

BRINGING CHILDREN TO CHRIST *in the* CLASSROOM

*To know Jesus Christ
is the greatest need
of every child.*

Two boys showed up in church school one year because their mother had just been baptized into the Adventist Church. They did not fit in.

Their language and clothes were different; their lunches were a daily source of humor. They talked during prayer, and were barely passing several of the subjects. Nothing seemed to be going well for them. One day the pastor's wife met their mother in town. After some polite conversation, the mother poured out her disappointment with the boys' experience at school. They were unhappy and had so many complaints that she was on the verge of putting them back into public school and giving up on the Adventist Church.

The pastor's wife briefly reviewed with her the reasons she had chosen the church school, encouraged her to wait a little longer for a breakthrough, and even found a quiet corner where the two of them could share a prayer.

The next day, the pastor's wife contacted the church

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school teacher to brainstorm ways to socialize the boys to church school and bring them to Christ. Alerted to the emergency, the teacher arranged an outing for the two boys with some other students. While they were gone, she talked to the Adventist students. She explained that the boys and their mother were so discouraged by what had happened in the classroom that they were thinking of giving up on the Adventist Church. Next, the teacher asked the students to pray with her that God would guide them in finding ways to help the boys. After prayer, she suggested

that the students tell what they did not like about the boys. They were brutally frank, as children tend to be. Everything they mentioned had to do with differences resulting from the boys' lack of familiarity with the Adventist life-style and failure to adjust to the school routine.

Next, the teacher asked the students what all of them could do to help the boys fit in, make friends, and feel that they belonged. Nobody replied. So the teacher asked, "What makes

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you feel good about being in our school?"

Having friends, getting chosen to take part in games and programs, being invited to a friend's house to play, and not being laughed at were some of the ideas the children generated. Now they were ready to suggest specific ways to help the boys experience what they enjoyed. Their honesty led to several good ideas for socializing the boys to the Adventist setting.

The teacher wisely led the students to share the responsibility for how the boys felt and to help them adjust. She sought volunteers to be friends, to assist the boys with their school work, and to participate with them in activities they didn't understand.

One student perceptively stated that the boys' mother didn't know how to make good lunches. As a result, a church member held a small workshop, which the new Adventist mother attended, demonstrating easy, healthful, and popular school lunches.

Once the students felt they were a support group that helped instead of ostracized the newcomers, actions and attitudes changed rapidly. The most exciting event for the class that school year was the baptism of the two brothers.

To know Jesus Christ is the greatest need of every child. Church schools have been established with the goal of providing an atmosphere conducive to this aim. The true story above portrays several important principles for bringing students to Christ in the classroom. Five will be briefly considered here:

No Classroom Exists in a Vacuum

The teacher cannot be expected to

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what was happening in the classroom.

"Social capital" is a term used to describe the positive effect adult interaction has on children. A major study revealed that disadvantaged students achieve more scholastically in religious schools than in public or private schools.¹ The involvement in the school by the religious community, with its fairly consistent value system, has been claimed as the reason for this difference in achievement.

In both public and private schools, the students leave home to enter a different world at school.

Their contact with adults is limited. In a church school, parents, teachers, and other adults from the church community profess more or less

equivalent values and interact to some extent with the students. The more adult interaction a child experiences, the higher his or her achievement in this area, and the more integration the child experiences into the value system of the adults. For church schools to be successful, the whole community needs to work together to bring children to Christ.

How can teachers increase adult church members' involvement with their students? Here are a few suggestions:

- Give occasional homework that requires students to interact with their parents. Send home a note of explanation about the assignment and the importance of children talking and working with adults.

- Welcome adult offers of assistance. Sometimes it seems threatening to have another adult in the classroom, but the

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know all, see all, and accomplish all.

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Thank God for a pastor's wife and the other church members who went to the help of the teacher instead of criticizing

threat is removed if you make friends with the other person, discuss how you can work together to enhance the educational and spiritual development of the students, and give specific directions on how the volunteer can help you most effectively.

- Ask capable church members to teach mini-classes you haven't the time or expertise to attempt, such as music, woodworking, sewing or other needlecraft, or art.

- Plan projects outside the classroom that involve adult-child interaction, such as visits to elderly people, putting on programs in nearby churches, or helping at a community-services center. Talk to the helping adults, stressing that together we can do more than anyone could do separately. By working together, we can positively influence the lives of our young people.

The Teacher, a Powerful Witness

A teacher's prayers provide a powerful witness to students. Our relationship with the Lord will have a major effect on young people as they consciously or unconsciously make decisions about their spiritual life. We cannot share what we do not have. Our connection with Christ must be strong in order to attractively portray Him to our students.

When the teacher will rely upon God in prayer, the Spirit of Christ will come upon him, and God will work through him by the Holy Spirit upon the minds of the students. The Holy Spirit fills mind and heart with hope and courage and Bible imagery, which will be communicated to the student. The words of truth will grow in importance, and will assume a breadth and fullness of meaning of which he has never dreamed. The beauty and virtue of the word of God have a transforming influence upon mind and character; the

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sparks of heavenly love will fall upon the hearts of the children as an inspiration. We may bring hundreds and thousands of children to Christ if we will work for them.²

Classroom Climate

The climate in the classroom will do more to draw students to Christ or alienate them from Him than all the talk and learning, policies, and standards put together. The classroom environment has four aspects:

1. *Are students physically comfortable?* To be hungry or cold or inappropriately dressed, or to need to go to the bathroom while peers do not share the same discomforts, is to be in a situation from which one seeks escape as rapidly as possible.
2. *Do students feel secure?* If students are afraid, embarrassed, or unsure of

what is expected of them, they will not be eager to stay. Their minds will be preoccupied and unable to concentrate on more important subjects. One of the greatest blessings of church school is that the teacher can pray with a student over his or her trials and insecurities.

3. *Do students feel appreciated?* Someone has said that children go where there is excitement, but they stay where there is love. Church schools may not offer competitive sports and electrifying entertainments, but they can offer more individual attention and adult interaction.

4. *Do students feel good about themselves?* Opportunities to be involved, to practice leadership skills and help others, and to become a more capable person have a positive effect on students' self-esteem.

Comparing the four environmental aspects listed above with the story of the two boys leads one to suspect that they may have been missing key elements of all four. Consequently, they wanted to escape, rather than think about the Jesus they heard about at school. Providing a positive climate is a necessary foundation for bringing students to Christ. Few

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children will be able to relate to Jesus in a negative environment. However, climate alone is not enough.

Offer Solid Information About Spiritual Things

If church school provides the world's best environment but fails to give students factual information about Christ and His Word, it will have cheated them of the most important part of their education. Remember Mary and Martha. Martha did a marvelous job of creating a pleasant environment, but Jesus applauded Mary for sitting at His feet and learning.

Students will eventually leave the insulated protection of the classroom to enter the next phase of life. While we hope that warm memories of care and love and of accepting Christ will linger, yet students' experiential knowledge about God's Word, His plan of salvation, how to be friends with Jesus, and how to overcome sin must have prepared them to make informed decisions. Their choices will largely be determined by the information available in their brains, rather than by the positive feelings they cherish.

*In every line of instruction, teachers are to seek to impart light from the word of God, and to show the importance of obedience to a "Thus saith the Lord." The education should be such that the students will make right principles the guide of every action: This is the education that will abide through the eternal ages.*³

Service—An Important Component

The final point we can draw from this story is the importance of service to God and others. To know Christ is not enough. Ministering to others must be part of the relationship. The Adventist students who befriended the new boys were undoubtedly blessed as they practiced their Christianity. The rejoicing when the two boys accepted Christ was a shared experience, because everyone felt involved in the victory. Helping students learn to minister to others is an important purpose of church schools.

The law of love calls for the devotion of body, mind, and soul to the service of God and our fellow men. And this service, while

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*making us a blessing to others, brings the greatest blessing to ourselves. Unselfishness underlies all true development. Through unselfish service we receive the highest culture of every faculty. More and more fully do we become partakers of the divine nature. We are fitted for heaven, for we receive heaven into our hearts.*⁴

Conclusion

Cultural differences may alter the details of bringing students to Christ. In some cultures, a student would not be ridiculed for bringing certain foods for lunch, or for wearing different clothes. Everyone would be wearing a uniform. Asking children to tell what they dislike about a person, even in a private meeting, might not be acceptable or desirable.

But the basic principles are the same anywhere in the world:

- The school is part of the church community. The teacher needs the assistance of every member of the church family.
- As a day-to-day model, the teacher's spiritual life will influence the spirituality of the students.
- The school climate will make or break the efforts to bring the students to Christ.
- Experiential knowledge of Christ and His Word will enable students to make informed decisions.

- As they are learning to know Christ, an integral part of that relationship is service to God and others.

Mentally review the students in your classroom. Are they growing in the knowledge of Christ? Which of the five principles above for bringing students to Christ could enrich their spiritual experience? Try to think of simple ways you can implement several of the principles.

Even though you are already working many hours each week and may feel overwhelmed, you can take courage from the promises the Lord has given us. He is in charge. He will work with us and through us to bless the lives of our students. Let me share with you two of my favorite promises:

*You may feel the deficiency of your character and the smallness of your ability in comparison with the greatness of the work. But if you had the greatest intellect ever given to man, it would not be sufficient for your work. "Without Me ye can do nothing," says our Lord and Saviour. John 15:5. The result of all we do rests in the hands of God.*⁵

*Often it will seem to the teacher that the word of God has little effect on the minds and hearts of many students; but if his work has been wrought in God, some lessons of divine truth will linger in the memory of the most careless. The Holy Spirit will water the seed sown, and it will spring up after many days and bear fruit to the glory of God.*⁶

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