

## COOL TOOLS FOR SABBATH SCHOOL

# A Transformational Sabbath School Class for Youth

Teachers want to prepare their students to be mentally and physically healthy and productive in the society around them. Learning that fulfills this desire is doubly essential for Christians because it has bearing on citizenship in God's present and eternal kingdom. Imagine how God feels about His children—anyone who accepts His saving grace and chooses to be adopted into His family. Much more than human parents and educators do, He wants each to grow spiritually, physically, and mentally, to be well-informed, well-balanced, and good citizens in His kingdom, both present and future.

The verbs we associate with Christ's Commission to His disciples are "go," "make disciples," "preach," "baptize," and "teach." Matthew 28:18-20 speaks of making disciples and teaching, which indicates that we are to instruct and mentor. Mark 16:15-18 gives a version of the Great Commission that uses the word "preach" with the implication of being a public crier of the truth.

Although they might be hard-pressed to explain it, most teachers know the difference between the activities of teaching and telling. Teaching implies that some type of plan or method exists that is repeatable by the learner, that the needs of the learner are taken into consideration, that some type of two-way communication continues, especially when mentoring is involved. Telling is more of a one-way street. So is preaching.

Sometimes it seems we consider the Mark-written commission to apply to the church setting, and the Matthew-written commission, at least parts of it, to be fulfilled by our extensive parochial school system. But we would have much better success at "doing church" if we informed our activities there with the knowledge base we use to inform "doing school."

The implementation of sound educational practices would be the very thing needed to revive Sabbath School and make it the much-needed biblical core of youth ministry. "Youth have left Sabbath School," says David Neal, a youth director, "for mainly the same reason as adults. This once brilliant nurture program has in many cases turned into little more than a prelude to the main worship service, rather than the life-transforming agency it is meant to be. The class discussion time is often an intellectual exercise without members having their felt needs met. Groups of 10 or 20 youth may meet together on a

Sabbath morning, but there is little bonding. There could be two reasons for this, either an inadequate curriculum or poor teaching."<sup>1</sup> Neal goes on to state that he does not believe the problem is an inadequate curriculum.

Education should focus on the learner, but the beginning of curriculum is the teacher. Whoever the teacher is—even in his or her most hidden moments—is the most influential thing he or she brings to the learning table. The teacher's impact as curriculum is greatly magnified when the nature of the learning is about God. Then the mode of learning is primarily discipleship, fulfilling the great commission, whether or not the teachers are comfortable with their own discipleship status—or feel competent to "make disciples."

A knowledge of the professional practices of formal educators should never discourage the Spirit-led lay person who is stepping out in faith and volunteering to fill the need of youth discipler in their local church. But churches that embrace their role as educational centers should provide ways for dedicated lay persons to be equipped with educational tools that will enhance their ministry of discipling young people.

### Planning and Preparation

"A person cannot teach what he or she does not know."<sup>2</sup> This holds doubly true of the Sabbath School teacher. But this fact should not be used to discourage volunteer youth teachers. If they have personally submitted themselves to the instruction of the Holy Spirit, they will be equipped with what they need to know. They, however, must be willing to be lifelong learners, not



just Friday-night preparers of something to do in Sabbath School.

One way that this could be facilitated for volunteer teachers would be to base the Sabbath School curriculum they teach from whole sections of the Bible with which they could become familiar week by week ahead of class time. They could study from the Conflict of the Ages series as well as commentaries as they prepare for the lesson. Then, with the students, they can address issues that spring from the discussion or life circumstances. Background material could be provided for them in the teachers' guide to the Sabbath School curriculum to provide "crash" learning of their subject matter. This is currently the design of the youth Sabbath School curriculum, *Cornerstone Connections*.

This is not to say, of course, that the teacher should pass this "content" on merely as dry information. Many resources are geared specifically to help gain the teaching skills necessary to teach for transformation. The "Cool Tools for Sabbath School" Web site is a rich source.

"Teacher's knowledge of their students should include the students' stage of developmental understanding."<sup>3</sup> It is important that teacher training in the church include ongoing information about the developmental stages the teachers will be teaching.

In the field of education there is also much information about how individual learners vary from one another. We have also been encouraged to focus on the needs of the individual learner in the Sabbath School setting: "Attention to individual development [is] needed in educational work today. Many apparently unpromising youth are richly endowed with talents that are put to no use. Their faculties lie hidden because of a lack of discernment on the part of the educators."<sup>4</sup>

A teacher training program for youth Sabbath School should include information about and training in using such educational concepts as learning styles and the multiple intelligences. "Sabbath School teachers are challenged and privileged to honor Sabbath School members in the unique ways God made them, instead of trying to recreate them the way we wish He had made them."<sup>5</sup>

Particularly in religious education should the relationship between teacher and learner be strong and positive. As stated before, another term for this type of education is "discipleship." But the concern about this needed bond among people is not the purview of only religious and educational entities. Mental health studies are showing the urgency of connectedness in all human arenas.

## Selecting Instructional Goals

This aspect of good education is often elusive to the volunteer teacher at Sabbath School. Actual printed curricula tend to include some explicit goals, but not many of the teachers who use the curricula truly understand them, even if they are good ones. With non-formal education, teachers don't have to be concerned about such things as state requirements, but they are attempting to teach for transformation and "a vague Sabbath School lesson aim will usually result in vague teaching."<sup>6</sup> Sue Kline outlines succinct steps that will help a Sabbath School teacher connect with the idea of having instructional goals:

- "Don't necessarily adopt the lesson aim stated in your curriculum. . . . Consider the needs of your class, then adapt the aim and lesson to them."

- "Let the Scripture passage begin working in your life before you teach it to others." [This, of course, is including the concept of teacher as curriculum as mentioned earlier, the very heart of teaching for transformation and discipleship.]

- "Don't be afraid to deviate. And don't try to teach too much."

- "Knowledge becomes learning when it is translated into a life-changing action. This is more likely to happen when you begin a Bible study with a well thought-out, specific aim for your class members' spiritual growth."<sup>7</sup>

- "Let the teachers enter, heart and soul, into the subject matter of the lesson. Let them lay plans to make a practical application of the lesson, and awaken an interest in the minds and hearts of the children. . . . The teachers may give character to the work, so that the exercises will not be dry and uninteresting."<sup>8</sup>

## Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport

"Teaching is a matter of relationships among individuals. These relationships should be grounded in rapport and mutual respect, both between a teacher and students and among students."<sup>9</sup>

For those who are teaching for spiritual transformation in youth, the very essence of what they are trying to teach is epitomized by the biblical concept of "one-anothering." The very way to tell whether or not transformation is taking place is whether or not the students are coming to experience respect for one another and class rapport. After all, Jesus said that the way it would be obvious that we were His disciples would be if we loved one another (John 13:35). This could even be a possible form of assessment of learning.

## Establishing a Culture for Learning

This is much needed for serious church-based Bible learning—and somewhat controversial. In many churches youth ministry and Sabbath School are not connected, and Sabbath School loses membership because it is boring. In other churches the two are connected, but Sabbath School has been made to appeal to a very broad audience and features entertainment more than learning. Whether in Sabbath School or in a smaller Bible study setting for serious learners, some venue must be established within the church program for interesting, innovative, and transforming Bible learning.

“Our first challenge then is to make Bible study as interesting an experience as watching TV. We must get [learners] excited about serious Bible study. I emphasize Bible study and not study of the lesson curriculum.”<sup>10</sup> Once again, the Web site “Cool Tools for Sabbath School” echoes this sentiment and offers suggestions: “Repeatedly teachers and students ask how to get the Bible study discussion into the Bible and out of the Bible study guide. Many members are dismayed about the imbalance between Bible study and banter about personal opinion.”<sup>11</sup>

The following statement, made about the formal school setting in 1992, is still abysmally accurate about the religious education setting, “The ‘heart of the matter’ of any educational reform or restructuring is the relationship between the teaching and learning processes. We know that effective teaching mirrors effective learning, yet as educators we have not mounted a serious effort to organize teaching around the learning process.”<sup>12</sup>

## Organizing Physical Space

The physical setting is always a challenge for the church-based Bible teacher. Most churches do not have specially designed educational wings. In many places in the world there just is no space and it is fortunate if the climate is a warm one and there is a shade tree on the church property. As the concept of sound educational practice takes hold in the church, however, more and more an informed case should be made to the board and/or conference of this important need.

Volunteer teachers can be informed about the importance of this and advised of strategies by which to lovingly badger the bureaucracy. But they must also be supplied information on how to adapt whatever they have into the best learning environment possible. It cannot be expected that the type of adaptation necessary will “come naturally” to volunteer teachers. But, especially in a Bible “classroom” setting, it is vital that every student feel safe, comfortable, and

included so that the learning experience can make the most possible impact on their lives.

## Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques

“In a well-run discussion, all students are engaged. The dialogue is not dominated by a few ‘star’ students, and the teacher is not simply waiting for someone to provide the answer he has been looking for.”<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately this description sounds like too many Sabbath School classes—especially when we honor the star students as a way of encouraging others to study their Sabbath School lesson.

If Sabbath School teachers had only one topic that they could study before becoming teachers, it should be how to ask good questions to lead to good discussion. “Research in education indicates that training teachers in questioning techniques can enhance learning skills in their students by encouraging their thinking from literal repetition of facts into deeper exploration through comprehension, application, and inferential reasoning.”<sup>14</sup>

A teacher can create more effective questions through the use of the following strategies, drawn from two sources:<sup>15</sup>

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Ask follow-up questions.
- Ask extension questions.
- Wait for students’ answers.
- Don’t evaluate responses.
- Use questions to move the class toward the learning goal.
- Use clarifying questions (“Explain . . .”).
- Ask “how” or “why” questions.
- Pose questions before asking a student to respond.
- Prepare 12 to 15 questions for an hour’s discussion.
- Don’t settle for only one answer.
- Develop a tolerance for silence.
- Avoid answering your own question.

## Engaging Students in Learning

There are not, of course, in Sabbath School as many different ways to engage students in learning as there are in formal learning settings. Much more could be done in this area, however, than is often done in the typical Sabbath School.

In talking about the latest educational practices of her day, Ellen White said “The use of object lessons, blackboards, maps, and pictures, will be an aid in explaining these lessons, and in fixing them in the memory. Parents and teachers should constantly seek

for improved methods. The teaching of the Bible should have our freshest thought, our best methods, and our most earnest effort."<sup>16</sup>

Further, "In order for the study [of the Bible] to be effective, the interest of the pupil must be enlisted. Especially by the one who has to deal with children and youth differing widely in disposition, training, and habits of thought, this is a matter not to be lost sight of. In teaching children the Bible, we may gain much by observing the bent of their minds, the things in which they are interested, and arousing their interest to see what the Bible says about these things. He who created us, with our various aptitudes, has in His word given something for everyone. As the pupils see that the lessons of the Bible apply to their own lives, teach them to look to it as a counselor."<sup>17</sup>

And, "It is not the best plan for teachers to do all the talking, but they should draw out the class to tell what they know. Then let the teacher, with a few brief, pointed remarks or illustrations, impress the lesson upon their minds. Under no circumstances should teachers go through the lesson mechanically, and then sit down, leaving the children to stare about, or whisper and play, as we have seen them do. . . . The active minds of children should be kept constantly employed. Their ideas should be drawn out and corrected, or approved, as the case may require."<sup>18</sup>

### **Reflecting on Teaching**

It is all too easy at the end of a Sabbath School class period, especially with young people, to have a sense of "having gotten through another one," and, unfortunately, to put the teaching process out of mind until the next Friday night. But religious educators who are gifted by the Spirit with the gift of teaching will feel the necessity of continuing to evaluate and improve their ministry in the church body.

"The Sabbath school is not a place of entertainment, to amuse and divert the children, although, rightly conducted, it can be all of this; but it is a place where children and youth are educated, where the Bible is opened to the understanding, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little. . . . Let every teacher feel that he must know more; he must be better acquainted with those with whom he has to deal, better acquainted with the best methods of imparting knowledge."<sup>19</sup> Only by careful reflection on what has gone on and what might be improved can this kind of growth and improvement take place.

### **Communicating with Families**

The family is the first line of education and training in nurturing young members of the body of

Christ. Those beyond the family, who continue the discipling process at the church itself, must be encouraged to stay in close communication with the family. Unfortunately, in this day, the first line of defense may be decimated, and that information will also be helpful as the dedicated teacher attempts to nurture young people and disciple them for Christ. According to Oliver Archer, youth pastor at Pioneer Memorial Church on the campus of Andrews University, "Parents are your strongest allies. Well, actually, they are sometimes your strongest allies, and sometimes the biggest problems. But in either case, you have to include the family and stay connected with them as you are attempting to minister to their young person."<sup>20</sup>

### **Contributing to the Church and the Community**

As religious educators, as persons exercising the gift of teaching for the edification of the body of Christ, youth Sabbath School teachers are a vital part of the "priesthood of all believers." They are not only teachers, but also mentors and role models to the young people they teach. They will be modeling how to live in community as the body, and how the body reaches out to bless those in the world around them. They will need awareness of this function of their "professional practice" and also encouragement and ideas about how they can fulfill this duty.

### **Growing and Developing Professionally**

To some it may seem frivolous to apply the professional practices outlined in this article to the "unfortunate" person who finally agreed to say yes to the nominating committee. However, "The Sabbath School ministry is not a Sabbath-only responsibility. It is not like a light switch that can be turned off during the week and turned on again on Friday night. One must eat, drink, breathe, and sleep Sabbath School. The fire can ignite creativity—or at least a sensitivity to the creativity that abounds."<sup>21</sup>

But until we change our way of thinking about the vital importance of the religious education happening within the walls of the church, we will be continuing to let God down in the training of His children for their life in His kingdom both here and in the hereafter. We cannot rely on the elusive dream of having all the future generations of our church go through formal Adventist Christian education.

"The object of Sabbath School work should be the ingathering of souls. The order of working may be flawless, the facilities all that could be desired; but if the children and youth are not brought to Christ, the school is a failure; for unless souls are drawn to

Christ, they become more and more unimpressible under the influence of a formal religion.”<sup>22</sup>

Unless the teacher is a humble disciple of Christ, personally growing and developing in their spiritual journey, whatever they are teaching on Sabbath will run the risk of making their students more and not less “unimpressible under the influence of a formal religion.” More than any other class of teacher, formal or non-formal, the youth Sabbath School teacher is compelled to growth and development.

1. David Neal, “The Youth Sabbath School—Its Purpose and Future,” *Journal of Adventist Youth Ministry*, 1985, p. 23.
2. C. Danielson, *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996), p. 62.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
4. *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 74.
5. <[Http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org](http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org)>.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*

8. *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, pp. 113, 114.
9. C. Danielson, *ibid.*
10. David Neal, *ibid.*, p. 29.
11. <[Http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org](http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org)>.
12. R. Marzano, *A different kind of classroom: Teaching with dimensions of learning* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 1992), p. 5.
13. C. Danielson, *ibid.*, p. 92.
14. <[Http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org](http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org)>.
15. Thom and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: And How to Fix It* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, 2003); Gary Swanson, “Questioning guidelines,” <<http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org>>.
16. *Education*, p. 186.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
18. *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, pp. 116, 117.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
20. O. Archer, A. Martin, interviewer, *Issues and Challenges in Adolescence*, July 30, 2007.
21. <[Http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org](http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org)>.
22. *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 61.



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