School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1827); see James E. Kirby, Russell E Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe. *The Methodists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 19.

non-religious instruction.<sup>15</sup> By the time of the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844, Sunday Schools had been turned from “a temporary experiment for teaching the poor reading and religion to a permanent means of religious training for all Protestant children.”<sup>16</sup>

The founding of the American Sunday School Union (1824) and then the MEC’s Sunday School Union (1827) heralded a new approach to Sunday School in Methodism. The SSU published curriculum which divided students by age, culminating in a “Bible class” for adolescents which stressed conversion, followed by serving as teachers for the younger children.<sup>17</sup> Curriculum for all ages emphasized “sin, repentance, and regeneration,” and catechisms were heavily used.<sup>18</sup> In 1840, General Conference enacted legislation which gave the SSU official sanction within the church, required the establishment of Sunday Schools under the control of the pastor and the quarterly conference, required Bishops to appoint Sunday School agents (who were to travel and promote the cause of Sunday Schools in the conferences), and instructed the Methodist publishing house to begin a new Sunday School periodical, called the *Sunday School Advocate*.<sup>19</sup> The 1844 General Conference added a plan for the funding of Sunday Schools.<sup>20</sup> The move was on toward incorporating Sunday Schools as full partners in the church’s ministry.

Worship in this era probably did not vary much from the earlier-established pattern of singing and prayer. Hymns were one of the main ways children experienced images of the kingdom, and they focused on pious death, particularly “happy deaths for saintly children.”<sup>21</sup> An 1835 Sunday School Union hymnbook contained hymns for the “Death of a Pious Child,” “Death of a Scholar,” and “The Fear of Death Removed.”<sup>22</sup> Judgment day was a common theme, including such hymns as “The Wicked Child

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<sup>15</sup> Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 11-20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Kirby et. al., 181-182.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 182, 184.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-183; Schisler, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Schisler, 34; Kirby et. al, 183.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn, Robert W., and Elliott Wright. *The Big Little School: Sunday Child of American Protestantism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 42.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

Judged,”<sup>23</sup> pointing toward the growing emphasis on a conversion experience as an entry to the kingdom—which would spare a pious child from the terrors of judgment.

### *1844-1939: Achieving the Ideal*

*1850s-1900s:*

Theme: Bringing children in

Aim: Conversion and nurture

Orders: Beginnings of assembly service

Resources: Sunday School hymnals and songbooks,

Bible, graded lessons, teacher institutes

Audience: Mainly church children

After the 1844 split, both divisions of episcopal Methodism (MEC and MECS) continued to develop and refine the idea of Sunday School. This era inaugurated many themes and images that would

come to fruition in the later “golden age” of Methodist Sunday Schools.

The greatest stimulus to changes in Sunday Schools was not a Methodist event or publication at all, but the publication of *Christian Nurture* (1847) by Congregationalist pastor and theologian Horace Bushnell. Contrary to the revivalistic, conversionistic impulse of the early nineteenth century, Bushnell proposed a theory and method of Christian education with the aim “*that the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise.*”<sup>24</sup> His vision of the Christian life is that

...the aim, effort, and expectation should be, not, as is commonly assumed, that the child is to grow up in sin, to be converted after he comes to a mature age; but he is to open on the world as one that is spiritually renewed, not remembering the time when he went through a technical experience, but seeming rather to have loved what is good from his earliest years.<sup>25</sup>

The responsibility for bringing children up in this manner, according to Bushnell, was not only the parents’, but the church community’s. Influenced by Romantic currents

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (N.p.: Scribner, 1861; reprinted by Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1979), 10. Italics are Bushnell’s.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

of theology, he saw the role of Christian educators, particularly in the family but also in the church, to teach young children “rather... a feeling than a doctrine; to bathe the child in their own feeling of love to God, and dependence upon him, and contrition for wrong before him... then, as the understanding advances, to give it food suited to its capacity, opening upon it, gradually the more difficult views of Christian doctrine and experience.”<sup>26</sup> He condemned churches who stood in the way of this process by being “rent by divisions, burnt up by fanaticism, frozen by the chill of a worldly spirit, petrified in a rigid and dead orthodoxy” and making “no element of genial warmth and love about the child, according to the intention of Christ.”<sup>27</sup>

Bushnell's writings, as well as the growing influence of Romanticism in American theology and literature, led to a change in the content and approach of Sunday School. Catechisms became less popular, and the uniform-lesson series (which taught the same lesson for all grades with separate take-home leaves for students of various ages) was used more widely.<sup>28</sup> Conversion remained a goal, but it was more likely to be approached gradually, not necessarily achieved in a dramatic one-time experience. Mid-century MEC leader of Sunday School reform John Vincent saw the Sunday School as having three functions: spiritual promotion of growth in divine life, preparatory education in Christian truth, and mission to the disadvantaged.<sup>29</sup> Vincent and other Sunday School educators favored organizing and regularizing the Sunday School, professionalizing it through the use of uniform lessons and the proper training of teachers, and expanding its reaches to young adults who might otherwise be lost to the church.<sup>30</sup> Moving the Sunday School away from revivalistic approaches, Vincent saw its aims as combining “conversion, spiritual culture, and the formation of character.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Kirby et. al., 190-192., 209-211. The Uniform Lesson Plan was introduced by the National Sunday-School Convention in 1872.

<sup>29</sup> John H. Vincent, *The Modern Sunday-School*. (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1900), 14.

<sup>30</sup> In 1860, the MEC General Conference legislated that the Sunday School should train adults as well as children (Kirby et. al., 202).

<sup>31</sup> Vincent, 73. See Kirby et. al., 203-204 for an analysis of Vincent and his antipathy to revivalism.

Worship in a more organized and regularized Sunday School was necessarily more organized and regularized as well.<sup>32</sup> The dividing of students into grades by age—primary/infant (5-8), intermediate (8-10), junior (10-15), and senior (15-20)—was becoming more common.<sup>33</sup> The idea of “opening services” was already developing, as Vincent’s book makes clear. He outlines the opening services of a Sunday School teacher’s training institute as a model for Sunday School worship; it should avoid “the dull routine of a ‘prayer-meeting hour’” and concentrate all its “Scripture readings, remarks, songs, and prayers” around one topic.<sup>34</sup> This pattern would become hugely popular for all forms of Sunday School worship until well into the twentieth century. Since opening and closing exercises often involved the reciting of “Golden Texts” from the week’s lessons, another opportunity was provided to emphasize approved images of creation, salvation, and piety.<sup>35</sup>

More music was used in the Sunday School in this era than had formerly been the case.<sup>36</sup> Conflict frequently broke out over types of music and the underlying worldviews associated with them. The popular gospel hymnody of the day—and its images of God’s creation sometimes at odds with official doctrine—never failed to be criticized by members of the Methodist bureaucracy. Often criticized was the tendency to reuse secular tunes of “folk’s lore and border minstrelsy” and the supposedly doggerel-like nature of the lyrics.<sup>37</sup> Songs in both official Methodist publications and gospel songbooks focused less on “happy deaths for pious children” and frightening images of judgment, and more on enjoying the love of Jesus and witnessing about the Christian life. Heather Curtis, in an unpublished paper, discusses at length the use of hymnody with children to emphasize a certain vision of the kingdom: encouraging familial and social

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<sup>32</sup> It was also supported—or supposed to be—by an organized, regularized library. See “Our Sunday School Literature,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* [MEC], April 1976, 324-347.

<sup>33</sup> Kirby et. al., 211.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Kirby et. al., 212.

<sup>36</sup> “Sunday-School Hymns and Music,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* [MEC], 431.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 429-430.

bonds, identifying themselves as good citizens of the republic, learning of social causes of the day (temperance and abolition), and remembering the glories of eternity.<sup>38</sup>

However, there were still plenty of hymns about heaven. One example by Fanny Crosby ties in the image of the Sabbath School's closing exercises with that of heaven and eternal life:

Fading, slowly fading, sweet Sabbath day,/ Like a hallowed memory lingers thy golden ray./ Dear Savior, now to every heart/ Reveal the way, thy truth impart/That leads to life beyond the skies,/ Where pleasure never dies./(Chorus) Fading, slowly fading, sweet Sabbath day./In gentle tones it seems to say:/ Passing away! Passing away!<sup>39</sup>

Another, from an official Methodist Sunday School songbook, paints a slightly more comfortable picture than did previous eras of the journey to the afterlife:

Sadly we stand, and with tremulous breath,/ as we stand by the mystical stream,/ In the valley and by the dark river of death, and yet 'tis no more than a dream./ (Chorus) Only a dream, only a dream,/ And glory beyond the dark stream;/ How peaceful the slumber, how happy the waking,/ For death is only a dream....Why should we weep when the weary ones rest/In the bosom of Jesus supreme?<sup>40</sup>

After the turn of the century, images of the kingdom would begin to focus even less on the afterlife and more on moral Christianity in the here and now.

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<sup>38</sup> Heather D. Curtis, "Children of the Heavenly King: Hymns in the Religious and Social Experience of Children, 1780-1850" (unpublished paper in possession of author).

<sup>39</sup> Phoebe Palmer Knapp, *Notes of Joy, for the Sabbath School, the Social Meeting, and the Hour of Prayer* (New York: Biglow & Main, 1869), 53. This book, edited by the daughter of holiness evangelist Phoebe Palmer, was a holiness favorite and contained many hymns by Knapp and Fanny Crosby.

<sup>40</sup> W.G.E. Cunyningham and R.M. McIntosh, eds., *Living Songs: for the Sunday School, the Epworth League, Prayer Meeting, Revivals and All Special Occasions of Christian Work and Worship* (Nashville: Publishing House of the MECS, 1895), 167-168 (lyrics by C.W. Ray).

1900s-1930s:

Theme: Helping children grow

Aim: Nurture, conversion

Orders: Assembly service (“opening exercises”)—intergenerational, but later graded

Resources: Sunday School hymnals and songbooks, Bible, published orders, idea books, educational psychology

Audience: Church children and adults

The early twentieth century saw an explosion of church school<sup>41</sup> literature, including literature regarding worship. The division of children, youth, and adults into “closely graded” classes became more complex and rigorous. By the 1930s a large church would ideally have a Cradle Roll<sup>42</sup> and nursery department (children under 4), beginners (4-5), primaries (6-8), juniors (9-11), intermediates (12-14), seniors (15-17), young people (18-23) and adults (23+).<sup>43</sup> Uniform lessons were abandoned more and more, under the guidance of new psychology regarding how children learned, and graded lessons came to the fore, which were adapted to the differing educational requirements of each age.<sup>44</sup> Worship began to be segregated by departments, and by the end of this period most departments worshipped separately in large churches.<sup>45</sup>

The teaching possibilities of worship continued to have an elevated place in the emphasis of Sunday School educators. One wrote:

The worship period is a vital part of the educational process. The singing, the reading of the Scripture, the offering of prayer, the bringing and dedication of gifts, and the inspiration of pupils through an address are vastly more than introductory activities....Worship trains the feelings and is at once the product and the producer of action.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This era also saw the beginning of the term “church school,” meant to tie the Sunday School more fully into the life of the church.

<sup>42</sup> Children were enrolled in the Cradle Roll shortly after birth, an action that had no particular relation to baptism.

<sup>43</sup> *Church School Literature: Its Proper Use and How to Order It* (Nashville, general Board of Christian Education of the MECS, 1932..

<sup>44</sup> See E.B. Chappell, ed. *Introduction and Use of the Graded Lessons: General Manual*. (Nashville: Smith & Lamar, 1914) for an extensive introduction to closely graded Sunday Schools, including instructions for worship.

<sup>45</sup> ESF (81) spoke of growing up in a smaller church where the entire Sunday School, approximately 100 people, worshipped together in “opening exercises” before their graded classes.

<sup>46</sup> Chappell, 134-135.

Another claimed that the aim of children's worship was to lead to "the corporate worship of adults—the fulfillment of individual Christian nurture and of reverent group worship for the young at each age. Such beginnings will produce a revival of real worship in our churches."<sup>47</sup>

Specific elements of the service received much attention. Hymns were to be "good literature and the tunes must be good music...nothing that is cheap and belittling...the entire worship must be marked by dignity, grace, and orderly beauty."<sup>48</sup> Scripture reading was no longer connected with the uniform lessons, since there were no longer uniform lessons. The reading was intended to be "liturgic and not didactic," although Scripture memory verses could from time to time be used.<sup>49</sup> The address to the school, still normally given by the superintendent, was no longer on the theme of the uniform lesson, but was intended to be an inspirational talk. In fact, the need for inspirational talks was part of what prompted the explosion of resources—and ensured that there is no shortage of images for the kingdom of God and the Christian life in this era. Continuing the strong emphasis on building the Kingdom through good conduct and moral Christianity, recommended topics included "the interpreting of current events in the light of an overruling Providence or in the light of duty or of opportunity for service," which "may be one of the truest and best modes of spiritual teaching, for spiritual teaching is aiding the pupil to solve his moral problems."<sup>50</sup> Missions, church history and heroes, and vocation were also common topics.<sup>51</sup>

Resources also attempted to guide the Sunday School leader, pianist and musicians in the proper selection and performance of Sunday School music.<sup>52</sup> Music was to be solemn but not dull, and contain a good selection of traditional hymns.<sup>53</sup> Again, popular hymnody was challenged: "A careful examination of one of these songbooks [the

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<sup>47</sup> Reginald McAll, "Training for the Worship of the Young," *Methodist Review* [MEC], May 1927, 366.

<sup>48</sup> Chappell, 135.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-136.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

<sup>52</sup> See Reginald L. McAll, *Practical Church School Music* (New York: Abingdon, 1932).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

‘insipid popular commercial books’] shows that the great hymns of our faith are generally relegated to odd corners of the book, often without their tunes, while the veriest trash is given prominence.”<sup>54</sup> The “trash” was often blamed on the revivalism of the last century. One author complained that “The Sunday School to-day seems to be quite generally under the spell of the ‘Billy Sunday jazz’ . . . two-steps and waltzes galore.”<sup>55</sup>

Hymns were meant to be adapted to the age level of the learner, and attention was to be given to special days or festivals of the Sunday School, the nation, and the local church, particularly Children’s Day and Rally Day.<sup>56</sup> Rally Day would assume more importance several decades later, but Children’s Day (which featured performances by the Sunday School pupils) and Decision Day (which challenged children to conversion) were important parts of the church school’s “Christian year.” Children’s Day was a Sunday School performance program; one writer evocatively described Children’s Day as “a pageant of white dresses and timid smiles.”<sup>57</sup> Decision Day, the culmination of the vision of the kingdom as being inaugurated by personal experiences of salvation, hoped to be the culmination of a loving leading of children who were “already [children] of God” into making a public declaration of their faith.<sup>58</sup> Although children were always to be confronted with the challenge of the Christian message, Decision Day was to be a climax of this work. Suggested for Christmas or Easter as seasons being the most “intensely religious by association,”<sup>59</sup> preparation was to be made through prayer and talks for some weeks before. The preparation culminated in a worship service which

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 156. According to McAll, the “veriest trash” included such phrases as “blossom bells,” “lily bells,” “Look him in the eye and smile,” and “the darling little birdies are singing, glad and gay” (156).

<sup>55</sup> Samuel M. Le Page, “Musical Supervision for the Church,” *Methodist Review* [MEC], May 1925, 399. Not *everyone* complained; one author thought that “the gospel song has vindicated itself by results” and that “it is an equal abuse [as not teaching classic hymns] to limit the Sunday School to the staid and stately hymns. Songs for young people must have some ‘go’ in them, and a little more ‘go’ would not injure the church hymnal” (Stanley F Davis, “Music and Worship,” *Methodist Review* [MEC], March 1910: 289).

<sup>56</sup> McAll, 157-162.

<sup>57</sup> Ralph D. Harper, “Worship as an Aesthetic Experience,” *Methodist Review* [MEC], November 1930, 897.

<sup>58</sup> Christian S. Reissues, “Church Members from the Sunday School,” *Methodist Review* [MEC], March 1915, 242.

<sup>59</sup> F. Watson Hannan, *The Sunday School: An Evangelistic Opportunity* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1920), 103.

featured a call to Christian discipleship, “a simple, brief, clear appeal to the young people to surrender their lives in perfect loyalty to Jesus Christ both for his sake, and in order that they may help him save the world.”<sup>60</sup>

This approach to Christian education and worship, with its image of the Kingdom as constituted through good citizenship, moral behavior, reverence, and personal experience of God, was carried by both branches of episcopal Methodism into the 1939 merger, but change was on the horizon.

### ***1939-1968: Settled and Sure; Coping With Change***

*1940s-1950s:*

Theme: “Becoming a Christian and then acting like one” (MSW)

Aim: Nurture

Orders: Assembly/”opening exercises” service, graded departmental worship, vacation church school, camps

Resources: Sunday School and other hymnals, graded curriculum, published orders, educational psychology, *Book of Worship* (1945), teacher workshops

Just after the merger, Sunday School (and its worship) reached its height in terms of attendance, resources, and above all sheer confidence in its own ability to guide children into responsible, Christ-centered adulthood. Sunday Schools in this era continued many of the same trends of the 1930s. They were closely graded (at least in larger churches), were grounded in the psychology of education, made ample use of published curricular resources, attempted to include “high” types of art and music, were tied in to Christian education on weekdays and special occasions (such as vacation church school, weekday religious education, and Christian camps), and focused on nurturing and challenging children and adults into a relationship with Christ. However, some themes came more to the fore, as a vision of the kingdom of God was nurtured which was tied closely to the culture of the country and showed a decidedly upper-middle-class tilt.

First, Sunday school education became more closely tied with education as an American citizen, particularly due to the influence of World War II. A 1942 litany of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 114.

dedication for flags dedicated to God the Christian flag, the American flag, and the service flag (which symbolized members in the armed forces) “for use as sacred symbols in the church.”<sup>61</sup> The relationship of the church to the American way of life was related to a wider vision of what it meant to have a satisfying Christian way of life: good conduct, service to others, avoidance of frivolous entertainment, and middle-class achievement. A stained glass window designed by youth in Michigan in 1941 speaks to these aims. The motto for the window read “Look Up—Lift Up... inspiring us to look up to Christ and help others.”<sup>62</sup> It pictured images of “the various things that make life worthwhile” including: “Education and an Appreciation of All Good Literature,” “Easter, Immortality, Purity, and the Love of Nature,” “Boy and Girl Friendships,” “The Christian Home,” “For God and Home and Every Land,” “Creative Arts,” Dramatics,” Recreation,” “Hope, Faith, Ideals,” and “Inspiration, Strength, Co-Operation.”<sup>63</sup> According to one educator, among the goals of the Sunday School, after achieving a relationship with Christ through nurture and decision, were to

cultivate right attitudes and form right habits...develop loyalty to the church...and develop a sense of obligation for civic and social righteousness, community service, and interracial friendships.<sup>64</sup>

A growing concern was expressed for the physical environment of worship and visual images of the kingdom. “Worship centers” were common in classrooms, where a

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<sup>61</sup> C. Blaine Duncan. “A Litany of Dedication: The Flags,” *The Church School*, September 1942, 708. See also James W. Sells, “An Order of Thanksgiving for Harvest, Land, and Liberty,” *The Church School*, November 1944, 481. JLS, FBS and MSW recalled pledging allegiance to the Christian flag and the Bible in their vacation church school in the 1940s and 1950s with these words: “I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands, one Lord, crucified, risen, and coming again, with life and liberty for all who believe, uniting all mankind in service and love; I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s holy word, and to the truth for which it stands. I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path, and will hide its words in my heart that I might not sin against God.”

<sup>62</sup> “Youth Enriches Worship,” *The Church School*, October 1941, 40.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>64</sup> L.F. Sensbaugh, “The Sunday School ‘Menace,’” *The Church School*, October 1945, 433-434. Regarding interracial friendships, MBA (50) vividly recalled “learning about various racial groups when I was in the first grade, by singing ‘Jesus Loves the Little Children, all the children of the world.’ As we sang ‘red and yellow, black and white,’ the teacher would point to a large mural picture in the front to children of various racial groups. When you live in a town of 1400 and the only minority is Roman Catholic, this was quite ‘hot’ information!”

picture or symbol such as a Bible or cross (or Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*) was placed to illustrate an aspect of Christian life: "If one chooses a worship theme such as the 'Word of God,' an open Bible on the table or altar surrounded by candles or flowers will give weight to the content of hymns, prayers, and remarks concerning the subject."<sup>65</sup> The title of one article speaks to this aim: "Beauty Leads to God."<sup>66</sup> Singing was still a prominent aspect of church school worship, and continued to be an area of tension, due particularly to the effect it was seen as having on the emotions.<sup>67</sup> The youth were of particular concern here, as they seemed to prefer songs with "pep" and the popular music of the day.<sup>68</sup> The desired qualities of worship music included "dignity," facing "the actual situations and realities of life as it is today," and "as much beauty and quality as it is possible to obtain."<sup>69</sup> Gospel hymnody remained a problem: "The old so-called 'gospel songs' with their familiar tunes and swinging rhythms, are too frequently what people want to sing. But this is not worship. Sentimental words and undignified music are not worthy to sing to the glory of God."<sup>70</sup> Teachers were encouraged to lead students to "love good hymns and good worship music," particularly because it would prepare them for adult discipleship through singing from the *Methodist Hymnal* in adult worship.<sup>71</sup> Jazz, blues, sentimental, nostalgic, and pietistic or individualistic songs were all disapproved of, despite (or perhaps because of) their commercial success: "Trashy, jazzy music made to sell by the bushel goes like hot cakes."<sup>72</sup> Teachers should even avoid encouraging students to sing with gusto, as this was more appropriate to "old time

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<sup>65</sup> Henry M. Johnson, "New Techniques in Worship," *The Church School*, May 1943, 295.

<sup>66</sup> Clarice M. Bowman, "Beauty leads to God," *The Church School*, July 1945, 303ff.

<sup>67</sup> Rowena Ferguson, "Worship is Communication," *The Church School*, November 1945, 486.

<sup>68</sup> As one author wrote against gospel, "Is it not part of our responsibility to introduce young people to the fact that pep, after all, is not the highest good either in life itself, or in music?" (Edwin Michael Hoffman, "When Is a Hymn Truly Worshipful?" *The Church School*, January 1947, 4ff).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Clarice M. Bowman, "Music and Intermediate Worship," *The Church School*, November, 1943, 585.

<sup>72</sup> Hoffmann, 5.

singing schools” than “services of worship.”<sup>73</sup> How well all of these recommendations trickled down to the local level—or how well they were liked when they did—remains a question. MSW, FBS, JLS, and MBA all recalled singing in Sunday school a number of gospel choruses and hymns, with an “evangelical” cast. Even when “dignified” music was used it did not always have the intended effect: WBC (54) remembers singing “God Of Our Fathers” at “a pace slow enough to take a nap between phrases.”

Leaders were encouraged to use special days in the church/secular year (no real difference between these existed at this point) to teach religious truths: New Year’s Day, Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day (as long as it did not promote “division and class feeling”), Thanksgiving, and Christmas.<sup>74</sup> In addition to taking notice of celebrations of the larger church, the Sunday School continued to develop and change its *own* liturgical year. Decision Day was no longer a factor, but Children’s Day remained—at least early in this period—and Promotion Day and Rally Sunday became focuses of planning. Promotion Day involved the “promotion” of students from one class group to another, usually at the beginning of the school year in conjunction with Rally Day—as time went on they were brought together in a “Christian Education Week.”<sup>75</sup>

Rally Day was in many ways the focal point of the whole church school year, and the importance it had assumed showed a shift in the image of what Sunday/church school and its pupils were intended to be and do. Rally Day was intended “for the purpose, first, of informing and challenging the people of the community with regard to the Church’s program of religious education; and second, for receiving an offering for the Annual Conference Board of Education.”<sup>76</sup> The hope was that members of the community, properly notified and evangelized, would come and see the Sunday School program in action and decide to join it. Worship services, particularly dramas which explained the aims and purposes of the church, Christianity, and the Sunday School, were frequent means of getting the Rally Day message across, and numerous examples appeared in

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<sup>73</sup> Bowman, 585.

<sup>74</sup> Clarence Edwin Flynn, “Special Days as Teaching Opportunities,” *The Church School*, November 1945, 483ff. MSW remembered Halloween as being of great importance, celebrated by departmental dress-up parties the Saturday before Halloween.

<sup>75</sup> John C. Millian, “Starting the New Year Through Christian Education Week,” *the Church School*, September 1944, 398.

<sup>76</sup> *Discipline*, 1940, ¶1183, quoted in *The Church School*, May 1942, 458.

resource magazines; students were also encouraged to write their own worship materials for Promotion and Rally Day.<sup>77</sup>

MSW described the aim of this era as a whole of “applying Bible stories to help us be good Christian people with good behavior and respect, who did personal devotions, were kind and helpful to our parents and families and other children, and didn’t fight on the playground.” Changes to this well-oiled educational machine were, however, just around the corner.

*1960s:*

Theme: Re-visioning the world

Aim: Consciousness-raising

Orders: Graded departmental worship, class intergenerational experiences, VBS, “happenings”

Resources: Arts, media, pop culture, idea magazines, graded curriculum, educational psychology, *Book of Worship* (1965), teacher-training workshops

Audience: Church seen as an integrated whole

The 1960s can be seen as a transition time between the peak of “traditional” Sunday School in the 1940s and the 1950s and the experimental, questioning focus of the 1970s and onward—between a church that sought to uplift youth with Mendelssohn and one that sought to reach them with Janis Joplin.<sup>78</sup> Questioning authority became characteristic of the decade’s liturgical approaches—or rather, replacing one authority with another. In 1965, the Methodist Church’s second *Book of Worship* was published—soon to become the *Book of Worship* for the reconstituted United Methodist Church after the 1968 merger. It “marked the virtual conclusion of a process of liturgical revision, common to most Protestant denominations, which had attempted for several years to recover worship practices promoted by the sixteenth-century Reformers.”<sup>79</sup> However, “by the end of the decade, that process had been abandoned altogether”—in

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<sup>77</sup> Mable Keboch, “Preparing for Promotion Day,” *the Church School*, September 1944, 388-389.

<sup>78</sup> See Kenneth G. Fansler, “What If All the Arts Were Used to Communicate the Gospel?” *Church School*, December 1970: 21-27.

<sup>79</sup> Robert B. Peiffer, “How Contemporary Liturgies Evolve: The Revision of United Methodist Liturgical Texts (1968-1988),” (Ph.D. diss.: University of Notre Dame, 1992), 3.

favor of an ecumenical hearkening back to the traditions of the early church, particularly Hippolytus' liturgical formulations from the third century.<sup>80</sup>

Besides the changing winds of culture, part of what heralded the change in Methodist worship was the influence of Vatican II, specifically the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (first promulgated in 1963) and later directions on its implementation.<sup>81</sup> Besides moving Catholic worship to the vernacular, Vatican II emphasized recovery of early church patterns of worship, contemporary relevance of the Church and the liturgy, and a focus on the horizontal as well as—sometimes, in fact, more than—the vertical dimension of worship.<sup>82</sup> This liturgical upheaval came at the same time that, in James White's words, the cultural assumption that the morality, opinions, and lifestyles "congenial to forty-year-old middle-class whites [were] to be normative for all society" was "rudely questioned and found wanting by many elements of society which once submitted to such forms, however alien to them."<sup>83</sup> This assumption of middle-class morality had been nowhere more evident than in middle-class Methodist Sunday Schools, with their emphasis on Christian conduct, moral uplift, obedience, and good citizenship. It was an assumption that the post-Vatican-II liturgical reformers ended up reacting violently against.

With the added pressure of the merger and developing an identity as a new denomination, Christian educators and liturgists puzzled over the question of how all kinds of worship would be reformed and re-visioned. The majority of experimentation took place in the 1970s, but theoretical groundwork was laid throughout the 1960s. From the perspective of the time, White pictures the situation these reformers felt they needed to address: splintering of society, a new sense of freedom in many areas, alternative lifestyles which rejected "suburban values of security and comfort," changing moral standards, growing racial consciousness, and the acceptance of the "generation gap."<sup>84</sup> "Our services," he said, "reflect the values, modes of perceiving reality, and life styles with which a forty-year-old middle-class white person feels familiar, especially one with

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> James F. White, *New Forms of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 16.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>84</sup> White, 16-21.

a college education... We can no longer say ‘Like it or lump it.’ There is another alternative. They can leave. And many have.”<sup>85</sup>

Sunday School literature of the time witnesses to this transformation. Of course, Methodists were still working within the parameters of the 1964 *Hymnal* and 1965 *Book of Worship*. The 1965 *Book of Worship* was an updated but not radically altered version of the 1945 book—it had originated in a proposal made at the 1956 General Conference, and was too far along in its progress to incorporate the new developments that White and his cohorts were interested in.<sup>86</sup> Like the 1945 book, it laid out models and patterns for Sunday services, supplied a number of written prayers and litanies for various occasions, and provided orders for admitting children and adults into the church and for recognizing church school officers, church school teachers, and choristers. It eliminated some services from the 1945 version, particularly those which were related to a rural context and to family worship. Among its additions were a Psalter, Biblical canticles, and greater overall attention to the Sundays of the Christian year. Among its seasonal prayers was one for “Christian Education Sunday, formerly called Rally Day:”

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who has committed to thy holy Church the care and nurture of thy children; Enlighten with thy wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of thy truth, they may worship thee and serve thee from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**<sup>87</sup>

Beyond the *Book of Worship*, though, congregations were beginning to expand their vision of the kingdom as one that was more experimental, free-flowing, culturally aware, and racially inclusive.<sup>88</sup> The pattern for worship was often still the prayer-song-inspirational talk order, but suggested items for talks were less specifically outlined and

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>86</sup> *The Book of Worship for Church and Home, With Orders of Worship, Services for the Administration of Sacraments and Aids to Worship According to the Usages of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1965), “Preface” (no page number).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>88</sup> One educator, in recommending a hymn festival as a Christian education activity, asked people to evaluate the festival in terms of whether, among other things, it had helped the congregation to “better realize that it has a responsibility to make Christian nurture available for all children of every race and culture” (Rosemary Scheuerman, “A Hymn Festival,” *The Church School*, January 1969, 37).

drawn more frequently from the broader (Protestant) Christian tradition—one Lenten curriculum unit quotes Origen, John Wesley, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Peter Abelard, and an anonymous Scholastic theologian as springboards for meditations which the leader is free to develop in any number of ways.<sup>89</sup>

Drama and the arts were still emphasized strongly, with more willingness to perform secular plays were performed (such as Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*),<sup>90</sup> and discuss non-mainstream movies—such as *Midnight Cowboy*, “a movie that says God means man to be brother to the neighbor he meets.”<sup>91</sup> Television was growing in influence as well. Since “there are more TV sets than bathtubs in the United States,” one husband and wife team recommended that Sunday school could “take advantage of some of the better programs as content for class discussion.”<sup>92</sup> Another church’s Christian education department art show rose out of a criticism from a group of Black Panther youth who witnessed the popular Warner Sallman *Head of Christ* in the church school building and remarked, “All your pictures of Christ are stereotypes of sweetness. You are seducing the minds of your youth with Sallman.”<sup>93</sup> The completed show included not only Old Masters, but also modern art, West African paintings, Byzantine icons, and others “showing Christ in agony, contemplation, love, joy, anger, meditation, and other moods” and picturing him in a way “few had ever seen,” as “a Chinese, a Mexican, a Negro.”<sup>94</sup>

Music, too, was undergoing a change. The *Hymnal* was still emphasized as the center of the Sunday School’s musical life, but there was less focus on youth songbooks (authorized or otherwise) and more on simply teaching children to sing the hymns of the

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<sup>89</sup> *The Church School*, January 1969, 39-46.

<sup>90</sup> A. Argyle Knight, “A Drama Council in the Local Church,” July 1969, 6-7.

<sup>91</sup> Kenneth G. Fansler, “What If All the Arts Were Used to Communicate the Gospel?” *The Church School*, December 1970, 24. He also emphasized “letting the sunshine in” (a quote, of course, from “Age of Aquarius” from *Hair*) by allowing the “dramatically different newness of ‘now’ theatre” to open a window on “The age of Aquarius, the flower generation, daring to penetrate tabooed topics, asking again those questions answered by our faith” (25).

<sup>92</sup> William and Marie Pearce, “What If... You Used Resources?” *The Church School*, December, 1970, 9.

<sup>93</sup> John W. Boretoes, “Try an Art Show... We Did,” *The Church School*, July 1969, 8.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

church and short worshipful responses.<sup>95</sup> Rather than trying to eliminate youths' taste for music with "pep," it began to be suggested that youth be reached through their music: "The bouncy, bossa nova beat of the Doors...Music that speaks relationship....LAAW wahhh gahhhh OOOOOHHH oooooo wwwwooo, as Janis Joplin wails a new language of communication...and those who see and hear, feel!"<sup>96</sup>

An early 1970s publication, *Education Futures*, sponsored by the Board of Discipleship (a significant name change from the Boards of Education of the former denominations) sought to express new visions involving mass media, holistic learning, and attention to the contemporary context. Some of those who contributed vision statements wrote of such hopes and visions for kingdom education as:

Intergenerational learning centers: where children and youth become teachers as well as learners....Increased sensitivity to the fine arts....Integration and close inter-relationship between worship, education, evangelism, and action...Video and audio cassettes...active involvement...festivals and celebrations...The "good, moral, ethical, social justice" plan for living must be replaced with a living, working commitment to Christ...

—and finally, a telling statement:

The death of the Church/Sunday School: the end of a system in which 'students' grouped in age levels meet under the supervision of a 'teacher' to digest curricula packages of content material and then spew them back, being rewarded by gold stars for knowing such essentials of the Christian heritage as the shortest verse in the Bible.<sup>97</sup>

Not all of these visions came to pass; but it was not for lack of trying.

### ***1968-2002: Experiencing a New Thing***

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<sup>95</sup> See "Hymn of the Month," *The Church School*, December 1969, 20.

<sup>96</sup> Fansler, 21-22. He adds, "One man's Bach may be another's 'Old Rugged Cross,' ...graffiti are valid as a vehicle, and cassettes can catalogue community" (26).

<sup>97</sup> *Visions: A Collage of Hopes for the Future of Church Education* (Nashville, Board of Discipleship, 1973), 3ff.

*1970s-1980s:*

Theme: Growing in faith

Aim: Nurture, celebrative experience

Orders: Class worship, “informal” devotions, intergenerational worship, Sunday School participation in main worship services (i.e. youth services, dedication of teachers)

Resources: Media, graded curriculum, psychology, denominational devotional materials, idea magazines, pop culture, multi-cultural materials

Audience: All of church

The decades following the 1968 merger—particularly the 1970s—were a time of balloons, dance, contemporary and folk songs, youth and children performing and participating, and a blurring of distinctions between “worship” and what was beginning to be called “Christian education,” a term that no longer limited “Sunday School” or “church school” to Sunday, or even to the church. The emphasis was on action, participation, and celebration: “Worship as celebration is something one does, it is not done *to* him, or *for* him.”<sup>98</sup> Sanctuary spaces were encouraged to move from “immovable furniture, fixed pews, separation between the chancel and pews...that efficiently keeps the congregation from experiencing one another, and separated from the minister” to spaces characterized by utility, simplicity, flexibility, and intimacy.<sup>99</sup> An article by a United Methodist pastor claimed that “contemporary celebrative worship coupled with creative teaching styles creates a climate for increased attendance, commitment, and enthusiasm.”<sup>100</sup> His church turned their entire Sunday morning service into a “celebration—study happening,” combining elements of worship and education. Weekly topics for the “happenings” included Communion or Holy Community, Rally Day—Festival of a New Beginning, World Peace and War, Searching For a Meaningful Lifestyle, and “I’m OK, You’re OK.”<sup>101</sup> Groups for worship and study included multimedia, “game playing,” “encounter—rap group,” music, drama, role playing, and

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<sup>98</sup> L. Paul Neuffer, “Equipping for Celebration,” *The Church School*, July 1973, 1.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* (The four criteria actually come from James White).

<sup>100</sup> Wesley D. Taylor, “New Models for Study and Worship,” *The Church School*, March 1973, 31.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

arts and crafts. Church members were involved in creating prayers, poetry, and banners, making films and slides, and writing “contemporary” affirmations:

The church often means different things to different people. Some find no need for it, others go to it when they have nothing better to do. But the church can be much to you and me! It is a time to try out the Christian life, knowing that if we fail at it, and we will, we will find support, encouragement, and a word: “Try Again.”<sup>102</sup>

Worship and Sunday School once again had a strong intergenerational component, returning (unconsciously) to roots of a century previous. Students were still usually organized into classes for learning, unless the church was very small, but Sunday or Wednesday evening fellowships might contain worship and arts involvement in intergenerational groups. The “opening exercise” model essentially died out, almost overnight, although vestiges of it remained in unusual places. (Many older Sunday School classes retain vestiges of opening and closing exercises to this day.) Keeping with the blurring of lines around “Christian education,” there was a push for more involvement of children in church, rather than “segregating” them into “children’s church” or letting them subsist only on a diet of Sunday School worship when church and Sunday School were held at the same time. Youth and children’s choirs were one way to do this. So was a youth service—often the Easter sunrise service.<sup>103</sup> However, many children still did not attend the entire sanctuary service—or sometimes any of it.

Prayers, litanies, and other resources were still composed for Sunday Schools to supplement the resources available in the *United Methodist Hymnal* and *Book of Worship* (1965), although their images of God and his kingdom varied from that of previous decades. One “Litany of Shared Leadership” begins, “God, you started this business of shared leadership when you made us in your own image.”<sup>104</sup> A later UMC program for “Sunday School Growth and Renewal” commissioned two contemporary songwriters to write songs about the Sunday School. They responded with:

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>103</sup> Elayne Shults, “Youth Sunrise Service: Journey to Jerusalem,” *Church School Today*, Winter 1985-86, Q18-19.

<sup>104</sup> Mary Alice Douty Edwards, “A Litany of Shared Leadership,” *The Church School*, October 1972, 3.

God doesn't ask us to know every answer/ And doesn't expect us to heal every pain/ All God wants us to do is feed the people,/ And through God's grace we know love will remain/... We're reaching and teaching, learning new ways to grow/ We're caring and sharing, there's so much more to know/ We're yearning and learning; The seeds are ours to sow./ In living, we're helping each other grow (Brent Holmes)

and

We've come together/From all over,/Joining minds and heart and hands/In thy great spirit/ Of renewal/Springing up across the land/.... 'We are the reaching,'/ Say the voices,/ Searching Scripture for their way./ 'We are the teaching,'/ say some others,/ Struggling with questions for today (Wrightson S. Tongue).<sup>105</sup>

An anonymous author contributed a litany of thanksgiving for welcoming a new child to a class; it begins, "LEADER: Good morning everyone! I want you to know that a few years ago God created [name]. CHILDREN: And that is good! LEADER: This child of God has joined us today.... We will play, study, and share in this friendly place... We will learn about one another, and discover God's world in many ways... We will laugh, sing, and pray together."<sup>106</sup>

Music, of course, remained important, but the aims were different, focusing on self-expression rather than moral uplift. Teachers were encouraged to use music to "share our musical heritage... help children communicate their feelings, especially those which they are unable to put into words... help children learn about God and Jesus through their musical experience."<sup>107</sup> Learning and worship centers (still emphasized!) might contain a place for children to listen to music on their own.<sup>108</sup> People were always trying new and creative ways to involve music in the Christian education experience. In a complete 180-degree turn from some recommendations of forty years previous, the General Commission on Archives and History even released a pamphlet instructing churches how to have an old-fashioned singing school.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Richard L. Cookson, "Let's Sing About the Sunday School," *Church School Today*, Summer 1985: Q3.

<sup>106</sup> "A Litany of Thanksgiving," *Church School Today*, Fall 1985, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Peggy D. Bridgers, "Music in the Classroom," *Church School Today*, Winter 1986-87, 32.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> R. Kenneth Lile, *Guidelines for an Old-Fashioned Singing School* (Madison, N.J.: General Commission on Archives and History, 1986).

The Christian year as experienced in Sunday School was changing, too. Following a trend begun in the 1960s, more and more attention was paid to the historic Christian year and celebrating the festivals of the church: Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter (including an Easter Vigil), and Pentecost.<sup>110</sup> The Halloween emphasis was fading in favor of an emphasis on All Saints' Day.<sup>111</sup> As far as Sunday School's own festivals, Rally Day eventually transformed itself into Christian Education Sunday, with less emphasis on evangelizing the community and "selling" the Sunday School, and more on the dedication of teachers and the presentation of Bibles—although Promotion Sunday lived on, since there was a continuing need for handling the logistics of class promotion. Christmas pageants and programs also remained popular. Also, Vacation Church School or Vacation Bible School (the latter term was returning) grew into an ever-larger focus of the Christian educational year.

In many ways, the themes of this era would continue into the last decade of the twentieth century. But the publishing of the new *United Methodist Hymnal* in 1989 (followed by the 1992 *Book of Worship*) was the beginning of a sign of new trends in the church. Reforms advocated in the wake of Vatican II were finally coming to fruition within the church, as seen in the revised orders of worship and theological emphases of these new service books. At the same time, these books also contained a larger number of ethnic and global resources than ever before, as well as a growing number of choruses and songs from the ever-more-popular contemporary Christian music movement—a movement rooted in church growth principles and the continued quest for relevance. And then, there was cable television, the Internet, and the digital revolution.

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<sup>110</sup> Nancy Sorenson, "Something is Happening at Church," *Church School Today*, Winter 1985-86: 42-43.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. See also Jan Sutermeister Edwards, "Celebrate the Saints on Halloween," *The Church School*, Fall 1986, Q3. Some of the saints she suggested for commemoration include Moses, Paul, Martin Luther, Susanna Wesley, John Wesley, and Mary McLeod Bethune.

*1990s-2000s-beyond:*

Aim: Entertainment, comfort, challenge

Theme: Entertaining and challenging, catechism and discipleship

Orders: Class/graded worship, “informal” devotions, main service participation, “contemporary worship” themes

Resources: Media—esp. Internet, published resources, idea magazines, multi-cultural materials, graded curriculum, church growth materials, *Book of Worship* (1992)

Audience: All of church and the unchurched

It is difficult to evaluate present images of the kingdom in Sunday School worship in the present—as it is still growing, changing, and developing as it enters the twenty-first century. The best that can be done is to mention a few themes and changes in emphasis that have recently affected Methodist visions of the kingdom of God as a whole.

- *New orders and forms for worship*

The work begun after Vatican II in liturgical re-evaluation finally reached its widest influence on the church with the introduction of the new worship resources of 1989 and 1992. These orders emphasized the early church’s forms of worship, the communal nature of worship, and the centrality of the Sacraments in United Methodism. Questions began to be raised about the relationship of Christian education to catechesis and Christian initiation, the meaning of church membership for baptized but unconfirmed children, and the purpose and meaning of worship in all aspects of the church’s life. The lectionary, growing in emphasis since the 1960s, has often become a primary organizing force in weekly Christian education as well as weekly worship—as a way to link the two together. At the same time as this liturgical renewal, though, the contemporary Christian music and youth culture which grew out of the “Jesus Movement” and folk music of the 1960s and 1970s has exerted a huge influence.

- *The growth of youth culture*

Because of the influence of contemporary Christian music as well as the continued secular marketing to adolescents as an extremely specialized niche, churches have allowed and encouraged youth to develop their own culture and vision within the church—and within its Christian education program. Often presided over by a separate youth minister, it sometimes bears little resemblance to the aims and purposes of the

wider Christian education program. This means that youth worship, in and out of the Sunday School, is developing in new directions often only tangentially related to the denomination's stated approaches.

- *Encouraging children to participate in worship*

There is a trend towards teaching children about worship in Sunday School but actually allowing them to *experience* worship as part of the larger community of faith—pointing up changing perceptions of what worship is supposed to be and do, and how it does it. JHS says, “I have used Sunday School as a time of worship readiness for children and used a variety of children’s worship resources. An altar was set up and we integrated the main parts of worship—praise, prayer, creeds, offering—with the lesson taking the place of the message.” Several Christian educators have emphasized what children can bring to worship, and how it can benefit them in ways adults may not fully understand: “Worship is for the whole body of Christ. The whole of worship is for everyone present to be fed, to be in the presence of God, to rejoice as one of God’s people...to recommit to a life of loving God and loving neighbor, and to leave worship renewed and ready for life.”<sup>112</sup> However, some churches still keep children and the sanctuary quite separate.

- *Attract or disciple?*

Finally, there is a tension between differing visions of the primary purpose of worship and education in twenty-first century United Methodism—and how they work together to create the Kingdom of God. Is that kingdom a contextualized version of the faith adapted to secular culture and appealing to wide numbers, or a countercultural movement practiced by a few with a first-century vision? Do worship and church organization exist to attract the unchurched, disciple the faithful, or both? And how best are those goals to be accomplished? This is a continuing debate in the church, expressing itself in every level from General Conference resolutions on the place of Baptism and Eucharist, evangelism and catechesis, to local church attempts to start new worship services (or stop them being started). These questions as yet remain unanswered in the minds of many.

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<sup>112</sup> MaryJane Pierce Norton, “How to Welcome Children in Worship,” in *Worship Matters, Vol. II: A United Methodist Guide to Worship Work.*, ed. E. Byron Anderson (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), 124.

Sunday School worship has moved in many unexpected directions since Francis Asbury wrote his letter in 1791. It still possesses the same goal: to teach Christian truth to learners and make them members of Christ's Kingdom. But the definitions of teaching, learners, and the Christian faith and kingdom have altered greatly in two hundred years. They are likely to alter even more in the next two hundred.

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CMC, 30-year-old white male. Texas, North Carolina.

SFW, 32-year-old white male. West Virginia, North Carolina.

ALH, 33-year-old white female. Texas, North Carolina.

EDS, 34-year-old white female. Indiana, Illinois.

CGS, 40-year-old white male. Illinois.

JHS, 41-year-old white female. Virginia, Maryland/D.C., North Carolina.

CEG, 46-year-old white male. Kentucky.

MBA, 50-year-old white female. Illinois.

JSH, 52-year-old white male. Texas, Kentucky, Florida.

JLS, 53-year-old white female. New Jersey, Kentucky.

WBC, 54-year-old white male. Illinois.

JS, 55-year-old white female. Indiana, Illinois.

FBS, 57-year-old white male. New Jersey, Kentucky.

RS, 60-year-old white male. Indiana, Illinois.

EM, 61-year-old white female. Indiana.

MSW, 62-year-old white female. New Jersey, Kentucky, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois.

HLD, 67-year-old white male. Louisiana, Illinois.

ESF, 81-year-old white female. New Jersey.

MAS, 88-year-old white female. Ohio, New Jersey, Kentucky.

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