

STORY TIME, ALL THE TIME
A MODEL FOR SUNDAY SCHOOL: CANA LUTHERAN CHURCH
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Background

Cana Lutheran Church is a church worshipping about 135 per week with a Sunday school attendance that averages between 35 and 40 in addition to two adult classes with their own curricula. Classes are group-graded beginning with preschool/kindergarten through seventh/eighth grade, and senior high. Staff includes two teachers for each class, a Sunday school superintendent, an assistant superintendent, a librarian, music leaders, and an intergenerational event coordinator. As Cana's associate in ministry, I am a paid staff person who serves as a resource for all of the above. Our Sunday school runs from 9:30 a.m. to 10:40 a.m. on Sundays between Labor Day and Memorial Day, exclusive.

Prompting for a new model for Sunday School

A series of changes in staff and situations prompted Cana to examine both format and curriculum for Sunday school.

-after expressed concern that kids weren't give enough opportunity to learn Christian songs, Sunday school now begins with a common 'opening' in the sanctuary prior to classroom time. Cana's worship band members were enlisted and now the students sing favorite church camp and Sunday school songs to a live band! High school students, who were apt to complain about music time, now enthusiastically volunteer to lead songs and motions.

-teachers were looking for a new curriculum that minimized teacher preparation and most suited the group-graded nature of the classes

-a Trinity Lutheran Seminary course entitled "The Church's Ministry With Children" fueled me with the inspiration, tools, and resources to create a custom Cana model called "Story Time, All the Time." (See Appendix 1 for a bibliography.)

Goals: This model will....

- 1) Invite students to think for themselves, reach their own understandings, and learn at their own
- 2) Engage the students in the Bible stories as stories, nurturing students to develop patterns of reading the Bible on their own
- 3) Prompt discussion through open-ended questions that have no wrong answers
- 4) Encourage family discussions around the common lectionary readings
- 5) Give the students some quiet, reflective time—something often lacking in their lives
- 6) Create learning opportunities where multiple intelligences are engaged
- 7) Achieve quality teaching where less teacher preparation time is required
- 8) Complement and support the new opening format
- 9) Satisfy a congregational goal that I be more personally involved with Sunday school students

Vision and Planning

1. Synchronization with overall congregational goals and activities.

-*To improve youth ministry* is a primary goal for the congregation .We felt this new Sunday school model would forward that goal.

-It would also fit well into our new Sunday school format, as we would simply add "story time" to the opening.

2. Learning from others.

-In the initial stages of planning, it was helpful and encouraging to have conversations with others who have successfully used similar models

3. Helping others catch the vision

-In order to share the vision and give others a concrete look at what this model offers, I prepared a detailed Sunday school staff workshop. It included:

- scriptural foundation: Psalm 98:1-9
- inspiration; “No Way. The Hundred Is There” by Loris Malaguzzi, (Appendix 2)
- prayers
- background
- rationale
- division of responsibilities
- time-lines
- expert opinions
- opportunities for questions, concerns, and suggestions
- my own hopes and dreams for the new program

- I discussed it with our pastor and received his approval

- I then presented the workshop and plan to our Learning Ministry Team (CE Committee)

- I invited the team leader and Sunday school superintendent to present portions of the workshop to the Sunday school staff with me so the proposal was made by the team, not solely by me. We offered the workshop twice over the summer so that every teacher had an opportunity to attend, ask questions, and give suggestions for improvement.

-my report to the Congregation Council outlined the new proposal and gave them the opportunity for questions and comments

Our pastor was somewhat new at the time and our congregation was a little anxious about change. A well prepared outline with strong rationale and opportunity for others to ask questions/give feedback were essential in lowering the anxiety level. The line of reasoning was also strengthened by the fact that that Sunday school teachers initiated the process themselves by requesting a curriculum change.

Avoiding roadblocks

Although some roadblocks and resistance were anticipated because this was such new territory for the congregation, we were delighted by the overwhelming acceptance. Two factors probably contributed to the positive response:

1. It was presented as a work-in-progress, wide-open to suggestions and changes.
2. We requested that it be given a three-month trial period. If it wasn't working, then we'd willingly find a different curriculum for the remainder of the year. No one felt pressured. Near the end of the three months a Sunday school staff meeting was held to gather feedback. They all wanted to continue Story Time, All the Time.

Promotion

Information and promotion was accomplished through:

- the church newsletter
- the Sunday school bulletin board
- regular Sunday school Rally Day promotional materials
- parents received a note about the change and how to use “Story Time” to facilitate family discussions about each Sunday's Scripture reading

- We did not specifically promote the change in the community, but it was mentioned in our regular Rally Day invitations to community children.

Training and support

1. Initial workshop including a sample class
2. Follow up visits to each class where I demonstrated by leading the class myself
3. A notebook of activity ideas for the teachers to use. It was hard for our teachers to learn to relax and not plan every minute of each session. Some still feel compelled to over-plan.
4. For those teachers who felt creatively challenged and anxious about not having a prepared craft written out for them, we offered the assistance of having an activity helper chose and prepare a weekly activity for them to lead. Now we've learned to carefully pair teachers so that each class has a teacher who feels confident enough to prepare the class activities
5. A visit to each classroom once a year by the program coordinator

How To's for Implementation

CHOOSING THE STORIES

- The Sunday school year is divided into trimesters.
- From the common lectionary readings, I chose the text that best works as a story for children for each Sunday in the trimester
- A chart with the following information is prepared for teachers::
 - 1) the date of use and the story's Bible citation
 - 2) the story's topic and word definitions needed to understand the story
 - 3) five wondering questions. (See Appendix 3 for a one-year sample.)

A LOOK AT A TYPICAL SUNDAY

1. Sunday School opening in the sanctuary
 - Welcome and songs
 - Announcements led by the Sunday school superintendent and assistant
 - Birthdays for the week
 - birthday celebrants choose a small gift, and we sing "Happy Birthday."
 - Baptism birthdays
 - each celebrant is given a small white candle with a card attached that has part of the baptismal liturgy on it and the Sunday school recites it to them ("Let your light so shine before others....")
 - Offering collection; offering hymn
 - More singing
2. Dismissal for 7th/8th grade class and Sr Hi
 - the older classes use other material because Story Time is geared for younger children. However, these classes do have copies of the story chart, should they choose to use it.

3. Story Time

Preschool- sixth grade classes are then invited up front to the "story nook" (aka choir loft) to hear the story.

- I generally tell the story straight from the Bible, essentially doing a dramatic reading of it, only adding the definitions and some explanations.
- Sometimes I use a flannel board (which surprisingly they love)
- Sometimes I have them close their eyes and imagine the scene, and sometimes I just tell it.
- Then I say, "Let's see what the wondering box has for us today."

-I open the “wondering box” (a box decorated with question marks) and remove the “wondering hat” (a tall hat with a big question mark on it) and put the hat on my head

- I take out a bookmark with a quote from the story and five wondering questions on it.
 - Each student gets a bookmark in their classrooms to take home so their family can discuss the wondering questions together. (See Appendix 4.)
 - the wondering questions are asked and students have an opportunity to think about them
 - dismissal to classes.

4. Classroom Time

- In the classroom, the teacher leads a discussion based on the wondering questions.
- Then, the class participates in an activity that the teacher has chosen.
 - the activity is general rather than specific.
 - I ask that the teachers NOT plan a step-by-step craft to demonstrate the story, but rather allow the students to use their own imaginations.
 - sample activities might include:
 - write a poem about your answer to a wondering question
 - draw a picture that makes you think of the story
 - make a puppet of your favorite story character
 - work together to create a modern-day skit with the same theme as today’s story
 - the teachers supply adequate materials for the activity and help when asked but are careful to let students *use their own* ideas to interpret the story. In this way, each individual finds personally connect to the story in a way that one uniformed craft never will.
 - preschoolers may need a little more teacher assistance

TOOLS, INSPIRATION & VOLUNTEERS

1. Materials

- materials available to the teachers are the typical ones: paper, pencils, crayons, markers, scissors, paints, fun foam, glue, yarn, string, paper bags, sequins, beads, etc.
- There are also costumes, props, musical instruments, and wooden Bible figure dolls for acting out plays.
- We tell teachers that if they require something we don’t have in stock, just tell us and we’ll get it.

2. Inspiration

Inspiration is drawn from the stories themselves, idea books, and teacher magazines

3. Volunteers

In addition to teachers, this model requires one or more people to carry out the following roles:

- to develop an activity idea book
- to create a schedule of the stories chosen from the lectionary readings
- to define Biblical terms that may not be familiar to the students
- to think up wondering questions
- to make the take-home item, such as a bookmark, with the wondering questions on it.
- someone to tell the story each week
 - a dedicated storyteller willing to do it each week
 - a regular substitute, perhaps the church librarian
 - a group of willing storytellers used on a rotation basis

Reflection

Strengths

- The fact that we originally asked the Sunday school staff to try Story Time, All the Time for 3 months and we're still using it 3 years later testifies to the fact that it's well liked.
- Preparation time for teachers is minimal and the students enjoy this style of learning and are remember the story.
- Despite the fact some of the stories are fairly long, even preschoolers are able to remember the stories. At first, students were afraid of "wrong" answers, but now it's hard to contain the discussion of the wondering questions.
- Children often excitedly pipe up during the children's sermon to tell Pastor about the story.
- Complaints happen when it's time to go home because, as one young person said, "Sunday school is more fun" Others agree!
- Sunday school attendance has improved, while worship attendance has declined.
- Now that we're not purchasing a curriculum, we have more money to spend on items that once were considered luxuries. We're replacing nursery toys with religious-based ones and buying the teachers supplemental materials and books.

Room to Grow

- Some families say they enjoy discussing the wondering questions together. We hope to strengthen this church-home connection.
- The first year of Story Time, children took home "wondering question" bookmarks. This past year, children were given a "rainbow link" to chain together at home. This idea wasn't as successful. The children tended to play with them during class and pretty much destroy them. The original bookmarks were of cardstock and were sturdier than the paper chain links.
- Content for the "wondering questions" also needed adjustment. Originally questions were developed with the hope that they would be appropriate for any age. The first year the preschool teachers asked for easier questions. The second year, older students asked for harder questions. Now, questions are categorized as one easy question, one more difficult question, and three moderate questions each week.
- Teachers have requested a list of "safety net" activities—something quick and easy to do if the discussion and activity end before class time is up.

All in all, though we make more improvements each year, the Learning Ministry Team, Sunday school staff, and I feel that this model has been very successful for Cana.