

Sunday Schools of Today

VERY many of our Sunday Schools today are having to make the best of a bad job. Lack of accommodation and unsuitability of premises are a constant problem to Sunday School teachers and leaders, especially on the new housing estates, where there are such tremendous possibilities for evangelisation. Children are literally being squeezed into every corner of all available premises—even garages—and still they come! Many schools are endeavouring to meet these difficulties by working on a “shift” system, sometimes the same handful of teachers conducting each session. Graded teaching in such circumstances is a triumph and all honour is due to those who are working under such very difficult conditions. The splendid loyalty and devotion of Sunday School staffs everywhere cannot be over-rated.

Obviously in situations like these much “making do” is essential. Yet, when this kind of attitude is applied to other aspects of Christian Education, one is compelled to ask how much “we must just make the best of it” has become a subterfuge instead of a challenge. There is a danger in too readily accepting the inevitable. Many schools, for instance, are woefully under-equipped. Small children must dangle their legs from stiff-backed benches instead of having comfortable-sized chairs which can be arranged informally. Pictures (if any) are old and dilapidated, and quite inadequate either for teaching purposes or to aid a sense of beauty and worship in the department. Expression work media, such as coloured pencils and modelling clay, are in such scant supply that children must wait their turn to use them—and this at a time when day-school education is providing these same children with all the scope and variety of modern educative equipment at its highest standard. Dare we in the Church give our children less than the best? Is it not the Church’s responsibility, rather than the individual teacher’s, to provide the best possible equipment in order to ensure that the religious education of the children is given every opportunity for success?

The Sunday School, as part of the Church Family, is a part of that Family’s financial responsibility. But, of course, that is not all nor even the most important part. The Sunday School is also the educational responsibility of the Church. How far does the average Church member feel responsible for the staffing problems of the Sunday School? Is it a matter of concern to the

Church Meeting that the Primary department is lacking a pianist or the Senior department adequate leadership? Does the Church feel responsible for the appointment of new teachers, on the recommendation of the Sunday School teachers' meeting or the Youth Council and the deacons? How many Church members do not even know the names of those who are carrying out the educational work of the Church on their behalf. How often the work of the School is hampered by lack of staff, or by the teachers bearing so many other responsibilities in the Church that they have no time to fulfil all that their task requires of them—responsibilities that often might be taken off their shoulders by Church members who do not feel called to Sunday School work.

But what of the actual teaching that is taking place in Sunday Schools throughout the British Isles? Looking back over the months in which I have been working as Sunday School Adviser to the Baptist Union I must admit quite honestly that the over-all impression I have received, from the many Sunday Schools I have visited, is that very little progress has been made in the way of new methods of approach to Christian Education in our Baptist schools. Many schools in fact are pursuing the same policy in their Sunday School work as their leaders of some fifty or more years ago! The modern child is being forced into a pattern of worship entirely un-related to his every-day experience and training in day-school and home. Some teachers are still working under the illusion that the child of today is no different from the child of their own day. New techniques of teaching are accordingly regarded with suspicion or even antagonism, and the introduction of activity methods into worship are constantly considered as irreverent. The word "worship" is therefore kept to the narrowly-defined precincts of hymn-singing, prayer and Bible Study, and the policy continues of regarding the good child as the one who sits still and keeps quiet. Moreover it is thought that by so doing the child is actually learning and worshipping in the best and only way possible! How dismally the Sunday School of this type is failing to capture the child's interests, stimulate his desire to worship and allow expression of that desire in ways which are meaningful to his own experience.

Admittedly some general advance has been made in Sunday School work in that most schools nowadays are at least partially graded, though many are only divided into two main departments. Apart from Primary departments (most of which include Beginners' age-groups), I have discovered services still to be very much of the "sandwich" type, however, and little imagination was being used to find fresh means of approach. With the exception of a few outstandingly good Primary and Beginners' departments, the work amongst the younger children, too, can

generally only be described as dull. Weekly teacher training classes and conferences are almost non-existent; in fact I have come across only one Church where there is a hundred per cent weekly training class attendance throughout the whole school, though there are a number of other schools where some sort of training class (most usually fortnightly or monthly), is held for the younger departments only.

It seems to me that by far the greatest difficulty is not so much the lack of accommodation or of equipment, but the lack of really trained and imaginative leadership. How this is to be remedied is difficult to see until the local churches wake up to the fact that they will have to go all out for their own teacher-training schemes, if the quality of teaching and worship is to be improved in their schools, if young people are to be attracted into Sunday School teaching and if the whole purpose of the Sunday School, namely to win children and young people to Jesus Christ and into His Church, is to be fulfilled. One wonders, too, how much of the present appalling shortage of teachers is due in large measure to many years without any teacher-training policy.

What then is inferred by this term "teacher-training scheme," and how can it be implemented in the local church? Quite simply it implies the establishment in every Sunday School of the principle that no teacher (at least in the Primary and Junior departments), who has not attended the weekly Training Class, can teach a class on the Sunday. This is assuming that the church follows the wise policy of recruiting new teachers from the young people's organisation, at about 14-15 years of age, and giving them a trial period of a few months as helpers in the Primary department. During that time they also attend the Training Class so that, when they are ready for the responsibility of class teaching they are aware, too, of their commitment to the weekly preparation class. After three year's teaching and consistent training under the guidance of the Primary leader these young teachers are then ready for two or three years in the Junior department, again, of course, maintaining weekly attendance at Training Class. After this they are able to go on to the more difficult work of teaching in the Senior or Beginners' departments. In these teachers lies the hope of future trained leadership, not only in the Sunday School, but in other departments of the church. Five or six years of such intensive and systematic training should not compare too unfavourably with a day-school teacher's two-year training, for the curriculum covers Bible Study (so vital when Sunday School teaching becomes an alternative to further study and Fellowship in the Bible Class or Young People's Department), Child Study, Story Building and many other useful subjects. More experienced teachers in the other departments,

though not expected to attend compulsory weekly teachers' conferences, would yet be well advised to do so.

This meeting together for prayer and preparation welds the teaching staff into a true fellowship. This in itself greatly aids the worship of the department, for children quickly sense an atmosphere of harmony or discord between the teachers. Moreover, without such a time of preparation the Sunday service itself lacks unity. Lesson guides, of course, are an aid in this direction, and are widely used. For from being "guides" in the right sense of the word, however, they are only too often accepted as "gospel" by teachers who are not provided with training facilities and opportunity to discuss together the relevance or otherwise of the suggested teaching material. Accordingly the lessons are reproduced or even read to the children on the Sunday, regardless of the interests and capabilities of the class. Yet it must be obvious that lesson material can only be alive and meaningful to the scholars as, after background research and study, it has become vital and real to the teachers. In any case, for too long has the idea been prevalent that the lesson is the main part of Sunday School worship, the rest of the service being merely opening and closing exercises. In actual fact departmental worship can only become meaningful to the children when teachers, pianist and leader are together seeking to express the same truth through the whole service—so that hymns, prayers, the introductory talk, lesson, expression work and summary, etc., are all links in the process of bringing boys and girls into touch with one particular new and living aspect of the Christian Faith. This does not just happen. It takes careful and prayerful planning on the part of all the teaching staff to decide first upon the life aim of the worship and then how they will seek to fulfil it throughout the service.

Of course, the establishment of the principle of regular training classes must be grown gradually and must be planned flexibly in order to fit into the particular local situation. But, as already pointed out, the obvious time and place to start is with the young teachers as they commence their Sunday School teaching career. So many leaders, however, fail to challenge them right from the start to train as well as to teach, because they are afraid that they may frighten off these would-be teachers by setting too high standards for them. "You cannot expect young teachers to attend a Training Class, visit their scholars and meet all the other demands that teaching makes on anyone who is prepared to take it seriously. Anyway young people nowadays only come into Sunday School teaching to do us a favour." These are remarks that one hears occasionally. No wonder we are failing to attract and hold young people in the service of Jesus Christ in the Sunday School, if we fail to convince them that such service

demands whole-hearted commitment. What a misconception of the psychology of the adolescent, too, for there is a real thrill in tackling a job that requires one's all, and young people rise to a challenge of high ideals far more readily than to easy compromise.

Many teachers argue that they have no need for training, for providing they have a real love for the children they teach and for their Lord, nothing else matters. Basically, of course, this relationship is vital. That does not excuse one from training, however, but points all the more to the need for it. Real love for children and young people implies a deep-rooted relationship based on a genuine study and understanding of the individual child, his interests, problems, and environment. Nor is it sufficient for a teacher merely to possess a living faith; he must also be articulate in the things of the faith and able to interpret it in terms that young people can understand. We in the churches need much more practical and imaginative training if we are to answer with conviction the arguments and intellectual difficulties of young people today.

All these and many more reasons could be brought forward to substantiate this plea for the adoption of teacher training schemes. This is not to be blind to the difficulties involved, for one appreciates that these will inevitably arise. But meantime, while nothing is being attempted the vicious circle continues and new teachers still receive no training, becoming in turn the untrained leaders of the future. Meantime, too, the standard of teaching and worship continues to be much lower than the best. Just how unfavourably this low standard of teaching, together with poor equipment and generally unsatisfactory environment, compares in the child's mind with that which he receives in day school can only be guessed at, but it is a sobering thought. It is not surprising that many children get the idea that the teaching they receive in Sunday School is of lesser value than that of the day school, nor that so often the critical and intolerant adolescent over-throws what he considers to be out-worn theories, for which he can get little adequate explanation from his Sunday School department. We can no longer expect children and young people to spend an hour a week sitting in dreary surroundings, listening to long and badly-presented lessons which seem to have little real meaning in their own experience. There are, too, many other contra-attractions nowadays and too little home support for us to be complacent about the Sunday School methods of today. It is true that Sunday School attendance is on the increase, but this is the almost inevitable result of the increased birth-rate. The future of the Church is no more secure for this fact, if the increase of younger children is off-set—as it most certainly is—by

the diminishing number of boys and girls in the older departments, who drift away long before they have made any decision for Christ and entered into the fellowship of the Church.

Of course, there are happy exceptions to all this. Many schools I have visited have at least one department which is live, attractive and original, striving to make the very best of its resources and opportunities and where young people are being won for Christ. Each year, too, numbers of teachers and leaders go back to their respective Sunday Schools with renewed zeal and kindled imagination, after attendance at Baptist Union Easter and Summer Schools. Some churches are so anxious to encourage their Sunday School Staff in further training that each year they set aside a sum of money for that purpose. Thus one or two teachers are enabled annually to attend training conferences, or even to take a special course in Sunday School method and youth leadership at Westhill Training College, Birmingham. These courses vary from a three-month course for voluntary workers to a two year certificate course and there are special short-term courses for ministers and theological students. Yet other schools are embarking on the Baptist Union Diploma or the special correspondence course in Sunday School and youth work arranged by the Young People's Department. Many churches arrange their own week-end conferences and a few Youth Secretaries have organised longer ones in their areas. These conferences usually include on the Sunday a tour of observation of one particular Sunday School. This is followed by a discussion period with the teachers about their own practical difficulties and opportunities for further progress.

Much more advice and systematic guidance ought to be given to help and encourage Sunday School teachers. Unfortunately trained leadership is very scarce and one fears that the day is still long-distant when every Association will have the services of a full-time Sunday School Organizer. Meanwhile it should be possible to make fuller use of present training resources by encouraging intensive three or four month training courses in different areas, instead of the extensive policy which is at present being carried out. With one church as a demonstration centre, departmental worship and Training Classes could be built up, whilst group lectures and demonstrations would be held in other centres throughout the weeks. This long-term policy would avoid much of the danger of the present system whereby newly-kindled enthusiasm quickly dies out, because there is insufficient time to help to establish new ideas in actual practice.

The Sunday School, so it is asserted by some people, has had its day. There is no doubt that it has played an important part in the past years, but what of its place in the life of the Church today? The answer is clear. The future of the Church depends

upon the efficacy of the Sunday School, and in these days of uncertainty and disillusionment the urgency of our task is even more apparent. We have to help grow a generation of convinced Christians, many of whom have been brought up in homes totally lacking in Christian tradition. We have to equip these boys and girls to go out into a world that understands little and cares less about the Christian Church. Their training is our responsibility—a privilege that demands the best we have to give in time and energy and mental ability. Maybe the term "Sunday School" is out-dated; maybe in the future we shall have to re-mould the whole pattern of our work of Christian Education. Meanwhile the work can and must go on. It is the responsibility of each individual church to maintain it at the highest possible level so that the work of the Sunday School today may be both truly educational and truly Christian.

JEAN I. GREEN.

Songs of Zarathustra, trans. by Dastur F. A. Bode and Pилоo Nanavutty. (Allen & Unwin, 8s. 6d.)

In the series "Ethical and Religious Classics of East and West," this little book introduces the reader to Zarathustra, or Zoroaster as he is sometimes known, the religious teacher, born in Adarbaijan some 600 years before Christ, who fought polytheism and black magic and preached among other things, the one eternal God of justice and love, dedication to the law of righteousness and truth, mystic communion, freewill and moral responsibility, the regeneration of man and the universe, bodily resurrection and a last judgment. His teaching, which has affinities with the Vedas and Jewish mysticism and had some influence on the development of Gnosticism, is found in its purest form in the *Gathas* or *Divine Songs*, and it is of these that we are here given a translation. A helpful introduction, glossary, bibliography in addition to the text help the reader to understand something of the spirit of this ancient eastern religion which calls men to walk in the path of the Good Mind and the Divine Law.

GRAHAM W. HUGHES.