

Allelon: A Different sort of Sunday School

The Aims of this Sunday School Program

1. To integrate the Church life of our congregation's middle-schoolers and over-twenty-year-olds beyond the 11:00 Sunday hour
2. To integrate the content of the Sunday School hour and the worship service
3. To remove from any given teacher-personality the pressure of a Sunday morning's success or failure
4. To incorporate the lectionary into a greater share of the congregation's weekly Bible-study life
5. To open up more space for all of our people, young and old, to edify one another (Gk. Allelon)

Obstacles and Objections to Anticipate

1. Some of our adults will be uncomfortable having to lead a group of teenagers in discussion.
2. People over 40 and people under 20 (that is to say, most of our Sunday School students) have such different bases of experience that they have trouble communicating.
3. Teenagers want to have their own programs in church; they get squirrely when they have to sit through "old people church" already.
4. Adults want to have some relatively quiet time in church; they are ready to bang their heads through the wall when teens have to sit through worship service already.

The Basic Shape of Allelon

Each week, one of the congregation's talking heads (Nathan, Ben, Deneen, Wes, etc.) will gather everyone from age 12 on up in the sanctuary. The group will pray together, participate in a responsive reading of one of the week's Psalms (to be printed on the lesson sheet), and then listen as the talking head (I suppose the Church used to call these folks lecturers, but I like the sound of "talking head") reads aloud the week's sermon text. Then the talking head (TH) will distribute the week's lesson page (see attached) and divide the over-twenty population into groups of **no fewer than three and no more than four people** and number the groups. The TH will then assign the young, one by one, to groups. If the populations of the young and the think-they're-young hold steady, the groups should consist of three or four adults and two to four middle schoolers, allowing those adults less comfortable with the teens to take on support rather than leadership roles.

The groups will then move to various spaces within our building (front of the sanctuary, back of the sanctuary, tables downstairs, choir storage room) and work through the discussion page. The lessons will always consist of finding out things about each other by means of game-style discussion starters, close reading of the week's Scripture text, and mutual admonition based on what they learned. (This part makes a great deal more sense once one has looked at a lesson page—go ahead and look at one now.)

At roughly 10:45, a designated timekeeper within the group will bring the group back into the sanctuary, where each group will sit together. At this point the TH (remember the TH?) will read the day's other Scripture reading from the lectionary. The session will end with a prayer said by someone other than the TH (teenage preferred but not required) and wrap up around 10:50 so that the teens can blow off steam outside for a few minutes and so that those who do not do such steamy things can have a few minutes for setup and meet-and-greet.

In the space of an hour, everyone involved will have heard three bodies of Scripture, hopefully found out something new about someone outside her or his age group, and prayed together twice. In the space of a few weeks, people of all ages should start to develop preferences for which “other-agers” they prefer to work with. In the space of a Church calendar season, everyone involved will have considered each week’s sermon text in discussion and homiletic formats.

How We Jump the Hurdles

1. Because our lessons are based on the Scriptures primarily and because the discussions will intentionally be geared towards cross-generational conversation, we will not assume but will build a common base of experience for conversation.
2. Because no adult will ever have to be alone with teenagers and no teenager will have to be alone with adults, the program will aim towards integration of groups rather than assimilation of individuals.
3. Because the really good stuff happens in the small groups, our TH’s are allowed to get sick, travel, and experience those other human moments without wrecking a Sunday morning.
4. Because Nathan will have written the lessons ahead of time (with input from others as they see fit), and because the program is designed for extemporaneously-formed groups, only the TH has to prepare for Sunday morning, and minimally at that.

Getting the People to Say Amen

We’ll aim for May 20 as a startup date. (That’s the first lesson attached here.) Between now and then, Nathan will approach the upstairs class with the idea while Deneen approaches the downstairs folks. Ben and Deneen will also give Nathan ideas and feedback so that we can fine-tune the plan before and during its startup. On July 1 the program will hit its big test: Nathan will be in some northern state, and someone else will have to run TH. By that time, the other TH’s should be familiar enough with the program to serve as TH. If it can run without its designer, we have something. If not, back to the Carpenter’s Shop until I come up with something better.

Looking to the Future: Feedback Appreciated

- Web content to go along with lessons?
- A system for planning and constructing groups according to personalities?
- Teen Talking Head Day?