
Failure to Root – How Sunday School Seedlings Fail when Re-potted.

Covid 19 has turned many of us into home gardeners. Some people, like me, have been deeply disappointed with the results. A similar disappointment haunts our youth work.

Confirmation is where it shows. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence of a longstanding problem with our confirmation system. My mother is 91, and only she and Ernest Trent survived their confirmation class at Claremont Methodist Church, 75 years ago. I am 61 and only Michelle Evans and I survived our confirmation class, 45 years ago. Things have been going wrong for a long time. In a recent research project, I interviewed 11 different Methodist ministers from different race, language, age and gender profiles, it emerged that the story is still the same today. People grow up going to Sunday School, get to confirmation age, attend confirmation class and get confirmed...and then cease to meet (Mostert, 2018, pp. 80-81). Abruptly. They do not get incorporated into the mainstream life of the church. Except for a very, very few. Our churches are not known for their 18-35 year-old cohort! Seedlings grow quite thickly in the Sunday School nursery, but they mostly wilt in the flower-bed of the Adult Church.

We need to tell the truth to ourselves: the confirmation system does not work.

If we want to move from death towards life in our youth ministries, we need to find sources of actual data - truth - to guide our praxis; every practical gardener recognises the importance of knowing what the soil is actually like, not what we hope it's like, or what we wish it was like, or what it ought to be like.

The Wilting Church

Funding for core church functions is only an issue when the church is not thriving. Healthy churches simply *are self-supporting* (Thomas, 2001). A Church needing financial support from outside is seriously sick. If that lack of funding leads to the inability to have a minister, that church is doubly sick – it has ceased to be *self-governing*. And if youth work is not thriving, it is a sign that in the most obvious area (biological growth) the church is not *self-propagating* – a clear triple indicator of the approaching death of a congregation (Allen, 1927).

Finances are down, congregations are shrinking, and the youth are leaving¹: and no matter how much care we take in transplanting young people from Sunday School to Adult Church, we have the same disappointing result year after year. We must not flinch from this truth.

Having stared death in the face, we are then able to make decisions about staying alive!

¹ Mthembu notes that it is possible to hide this situation by not reporting it: "There should be exact statistics on new membership, retained membership and those that have left. As Methodists we have a responsibility to find our lost brethren" (2019, p. 224)

A Tale of Two Gardens

My focus here is on the confirmation-age, religiously minded cohort in our Methodist Churches (I am going to leave aside those who decide to dive into career absorption, sensuality and crime, choosing to ignore metaphysical meaningfulness. They need particular approaches and a separate paper.)

Sunday School kids are raised from seed in a functionally separate environment to the Adult Church. It has different leadership, channels of involvement, spirituality, structures, worship, group dynamics, discipleship objectives, inter-personal relationships, and connectivity with the world beyond itself (Logan, et al., 1998; Schwartz, 1999). I want to investigate is why these two gardens are so different, and what practical steps we might take to reduce transplantation shock; as Masondo might put it, “they need to be given social and intellectual space to grow and thrive” (2014, p. 7)

1. Leadership

Sunday school leadership is recruited from amongst those who are most sympathetic to children and their issues. Adult church leadership (often including the minister) is recruited amongst those who want somebody else to deal with the young. So when young people leave Sunday School via Confirmation, they end up in a church whose leadership is deliberately indexed to address the concerns of those who are not young.

Is it possible to have dual-indexed leadership?

2. Channels of involvement

Generally very little stress is placed on children exercising spiritual gifts in the Sunday School. Everything is prepared for them, prayers are prayed for them, caring is of them not by them. They are taught but never teach. They are told to read the Bible but never asked what they think about it. They have not been schooled in active evangelism, active pastoral care, or active mission.

When they emerge from Sunday School to Adult Church via confirmation they are expected to be autonomously functional as participating adults – I imagine that comes as a bit of a shock.

3. Spirituality

The key message most Sunday school children take home is “be good. Christians are good people”. When they emerge into late teenage freedoms, and find that they want to do some bad stuff on Friday and Saturday nights, they perhaps do not feel at home in the company of “the good” any more. If they are met with sermons that are mainly a riff on the “be good” theme, then there is nothing much there for them.

If spirituality is merely transactional good behaviour for earned benefits, then it cannot cope with the robust suite of temptations that they face. Is there a way of helping children develop more sophisticated spirituality that deals with their own true state of being? Do our children emerge from Sunday School with faith or legalism?

4. Structures

Sunday Schools are run on age-cohort lines, exactly like schools. Kids are socialised to relating most deeply to one single age group. When they “matriculate” from Sunday School to Adult Church, they are suddenly expected to relate to a broad spectrum of age groups and interest groups. In addition, the most recent age cohorts have already left – so young people emerging into the church are expected to relate to people on average 40 or 50 years their senior. That must be difficult to cope with!

5. Worship

Sunday school worship is keyed to youth interests and youth tastes. Usually they are then expected to worship solemnly through the medium of responsive prayers and hymns. To be fair, many churches are focusing on this as a problem area (Mthembu, 2019, pp. 218-219), and they are trying to contemporise worship forms. But many are not, and the subsequent alienation of the youth is not surprising. However, some theorists seem to consider that worship is the main issue causing the die-off of the youth. I disagree

6. Discipleship Objectives

In Sunday School, the curriculum is generally aimed at teaching the overall contents of the Bible, a Christianised ethic, and keeping the kids busy while the adults get along with their stuff. When they emerge into adult church, they are expected to become deeply engaged with reshaping their worldview according to Biblical principles. It is deeply unclear in this process where one is to make a faith commitment. In Sunday School they are treated as if they were committed Christians, and then they emerge into a church where they are treated as if they are committed Christians. The strain of keeping up the pretence is difficult for most people to maintain.

7. Group Dynamics

In Sunday Schools young people participate in small group learning sessions which are more or less well suited to communicating with them at their level and in ways that they relate to. When they are transplanted into church they are confronted with a generalised monologue, no more visual aids, no opportunity to raise questions and every pressure to simply be quiet and soak up insight. I suspect that the showpiece of communication in the adult church, the sermon, is one of the strongest elements in killing off new youth transplants.

8. Inter-personal Relationships

In Sunday Schools the relationships are informal, undemanding and friendly. Bullies are restrained. In adult church relationships are often formal, intense and often hostile. Bullies often assume leadership positions. It is not surprising that youth participation evaporates in such toxic environments.

9. Connectivity with the World Beyond Itself

The Church itself is a foreign world to the child in the Sunday School. Most congregations have very little concern (as a whole) for the world beyond themselves. But religiously minded

young people find involvement in such ventures to be deeply meaningful – and a place to find integration in the wider congregation. But such initiatives are the exception rather than the rule in Methodist churches: they certainly involve very few of the adult congregations.

Bottom line: The Youth are not the Problem in the Problem of the Youth

From this analysis it is obvious that I think that the problem of youth retention in the Methodist problem is not a problem with the youth – rather it is a failure of the adult church to be a nurturing and healthy environment for new inductees. The Methodist Church as envisioned by John Wesley would have addressed all these issues, and it would do us good to reflect on whether we were once a youth-friendly church. As Mthembu says, “We need to re-imagine a church that has its youth and children at the centre” (2019, p. 229)

I am one of the few who successfully made the transition from Sunday School to Adult church. These are some of my learnings gleaned from those who did not make it. But the people we should be learning from are today’s cohort of confirmands.

Asking Young people about the Church

Why ask the youth about the failure of the youth to integrate?

Perhaps some might consider these Methodists to be too young to give reliable insight. However, it is precisely these Methodists who decide to leave their church after confirmation. They are moving from childhood to adulthood, growing in their capacity to chart their own course through life, and part of that course is their faith profile. As they individuate from their parents (Andersen & Taylor, 2004, pp. 93-94), they form their own worldviews (Kraft, 1996, pp. 11-12). We need to work out what they find lacking in the church they are expected to join, and what they find meets their need in the churches they choose to affiliate with instead.

I suggest that we are most likely to find those things out by asking young people. What makes the transition from Sunday School to Adult Church so difficult for them? In the past social convention was rigid for Young people – you stayed a Methodist because there was no option: you bloomed or died as a Methodist. This is still largely in force in rural areas. But city life means choice for children.

How to ask for help from the young

I have attached my preliminary suggestion for a question schedule to form the basis of a one on one conversation with individual confirmands, conducted by a sympathetic but non-affiliated researcher. Responses worked out in group discussion are not OK because of the power of group-speak at that age. A youth leader, minister, parent, or anybody in a power-relation to the young person is also not OK: children are adept at telling you what you would like to hear². The question schedule needs a lot of input from others, but it is perhaps a start.

² The best source for this approach to research is Osmer, who describes a pastoral-research paradigm (Osmer, 2008).

Reacting to the research

If some of you would be willing to undertake this as a research project, I would be happy to convene a discussion group to pool our insights and produce a report on the voice of our youth for the Methodist Church. You might say “We need to let the youth sort this out” but I say it needs to be adults who do this because it is an issue of our adult behaviour and attitudes. We have to be the adults in the room – we have to change to help the youth, not expect the youth to change to help us.

We might not like what we hear, but the voice of our children could be the voice of Samuel to Eli (1 Samuel 3:17-18). My point is that problems with maintaining and expanding youth work is not a youth-work problem – it is a problem with the way we do church. Our Church Life is too harsh for our youth to find a place to grow and flourish after confirmation. That is my theory. Am I right or wrong? That can only be determined by looking at the best possible data we can get...I am ready to be put right by our young people and shown a better way. Are you?

Bibliography

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