Abstract

Sunday schools and church education programs are floundering in most Protestant churches and denominations in the US. In part this because we are stuck in schooling models, structures, practices, and assumptions born in the 19th century. Making those old schooling models work today is hopeless. We need to do something different. But this stuckness runs deep—in our psyches, our society, and the denominational structures, seminaries, and universities that shape and form each of us.

In this paper, after briefly discussing some of the factors keeping us in our stuckness, I tell the story of experimenting with changing patterns of worship and education in the congregation I serve as pastor. In the process I explore the dynamics of deep learning, the role of the pastor, religious education professional, and the religious education scholar, as well as implications of moving beyond the schooling model.
“Where are all the children?” she asks me, again. She is a long and steady presence in the church—among the founders of this ecumenical community church thirty years ago. The question is rhetorical. But probably in part she really does want an answer. She asks it at nearly every opportunity. It is not that we do not have any children. When they all show up, once or twice a year, there are more than a dozen of them. This is not bad representation of the future generation in a congregation with around one hundred members. But they don’t all show up. Some weeks none of them shows up. Many weeks only two or three or five are present. Considering the thousands of dollars we spent on the new Godly Play curriculum, and considering that I—their pastor—have a PhD in religious education, that is a rather pitiful showing of Sunday school children. The question is justified. Where are all the children? Why does our Sunday school seem to be languishing? Why don’t parents just get the kids to Sunday school and Church? It is a different era I tell her. Perhaps we need to do things differently.

Sunday schools, church education programs, parish-based Christian nurture initiatives are floundering throughout old line Protestantism in the US, and weakening in Roman Catholic circles, and shifting and morphing in evangelical contexts (cf. Wimberly 2015). It is a different era. Families are busy, sports take children to practices and games on Sunday mornings, the very idea of competency in Bible and Christian history and theology is unfamiliar to the point of being virtually incomprehensible to many. Being Christian is one option among myriad others in our culture. Being a weekly church attender is increasingly an option rarely exercised.

But we are still stuck—a majority of Protestant churches, and denominations, and church leaders—we are stuck in schooling models and structures and practices and assumptions born in the nineteenth century when families tended to be stationary and stable, and options for socialization and leisure activities were far and away more limited than today. Making those old schooling models work today is hopeless. We are in a different era.

Most of us know this. But our stickiness runs deep. It resides not only in the eighty-something small church founder lamenting the missing children each Sunday. It resides also in the thirty-something and forty-something parents who want their children to “learn the faith,” but cannot figure out how to extricate themselves and their children from the river of life that rushes headlong past the church. It resides also in pastors, teachers, Sunday school directors, and curriculum writers. It resides in seminaries where pastors, and directors of religious education, and curriculum writers are trained and formed—formed in schools whose structures stubbornly reflect nineteenth century academic patterns and assumptions. Institutionalized schooling structures. The seminary, and college, and university are institutions. And institutions are built to withstand the storms of time. It is their job and purpose to resist change and preserve the past—to ensure that accumulated and established wisdom endures from generation to generation. We are stuck in our institutions. And it is not the fault of the institutions. We are stuck in our own patterns and assumptions, and it is not our fault. We are shaped by the institutions of education and culture that structure our society and structure our lives, and our minds, and even our souls.

I spent two months of the summer preparing the congregation for change. I talked about trying some “new patterns of worship and education.” I discussed it with the church council several times, and with the worship committee. I talked about it at the annual congregational

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1 Elsewhere I have traced the history of the Sunday school and some of the reasons it does not fit our contemporary context, Brelsford 2005.
meeting. I brought it into sermons. I wrote about it in two newsletters. Most members of the congregation seemed excited about the possibilities. Almost everyone agreed we “need to do something.”

Like many churches across North America, the Orchard Park Community Church has not-quite-enough members, and the median age of members is rising into retirement. In fact, they are aging out. Well-established, long-time, high-contribution members are dying off. Others are becoming infirm, unable to be as active as they were, not available for committee work, or helping with the spaghetti supper. Through most of its thirty-year history, this independent, non-denominational congregation has sustained seventy to ninety members. A couple of years ago it topped one hundred, then dipped back down following a few more funerals and a couple of job transfers—taking some valued young families out of town. The finances have never been great, but also not catastrophic. They built a simple but very pleasant sanctuary in 1996 to seat 125, along with a spacious and welcoming narthex, a kitchen, offices, four Sunday school rooms, and fellowship hall. And they paid it all off about four years ago. But the young families who filled the church twenty years ago are no longer young, and have not all been replaced. It doesn’t look so good. On a Sunday morning, in mid-summer, when there are twenty-nine people in the congregation, none of them children, and only a very few under age fifty—it doesn’t look so good. Regardless of how much they like their church, or their pastor, or each other, they know this isn’t really sustainable.

I brought a draft of a questionnaire to the church council. In preparation for changes in the fall we would distribute this questionnaire to get a sense of what people value most in the current patterns of worship and Sunday school, and what kinds of changes might be agreeable to most people. Some of us had been back and forth on email—re-writing, changing, and refining the questions over the past few weeks. Everyone liked the questionnaire and thought it was ready for distribution, beginning next Sunday. Everyone except Virginia. Another eighty-something member. She said she was willing to entertain some changes. She thought some changes were necessary, and might well be good. She had been part of council discussions about the changes over the past couple of months and had not so far objected. But the questionnaire terrified her. Questions like, “If there were a 40-minute worship service followed by twenty to thirty minutes of small group discussions for adults and classes for children, I (and my family) would most likely: a) attend both, b) attend worship only, c) attend the small group/classes time only, d) attend one or the other or both depending on the week, e) attend neither....” There were fourteen questions altogether. Most less complicated. But “I read this questionnaire” she said, “and I feel like everything is going to change, and it just scares me.” After some discussion there was a motion to move ahead with distributing the questionnaire the next Sunday—we just need to get this rolling, and we need to find out where people are. But, I interrupted before the motion could be seconded or voted. Virginia’s feedback could be very important. Maybe we don’t need the questionnaire right now. It’s all just hypothetical at this point. We are asking people to imagine things and then tell us how they feel about those imagined things. And Virginia was imagining the worst. Perhaps, at this point, the questionnaire would only instigate fear.

We decided to hold the questionnaire and proceed in implementing some changes first, then maybe the questionnaire could gauge responses to actual changes already experienced.

This was a good decision. Sometimes we think way too much. We form a committee, do the research, design a questionnaire, make a proposal and debate it. Is there any evidence this will work? Is there precedent? Can we afford it? And we remain in school. All good questions.
All good strategies for gaining knowledge and understanding. And all part of the schooling model, the academic model—the modern knowledge transmission and acquisition model.

The way life actually works, the way the human brain actually learns—and the way, therefore, humans prefer to learn—is we do things, life happens, and then we think about it, then we assess what happened, try to understand it, try to be ready for it next time, or more ready for it, and more able to shape the experience into a good one. We learn by processing experiences. Not by experiencing processes representing examples of theoretical knowledge studied and explained in advance.

On the first Sunday of implementing a change in worship I was scared. I did not want to do it. I questioned why I had decided to stir things up, make things harder for myself. It felt awkward. This was going to be awkward. So, I confessed this from the pulpit—confessed my fear and trepidation. And I reminded them of what I had said previously, in a sermon a couple Sundays ago, about needing to be willing to fail in order to discover something new. Successful corporations that want their workers to create something other than, and better than what already exists must find ways to “make it safe to fail” (cite research).

Then we dove in. I had discussed with the council and worship committee numerous changes. I wanted to create immediate learning opportunities for everyone—all ages—from small children to aging adults. No more Sunday school, and no more (or at least fewer) traditional mid-twentieth century worship patterns. I envisioned small group discussions, and mission volunteer Sundays, and people doing art in the back room. But we would start slowly. We would start with small changes and let the congregation process them one at a time, and perhaps participate in shaping the next step.

The children went to their *Godly Play* class after the “Children’s Lesson” as usual, and then, following the shortened sermon (ten-minutes instead fifteen or twenty) I posed a question. I asked what they thought. What was the meaning of this parable about the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep to go in search of one lost sheep? Did my interpretation make sense? What other interpretations could they think of? Turn to someone near you and talk about, I said. Talk to one other person, or maybe two, but no more than three in a group. In the long run, I envisioned groups of four or five or more in discussion for ten minutes or more. I had already rearranged the chairs in the sanctuary to make it easier to create such groupings when the time would come. But today I gave them “four to five minutes” and I didn’t want any chairs moved. The chairs would remain in their semi-circle pattern, divided by three aisles, like a concert theater, surrounding the chancel. After about four minutes I dinged my Zen singing bowl to bring conversations to a close. The unexpected gong also brought some laughter. Humor is always good for diffusing tension. And a spirit of playfulness is key for constructive learning (cf., Goto 2016, Berryman 1991). Then I pressed them further—another three or four minutes to discussion the implications of the meanings of this parable for us—for you, and for me, and us today in our context.

The conversation lulled after about two minutes. This was not a seminary classroom. I dinged the bowl again, thanked them for “playing along,” and continued on with the rest of the worship service. It was a small contained change—one new element in the service, given space by shortening the sermon and reading only the Gospel lesson and Psalm (not also the Old Testament lesson as is usual). As this experimentation expands we will go from singing three hymns to singing two, and one of them may eventually be contemporary. Perhaps the Prayer of Confession will also become very short and simple. Eventually, different groups will go to different parts of the building for the discussion period (and at that point there will be little
difference structurally—or in terms of process—between what the children are doing and what the adults are doing during the second half of the morning “church experience.” At least that is where I think we are going. We may or may not get there. It may or may not “work.” In any case, in the process we will be exploring and experimenting—and playing with—new patterns of worship and education. That is the goal, toward the end of revitalization of the church.

There are other patterns, of course, which we may or may not discover and may or may not explore. I do not know. I am determined to not know—working hard at not knowing. And I am asking my congregation to try to be OK with not knowing exactly where we are going—to play along. We are engaging a process of discovery. I am not teaching them something I already know, not sharing with them my secure ecclesial wisdom, not leading them like a tour guide through familiar territory.

What I am sharing with them, and what I am using to guide them along this process, is my knowledge and understanding, and perhaps even wisdom, about pedagogy—about processes of learning, and patterns of formation, and development, and growth toward enriched life. I am functioning as a teacher, and a practical theological leader.

This is what we have to offer as practical theologians, and as professionals in religious education. Our practical business is pedagogy. And our theoretical business also is pedagogy. It is easy these days to acquire information and gain technical knowledge (just “google it”—just do the research). What is not easy is deep teaching—facilitating deep and life altering learning. It is not easy to find ways to enable others to have and integrate new insights into their working patterns of mind and habits of living. Or perhaps “insights” is the wrong metaphor—a schooling metaphor for knowledge acquisition. Perhaps a better metaphor is the opposite—the real task of the teacher is to help learners acquire new patterns of mind and habits of living, which may yield new insights into the depths of meaning in the world around them.

I am not attempting in this paper to provide insights regarding modern western cultural shifts that precipitate the decline of the contemporary church in its traditional forms (this has already been hashed and re-hashed); and I am not trying to convince the reader of the necessity of making changes in patterns of worship and education in contemporary Christian churches (this too is widely known and accepted); I am also not seeking to share new examples of more effective and functional patterns of worship and education (which are in the process of emerging, and to which the reader might well want and expect me to make a contribution).

Rather, my concern here is pedagogy, which is the proper province of religious educators—and especially of scholars of religious education. As a scholar of religious education I do not know what should or should not be taught in any given community of faith. I do not know what is needed, or (deontologically) what is just or unjust in any particular community. I do not even know what will work or not work pedagogically in any given community. It all depends on context, the particulars of the community and the situation and the sitz in leben. As a person, and as a pastor, and as a religious education practitioner I have hunches, and opinions, and even insights about these matters. But, as a scholar and a theorist in religious education my expertise is in pedagogy—I seek to understand and explain the processes by which persons actually learn, actually come to know things, actually change their thinking and change their lives.

And, in a nutshell, the way people learn, and come to change their lives, and change their thinking, is through engagement in experiences. This too, we know already. Dewey knew it a hundred years ago, and supposedly shaped twentieth-century educational philosophy around it. Freire knew it, and made “transformation” ubiquitous in our educational vocabulary. And now
brain science and evolutionary theory argue in this direction as well. Learning happens and ideas are formed—not primarily by reason, but by images, habits, non-cognitive experiences, and cultural patterns and assumptions constituting an implicit curriculum (cf. Blevins, Hogue, Gardner, Eisner). We know this. Especially the “progressives” among us. We know this.\(^2\)

And we are still stuck in school. We call would-be pastors away to three years of post-graduate schooling to provide the basic knowledge and understanding necessary for the pastorate. And the most common degree desired or required for those who teach those would-be pastors is a Ph.D. A Doctor of Philosophy—the highest academic degree possible in North American institutions of higher education—representing a pinnacle of success in school. At the same time, the educational structures and processes in the culture at large continue largely in their traditional modern forms, despite growing disillusionment and dissatisfaction with both the outcomes and the processes. It is little wonder, then, that churches find it extraordinarily difficult to imagine anything other than “Sunday school” when they think of educating themselves and their children in the faith. The most successful school students (and therefore the most heavily invested in the schooling system) become the teachers of the leaders who lead the churches, and the non-profits organizations, and government agencies, and businesses, and the country. A pastor with a Master of Divinity Degree is one who has made it through school, and been certified as educated and authoritative by the school.

This is not to say the schooling model is evil, or that schools should be abandoned, or professional training requirements should be completely changed. I have a Ph.D. I love learning. I love academic learning. I stayed in school as long as I could before launching a work life. And I continue to value and treasure all of those academic experiences, and all of that academic learning. Rigorous, and formalized education is valuable and important. But education need not always follow a traditional (modern) pattern of schooling.

I am suggesting that, in the church at least, we should uncouple ourselves from the schooling model. There are patterns of education and formation that prevailed in the church for a vast majority of its history—at least the first 1800 years—before the schooling model took root (cf. Wimberly 2015). Churches, pastoral leaders, religious education professionals should mine these resources. Some of this work is being done (cf. Yust & Anderson 2006, Goto 2016, and others). More needs to be done.

Such resources from the past provide ideas. They stimulate the imagination of possibilities. And the issue of pedagogy is key. How do pastors create changes in a congregation? How do teachers change students’ life patterns and habits? Understanding how this has been done in the past is helpful, as is understanding the psychological and biological dynamics of how it happens in the present. But, what is needed more than understanding is experiences, and an informed imagination of how to nurture them.

I conduct worship under the assumption that people come to church for two primary reasons (regardless of whatever reasons they may articulate): to experience community, and to experience God (probably, most often in that order). And, their instincts are exactly on target. If they experience genuine community, and if they experience God, their lives will be changed… as well as their minds, and their attitudes and beliefs and commitments. This is what we have to offer as leaders in religious faith communities—we offer (the possibility of) a kind of genuine

\(^2\) It is not even clear that reflection is necessary for learning. Experiences change our ways of living, and our ways of living shape and reshape our thinking—our understanding, our knowing.
community increasingly rare in western society, and we work at opening ourselves and creating openings for ourselves and others to (the possibility of) genuine experiences of God. Give them what they are truly seeking, and they will be transformed—usually in ways and directions they were not seeking. This kind of transformation is what will revitalize the church. The western church needs revitalization, and it will not be revitalized by new ideas and insights; it will be revitalized by new patterns, habits, and structures.

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3 I have intentionally avoided the term “transformation” previously in this paper. It is a worn and weathered word. It points to something important, of course. But, any sign that is too long in the same place saying the same thing becomes invisible. People just don’t see it anymore as they pass by.
Bibliography:


