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(122) SUNDAY SCHOOL MOVEMENTS IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Jan Grobbelaar

Origin of a Movement

The origin of Sunday schools seems to be debatable. Already in the sixteenth century, St Charles Borromeo had organized a Sunday school in the district of Milan to teach needy children. There are also other early cases of Sunday schools, for example, those established by the Rev. Joseph Alleine, a Yorkshire clergyman, in the seventeenth century.¹ Traditionally, the English Anglican evangelical Robert Raikes (1735-1811) is credited as the pioneer of the Sunday school movement. The growing number of poor and illiterate children working long hours in factories as a result of the industrial revolution, as well as the growing number of young people in prison, distressed him.² Since it was the only day they did not work, he started with a school on a Sunday in 1780 to provide education for these needy children. He started in the kitchen of Mrs Merideth's home, across from the prison in Sooty Alley, in Littleworth, one of the worst slum districts in the city of Gloucester.³ Although Sunday schools were a semi-secular institution where children were taught reading, spelling and writing, it was done with the Bible as their textbook to 'keep them from turning to a life of crime'.⁴

Denominations and non-denominational organizations replicated Sunday schools widely and the movement grew rapidly. In 1785, it spread to Wales and a year later to Ireland.⁵ Quickly, this led to the formation of independent regional and interdenominational societies. In 1785, the Society for the Establishing and Maintaining of Sunday Schools in Great Britain was established by William Fox and in 1803 it was replaced by the London Sunday School Union.⁶ It is estimated that by 1786, 250,000 children were attending Sunday schools,⁷ and by 1789, 300,000 children were already attending Sunday school in England.⁸ The popularity of Sunday schools was hugely influenced by Raikes who, as the then editor and proprietor of the *Gloucester Journal*, gave much publicity to its cause.

The movement did not only grow in the UK but also began to spread to Europe and the USA. Sunday schools started in Germany in 1786 and in 1836 it was established in the Netherlands.⁹ In Europe, many

¹ Nam Soon Song, 'Sunday School Revisited: An Alternative to Christian Education of the Church Today?', *Religious Education*, 108.2 (2013): 2.

² James Estep, Roger White and Karen L. Estep (eds.), *Mapping out Curriculum in your Church: Cartography for Christian Pilgrims* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 79.

³ Dirk Coetsee and Jan Grobbelaar, 'A Church where Children are Welcome: A New Paradigm for Children's Ministry in Africa', in *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2013), 804. Cf. Song, 'Sunday School Revisited', 5.

⁴ Estep, White and Estep (eds.), *Mapping out Curriculum*, 79.

⁵ Pertti Luumi and Ulrich Becker, 'Sunday School', in *Encyclopedia of Christianity Volume 5*, eds. Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochman, John Mbiti, Juroslav Pelikan and Lukas Vischer, Translation ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 230.

⁶ Luumi and Becker, 'Sunday School', 229.

⁷ Joseph Kofi Antwi, 'Integrating Indigenous Akan Educational Patterns into Christian Education in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.' (Unpublished MPhil thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2011): 44.

⁸ Dirk J Viljoen, 'Die dooplidmaatbediening van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1962 tot 1990, met toespitsing op die kategeeseenjeugaksies,' (Unpublished DD thesis, University of Pretoria, 1994): 20.

⁹ Dawid W. De Villiers, 'Die Kategese in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in SA: 'n Prinsipiële, Historiese en Praktiese Ondersoek van die Kategese in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in SA': unpublished DD thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1957, 257.

Sunday School Unions were also formed, for example, in the Netherlands (1865), Finland (1888) and Norway (1889).¹⁰ It seems as if the first Sunday school in the USA was held by William Elliot in 1785 at Oak Grove, Virginia.¹¹ According to De Villiers, it was the Methodist church that took the Sunday school to the USA, in 1785.¹² From Virginia, Sunday schools sprang up in rapid succession in South Carolina, Maryland, Rhode Island, New York and Pennsylvania.¹³ The goal of these Sunday schools was to teach children reading, writing and moral consciousness.¹⁴ In 1791, a new Sunday school society, the First Day Society, a group of clerics and merchants, was organized in Philadelphia.¹⁵ In 1821, the American Sunday School Union was founded.¹⁶

According to Thomas, 'it was the goal of the original Sunday school to offer an education to those that may otherwise do without. Yet the very nature of what its founders were hoping for was spiritual transformation as well as secular education of reading and writing'.¹⁷ Religious education and evangelisation was from the beginning part and parcel of Sunday schools. When compulsory state education was established in the 1870s in both Britain and America, reading and writing became the responsibility of the weekday schools and religious education became the sole focus of the Sunday schools.

Origins in Africa

The growth and intention of the Sunday school movements made it inevitable that Sunday schools became part of the foreign missionary endeavour. The extension of the Sunday school to Africa during the nineteenth century was largely dependent upon foreign missionary societies working in different countries in Africa.¹⁸ Mumo states: 'Sunday schools were introduced in Africa as a component of the Christianity the western missionaries propagated'.¹⁹

In his study on Christian Education in the Baptist Convention of South Africa, Matshiga concurs: 'Over the years, missionaries who were in charge of Convention churches were very helpful in ensuring that Christian education took place'.²⁰ Nduka is even of the opinion that 'tribute must be paid to the efforts and sacrifices of those in the West for the immense contribution of organising and popularising Sunday school. It would have been hard for Africa to benefit if these people had not sacrificially pursued this calling'.²¹ In

¹⁰ Luumi and Becker, 'Sunday School', 229.

¹¹ Elmer Towns, 'Sunday School', in *The Popular Encyclopaedia of Church History*, eds. Ed Hindson and Dan Mitchell, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013): 318.

¹² De Villiers, 'Die Katechese in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in SA', 257.

¹³ Towns, 'Sunday School', 318.

¹⁴ Religious Studies Department, Centenary College of Louisiana, *A Brief History of the Sunday School*: www.centenary.edu/religion/dotto/rel203/Sunday%20school.ppt (accessed 5 February 2015).

¹⁵ Towns, 'Sunday School', 318.

¹⁶ Luumi and Becker, 'Sunday School', 229.

¹⁷ Darren W. Thomas, 'The Role, History, and Decline of the Sunday School', in 'An Analysis of Sunday School Factors Leading to Effective Assimilation in Selected Baptist Churches in Georgia': unpublished EdD thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005: 3eridan.websrvcs.com/clientimages/36689/historyofthesundayschool.pdf (accessed 29 January 2015).

¹⁸ Edwin Wilbur Rice, *The Sunday-school Movement 1780-1917 and the American Sunday-school Union 1817-1917* (New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1971).

¹⁹ Peter M. Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation of Christian Nurture and their Relevance for Theological Education in Africa', in *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner, (Dorpspruit, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2013), 795.

²⁰ Dumile J. Matshiga, 'Christian Education in the Baptist Convention of South Africa with special reference to churches in the Transvaal: A Practical Theological investigation': unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, 2001: ii.

²¹ O.C. Nduka, *Growing a Healthy Sunday School in African Churches* (Abia State, Nigeria: Assemblies of God Press,

many cases, Sunday schools were the first step towards the establishment of day schools, usually referred to as mission schools.²²

However, the establishment of Sunday schools was not the starting-point of giving religious education to children and youths in Africa. Mumo states:

Different cultures have always had different ways of imparting religious education to children and other members of society... Africans likewise had an elaborate system of imparting religious and other forms of education. The entire African way of life was interlaced with different types of education. There were proverbs and wise sayings which had a profound message to pass to society on all aspects of life. Rites of passage were loaded with education dealing with all aspects of life such as morality, spirituality, relationships and life skills.²³

More formal Christian education on African soil had already started in the first century, with the establishment of the first African church in Alexandria, Egypt. From the histories of the North African church fathers such as Tertullian (c. 155-c. 240), Origen (185-254), Cyprian (c. 200-258), Athanasius (296-373), Augustine (354-430) and Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376-444), it is clear that education played a vital part in their own development, and they very much emphasised the important role of education for children.²⁴

The Ethiopian church was another pioneer of Christian education in Africa. In AD 316, Frumentius and Edesius, two Phoenician brothers from Tyre, accompanied their uncle Metropius on a voyage on the Red Sea to Ethiopia. They were sold as slaves to the king of Aksum in Ethiopia. They soon gained the King's favour and he appointed them to responsible positions. Just before his death, the king set them free. The widow queen insisted that they stay in the service of the court to help educate her young son Erazanes until he was old enough to become king. The brothers used their influence to spread the gospel in Ethiopia and some of the local people accepted Christ as their Saviour. When Erazanes came of age, the brothers were released from their commitment. Edesius went back to Tyre and was ordained as priest. Frumentius travelled with him only up to Alexandria, where he stayed behind. Here St Athanasius consecrated him as bishop of the church in Ethiopia.

The Missionary Period

It took more than a millennium before the rest of Africa was introduced to Christianity on a significant scale. Many mission stations were planted and, because the missionaries understood the multi-dimensional nature of salvation, they did not establish only churches, but in many cases, also health care facilities, for example, hospitals or mobile clinics, and dispensaries, as well as schools and other educational institutions.²⁵ As a tool of evangelism and faith formation, most of the missionary societies implemented a Sunday school programme at various mission stations. In an article on the educational impact of the Presbyterian mission in Eastern Nigeria, Taylor wrote:

To the Efik, adult and child, there was often little difference between day school and Sunday school. The mission did see them differently, and used the latter for ecclesiastical purposes. If diary entries are to be

2004), 78.

²² Luumi and Becker, 'Sunday School', 230.

²³ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 63.

²⁴ Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 'A Church where Children are Welcome', 806.

²⁵ Justus G. Mbae, 'Keynote Address. Conference on Education as a Tool for Evangelization and Development in the Modern World', in *African Ecclesial Review* Vol. 54, no.1 and 2, (2012): 6.

believed, Sunday schools attracted staggeringly huge crowds who enjoyed the singing and drama productions as well as the opportunity to reinforce their reading skills.²⁶

Originally, these Sunday schools were established where there were already some converts present. However, later on, Sunday schools started as the first missionary involvement in new areas, and only after that were churches planted.²⁷ As part of this missionary movement, it seems that the first Sunday school in Southern Africa was established by missionaries in Cape Town in the late eighteenth century.²⁸ Greyling is of the opinion that the first Sunday school in South Africa was established in 1841 in Pietermaritzburg by the missionary Daniël Lindley.²⁹ The first official Sunday school at the Cape was founded, according to De Villiers, on 26th May 1844 in a Dutch Reformed congregation in Cape Town, which was pastored by the Rev. Abraham Faure. During his studies in England, Faure had been exposed to the Sunday school movement.³⁰ At its beginning, the Cape Town Sunday school was attended by 125 children, but in only six months it grew to 400 children.³¹ By 1894, 706 congregations had Sunday schools and more than 21,000 children attended.³² In 1915, SANSSA, the South African National Sunday School Association, a South African unit of the World Sunday School Association, was established in Port Elizabeth.

Sunday schools were mainly attended by children, even from as young as three years of age. Although efforts were made to extend these classes to adults, only a few newly-converted adults attended.³³ In most parts of Africa, Sunday schools were and still are primarily for children, although it seems that different churches in different parts of Africa, for example in Nigeria, later on broadened the Sunday school movement to adults.³⁴ In the early years, no standard curriculum was used and the lessons taught were prepared from the Bible and the teachers were mainly the wives of missionaries.³⁵ Through the years, the emphasis has always been on the Bible, and a wide variety of Biblical content. Scripture verses to memorise were used and taught with the use of different teaching techniques.³⁶

Main Avenue

Gradually, Sunday school became the main avenue in African churches for nurturing children in the Christian faith. According to Mumo, 'nearly all Church denominations and local churches in Africa have a Sunday school programme'.³⁷ Despite some struggles and differences in development, the questions asked

²⁶ William D Taylor, 'The Presbyterian Educational Impact in Eastern Nigeria', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 14:3 (1983): 228.

²⁷ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 795.

²⁸ Nkonsenhle Zwide Nxumalo, 'An Examination of Nine Sunday Schools in the Manzini area of Swaziland with Reference to the Relationship between Church Growth and a Vibrant Sunday School Programme': unpublished DTh thesis, South African Theological Seminary, 2014, 45.

²⁹ E. Greyling, *Die Sondagskool van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, 2nd and revised edition (Bloemfontein, South Africa: Sondagskool Boekhandel, 1965), 18.

³⁰ De Villiers, 'Die Katechese in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in SA', 258.

³¹ E. Greyling, *Die Sondagskool van die Gefedereerde Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika* (Bloemfontein: Sondagskool Boekhandel, 1955), 18.

³² Erna Oliver, 'Sunday School: Past and Present', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Vol. 32, no. 1, (2006): 121.

³³ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 795.

³⁴ Foluke Bosede, 'Trends in Christian Education in Anglophone West Africa: Nigeria', *Christian Education Journal*, 3:10 Supplement (2013): 66.

³⁵ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 795.

³⁶ Ray Johnston, *Help! I'm a Sunday School Teacher* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialities Books, 1995), 72.

³⁷ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 793.

in different parts of Africa are to a great extent very similar.³⁸ Existing differences between churches are mostly based on church polity.³⁹

In general, the focus of Sunday schools was the spiritual formation of children. The objectives of the Sunday school can be summarised as follows:⁴⁰

- To bring children to Christ and impart a personal knowledge of God to them;
- To provide Bible teaching to gain understanding of God's word;
- To develop a vibrant Christian life by relating Bible teachings to daily life;
- To develop appreciation for and loyalty to their Christian heritage; and
- To prepare them for church membership.

To reach the above-mentioned goals, Sunday schools were very much fashioned on the western day school model. Instead of providing primary education to children in a society which is excluding them from the educational system, Sunday school has become the primary tool for faith transmission to children inside the church. What has not changed is the educational paradigm. 'The Sunday school... is a carbon copy of a standard public school... The style, the strategy, even the classes, are based on the public school matrix. The children hardly notice any difference.'⁴¹

The problem with keeping this school-oriented approach intact is that faith formation very easily becomes only an intellectual exercise. The transfer of knowledge in a classroom setting away from everyday real life, is seen as the (only) vehicle to faith formation and life transformation. 'The result is a fragmented life where spiritual growth becomes a temporary, isolated process determined by a one-hour information download once a week, measured by performance in cognitive examinations and rewarded with certificates and graduations. With this type of 'educational' foundation, it is difficult to bring adult church members to an integrated life of faith and commitment to God and his Kingdom.'⁴² What is more, this approach separates the generations into homogeneous groups with the noble motivation that each group's needs can best be ministered to on its own cognitive level, in its own language and style. This fragmentation usually influences the whole life of the church. In the process, children and parents, including almost all other adults, are separated from each other. The result is that children are excluded from the total life of the church and become marginalized in the faith family.

May be the biggest hurdle to overcome to change this educational paradigm to more effective faith-transformation for children is the way Africans, in general, think about children and ministry with children. In this regard, Tioye states:

As for children's ministry, it is somewhat seen as a second-class ministry. Children ministry is not recognized as a ministry as such, but rather a gathering to prevent disturbing adults' worship. Children have value in a general perspective, but when it comes to the priorities of the church, children are overlooked and underrated; the perception is sometimes negative. Most of the time adults see children as troublesome, difficult to manage, noisy, egocentric, and the like.⁴³

³⁸ Victor B. Cole, 'Guest Editorial: Trends in Christian Education in Africa – An Overview', *Christian Education Journal*, Vol. 10, Supplement (2013): 49. Cf. Fortuna N. Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education in Francophone West Africa', *Christian Education Journal*, Vol. 10, Supplement (2013): 53.

³⁹ Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 56, 59.

⁴⁰ Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 57.

⁴¹ Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 'A Church where Children are Welcome', 807.

⁴² Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 'A Church where Children are Welcome', 807.

⁴³ Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 54.

Still a Struggle

Through the years, this educational paradigm also created other problems for the Sunday school in Africa. According to Nxumalo, 'Much of Africa still struggles with the basic necessities needed to run a good Sunday school programme.'⁴⁴ After describing what Christian education should be, Semenye makes the following remark: 'When we examine the Christian education that is offered in East Africa, it does not measure up to what has been described above...'⁴⁵ This situation was partially the result of the fact that the role of the Sunday school in obtaining the noble goals of Christian Education, was not really recognised in the extensive research on Christian Education done in Africa during the last half of the twentieth century.⁴⁶

The Sunday school classes are mostly large, with the average class size between twenty and thirty children, and sometimes up to ninety.⁴⁷ One reason is that the enrolment rate is very high. 'In a study conducted in African Instituted Churches, Kenya, it was found that, in many churches, Sunday schools have higher enrolments than other educational and even church services.'⁴⁸ Another reason for these big classes is limited infrastructure or the absence of good facilities.⁴⁹ Furthermore, there are not enough well-trained volunteer teachers available. Many of the available volunteers have no acquaintance with teaching children and the training available for them is mostly à la carte.⁵⁰ The training is mostly not relational-based and an excellent child-friendly teaching methodology is absent.

Right from the beginning, the lack of a proper and relevant curriculum that meets the needs of learners in Africa, was a major problem for Sunday schools. According to Nduka, Sunday school material was more standardised during the early 1900s as a result of efforts made by John H. Vincent and B.F. Jacobs of the American Sunday School Union.⁵¹ Although the intention was good, the result was that the curriculum and the materials used became more and more western-based.⁵² Mould observes from an ecumenical perspective:

During the 19th century and well into the 20th century, in the modern missionary movement, it was standard practice for the sending churches to transplant their various forms of Christian education with little or no change, for churches being founded or aided in other lands and continents. Typically, Western teaching materials were exported. Even with translations, adaptations and attempts at curriculum by Western missionaries, none of them tasted or taught like a home-grown product. The marks of Western acculturation were too evident, the hard facts and nuances of a different local culture too great, to allow best learning to occur.⁵³

The result of this approach was that

Many of the African teachers find it difficult to use some Western lessons, even if they read English. Western materials often rely on the teacher being able to read a lesson written as if the teacher were talking to the students, then, without memorizing it word for word, remember the main ideas and present it to the students in

⁴⁴ Nxumalo, 'An Examination of Nine Sunday Schools', 46.

⁴⁵ Lois Semenye, 'Trends in Christian Education in East Africa', *Christian Education Journal*, Vol. 10, Supplement (2013): 74.

⁴⁶ Nduka, *Growing a Healthy Sunday School*, 253.

⁴⁷ Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 58.

⁴⁸ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 795.

⁴⁹ Cf. Nxumalo, 'An Examination of Nine Sunday Schools', 46; Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 798; Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 58; and Semenye, 'Trends in Christian Education in East Africa', 75.

⁵⁰ Nxumalo, 'An Examination of Nine Sunday Schools', 46; Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 798; Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 58; and Semenye, 'Trends in Christian Education in East Africa', 76.

⁵¹ Nxumalo, 'An Examination of Nine Sunday Schools', 45.

⁵² Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 56.

⁵³ Ralph N. Mould, 'Indigenous Curriculum Development – on an Ecumenical Basis', *International Review of Mission*, 60, no. 240, (1971): 462-463.

similar fashion. African teachers often prefer to use their own words to express the lesson, and are not practiced in rephrasing written words as their own. Western materials are often too long for African Sunday schools, where reading speeds are often slower. More and more Western materials are based around group activities that require space, tables and equipment, but African teachers seldom have access to these.⁵⁴

Another consequence of this use of western-based materials is that 'the African worldview is ignored or given in negative light'⁵⁵ while many themes and topics are not relevant to the African context with no practical importance for African children.⁵⁶

Positives

In spite of the above-mentioned struggles, Cole is of the opinion that Sunday school is improving by leaps and bounds.⁵⁷ One of the factors for this improvement is the invaluable complementing work of para-church organizations, for example, Youth for Christ, Navigators, Life Ministry, Child Evangelism Fellowship, Scripture Union, Christian Union, Fellowship of Christian Unions, and Association of Evangelicals. They enhance spiritual growth through developing materials, training workers, evangelisation and disciple-making across Africa.⁵⁸ Taken on their own, Sunday schools also had a major and positive influence on the lives of many children. 'Generations of church leaders all over the world can trace their spiritual roots to a Sunday school class and a devoted teacher somewhere in their childhood. This is as true in Africa as in any other part of the world.'⁵⁹ At the end of his study on the Sunday school, Mumo came to the following conclusion: 'Sunday schools are an important organ of the Church in Africa. Despite the haphazard way they are run and the challenges they encounter, they still remain robust. They continue to enrol large numbers and give Christian nurture to millions of Africans.'⁶⁰

Therefore, the churches in Africa have to invest in the faith formation of all these children. Maybe the challenge is not to try and do a better job of Sunday schools by building more facilities, by training more volunteer staff or by developing more relevant learning materials. Instead, we should critically rethink the underlying paradigm of Sunday schools and create a paradigm shift⁶¹ to a way of doing ministry with children in which they are welcomed and fully included in the whole life of the local church, experiencing a more integrated faith formation process.

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⁵⁴ Every Child Ministries, 'Establishing African Sunday Schools': www.ecmafrica.org/projects/find-project-by-country/dr-congo-projects/sunday-school-ministries (accessed 30 January, 2015).

⁵⁵ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 799.

⁵⁶ Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 58; and Semenye, 'Trends in Christian Education in East Africa', 77.

⁵⁷ Cole, 'Guest Editorial', 50.

⁵⁸ Cole, 'Guest Editorial', 50; and Semenye, 'Trends in Christian Education in East Africa', 75.

⁵⁹ Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 'A Church where Children are Welcome', 807.

⁶⁰ Mumo, 'Sunday Schools as the Foundation', 801.

⁶¹ Cf. Tioye, 'Trends in Christian Education', 53; and Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 'A Church where Children are Welcome', 803-07.

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