



April 2011

Rethinking Sunday School

Keep the words of the Lord in your heart...teach them to your children.

—Deuteronomy 11:18a, 19a

Necessity is the mother of invention. Last August, our Sunday School director e-mailed me troubling news. Teachers from previous years were unwilling to commit. “At this point, Pastor,” she wrote, “I have no one left to ask about teaching and I have no idea how we are going to run a Sunday School program with just myself and some substitutes. What would you suggest?”

St. Paul Lutheran in New City is a small parish. Church growth is a concern, and we know that without a Sunday School program, families with children are not likely to join our congregation. For years, Sunday School kicked off with a short contemporary sing-along led by a gifted guitarist who enjoys working with children. Hoping to build on this strong foundation, I invited the Sunday School director, guitarist, and a few church leaders to think with me about new education models.

Our brainstorming led us to begin The Gathering, a 45-minute contemporary worship service for children and families. The service begins and ends in song, allowing the guitarist to lead inspirational and educational songs like “I’ve Got a River of Life,” “Sandy Land,” and “Books of the New Testament.” The liturgy for The Gathering is designed to teach about worship in an interactive, informal way. It’s intentionally intergenerational,



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allowing children and parents to bond spiritually. I explain what prayer is, why we pray, and how to pray. Children and parents share prayer celebrations and concerns. We say The Lord's Prayer. As the offering plate is passed around, I talk about the offering, why we give, and where the money goes. Young people read Bible verses and a Children's Message



with props and time for questions is offered.

Kathi Kruk recently joined St. Paul after attending The Gathering with her sons, ages eight and two, for about a year. "I really enjoy The Gathering because it's casual and I always feel welcome," she says. "I

also like that everyone gets a chance to share what's on their mind. There really is no 'wrong' answer at The Gathering."

"I was pleasantly surprised by my sons' participation," says Maggie Olano, who began visiting with her sons, Nicholas (11) and Matthew (9). "Both volunteered to read Bible passages and sang with the sing-along. Children enjoy things more when they are asked to participate."

Now traditional Sunday School is offered two Sundays a month and The Gathering functions as Christian education on the other two Sundays. Since we began The Gathering, a few folks have volunteered to team teach traditional Sunday School. Some members are concerned that The Gathering competes with the later Holy Communion service, causing a decline in attendance. Others see the potential to enrich existing worship. "I think The Gathering is a great way to introduce children to all the parts of worship," says Dori Amtmann, who will become a member this fall. "Then they have more understanding when they attend our Holy Communion service."

As pastor, this arrangement allows me to offer worship instruction one week and attend to pastoral duties the next. And, a few new families from our church's preschool have come to The Gathering. What began as a Christian education crisis turned into an opportunity for outreach. Thanks be to God! ✚ **THE REV. RHONDA HOEHN** is interim pastor of St. Paul, New City.

The Lutheran New Yorker shares stories of congregational and synod ministry. Find more stories at www.mnys.org.



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