

# Diane Willkens: Sunday School Stories

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## Sunday School Stories

Good morning,

This morning I'd like to talk with you about stories, gifts, and Seekers – and all in the context of Sunday School. But first –

### **Flash Back to two years ago:**

Two years ago, Rachel read a newsletter from the small church where my Mother's has been minister. There was an article that caught her on eye on a Sunday School that was about to begin. The description so captivated Rachel's imagination that she called Mom to find out more.

Rachel tracked down the creator of the program, read his dissertation on the subject, and organized a pilgrimage last fall to see the program in action. Trish, Brenda, Sonya, Rachel, Sallie and I met the Sunday School director, talked with some of the teachers and children in the program, and here we are.

### **Another Flash Back – this time to six weeks ago:**

Six weeks ago several Seekers adults gathered for a brainstorming session about the upcoming Sunday School. We used the thank-you banner given to Brenda a few weeks ago as a

focal point – repeating out loud each child's name. And, as each name was said, we called out the positive attributes of that child.

In lieu of the banner this morning, I'd like to invite you to focus on the faces in the room and the children's' names hanging overhead. Let your minds call up as many positive and creative qualities for each child as occur to you. While you are looking and thinking, I will run through some of the adjectives that came to mind.

Inquisitive, funny, loves using her hands, imagination, juggling, dramatic, pirates, analytical, creative, attentive, energetic, eager, computer, colorful, studious, subtle humor, terrific reader, loves words. You can fill in much more.

Lucky Us. With all of these gifts, all of these talents, and all of these traits abounding in the children among us, I am very excited to tell you that I will be leading the Sunday School over the next couple of years. I am walking in some very big footsteps, following Brenda Seat, Lois Stovall, Nancy Marchal, and Mary Claire Powell. Each devoted her sense energy, passion and joy to leadership. And each drew out the talents and creative abilities of the adults and children in different ways.

For me – I am really excited by the possibilities ahead as we move into a new project model of Sunday School.

Now I want to describe the new model, talk about some qualities of the program, and start you thinking about next week.

There's that word "new". Ears perk up and question marks appear.

Starting next week, Sunday School will be focused on biblical story telling: a single story reinforced and experienced by the children and teachers in several project groups over a

period of six weeks. At the conclusion of the six-week period, the children will share the story with the full community through their projects.

Said another way, we are going to spend six weeks getting down and dirty with one Bible story. We will have three groups all involved exploring the same story but doing it through different projects – different forms of expression. In culmination, the children will tell Seekers the Bible story in their own ways through the projects they have created. And, for those adults not teaching, we will let you all know how much fun you missed!

As you can begin to understand there are some unique and energizing aspects of this Sunday School method.

- It takes into account the intellectual curiosity and creative ability of the students.
- It considers the outside interests and talents of the teachers. The teachers will teach what is interesting, fun and creative for them.
- This model reflects the fact that students learn differently today than we did, given their exposure to electronic technology.
- The project model allows time for the groups to delve into the story in depth and will give each child (and teacher) a chance to master the story and its meaning for them.
- With a hands-on experience, the story has a better chance of becoming part of the unconscious as a core story for that child's life.
- With the time devoted across a number of weeks, the students have the opportunity to reflect on their own story, and allow the bond between their story and the stories of the Bible.
- And, the project model allows the students the opportunity to contribute to the larger Seekers community through sharing – a sharing of lives of the

learners with the life of Seekers. (And, for Celebration Circle, they get a week off every six weeks or so.)

If I was sitting in your seat, it is at this point that I would be wondering "Okay, just how is this gonna work?"

First, we will select stories from the Bible. Stories will be chosen that are foundations of both Christianity and Seekers. In addition, stories will be chosen which speak to the fears of our kids, their need for love, security, growth, continuity and belonging, and caring for others.

So, first, we have stories.

Second, the classes or project groups will be inter-generational. We will no longer divide Sunday School by age groupings. This will enable inclusion of children whom without an age-focused class, such as Andrew, as well as encourage the active engagement of others who are in-between ages. Every six weeks the composition of the groups will change.

Friends can chose to be together in a particular interest group. Meanwhile, outside of Sunday School, the continuity of the age groups will be continued through retreats, confirmation classes, and other special activities.

So, 1 is story-based. 2 is mixed ages in the project groups.

Third, we will offer a variety of interest or project groups each session. We will invite teachers who have a particular skill, ability or hobby to lead a group. The idea is to offer three varied ways of interpreting the story and allow the students to pick what sounds most interesting and engaging to them.

As for the adults, this model may well offer many of you an opportunity to be with the children in a format and setting that is comfortable, fun, and perhaps less intimidating for you that sitting across a table working with written

curricula. We look forward to tapping the skills of many of you who may not have taught recently.

I started this morning with a couple of flash backs, let me now give you a sneak preview of the next weeks. This will give you an example of how this model may go:

Next week, we will begin exploring, probing, and experiencing the story of Jesus clearing the temple. We will look at the story through the many sides of a prism – each angle giving us a fresh look and a range of revelations. And each side of the prism offering us a mirror into our own lives as experienced through the story.

We will offer three ways of working with the story – each child will chose what group they want to be a part of:

- One group will script, cast and present a dramatization of the temple times and the story of Jesus throwing out the moneychangers. There could be a cast of thousands, after all in Jesus day, nearly 1 million people visited the temple every year.
- Another group will work with building; maybe painting, or otherwise creating the physical appearance of the temple, perhaps complete with sights and sounds of the time, the people, and that famous morning two thousand years ago. Can you imagine how it might have looked, sounded, and smelled in the temple the day Jesus put his foot down.
- The third group will work with a lot of clay, sculpy, and various other materials to build a three-dimensional model of the temple. Using the clay temple model, we will then create the “Temple Game”, complete with cards, game pieces, and rewards.

One core story. We will go deep with the story, connecting with our own stories and the stories of Seekers. We will go deep through three project group.

For all the kids here today, next week you will choose which group seems like the most fun way to work with this story until June 22nd. At the end, you will have an opportunity to share with the whole community, tell the story, be the teachers, and recreate essence of temple.

Some words about the interest or project groups. Each 6-week period offers a new story and new projects opportunities.

Importantly for the adults, each 6 weeks will offer the chance for you to be involved using your creative or artistic gifts, hobbies, or interests.

Some of the ideas for project groups are hanging overhead. As your eyes run over the possibilities, please use your wider vision to allow the names of the children to enter your mind at the same time. You'll see stained glass, photography, sculpture, pottery, woodworking, textiles, bookmaking, poetry, drama, dance, painting, quilting, music, video, and computer and internet – you tell me!

We've already tapped the Internet for the Temple story. Paul found a web site with a reference to the Arc of the Covenant and the Temple Mount. Rachel sent an e-mail to order a study guide from the archaeologist authors in England, post haste, as they say. They sent us the both on the good faith that we would send a check. Here is the book – complete with drawing, schematics, and wonderful rich study of the Arc of the Covenant and the Temple.

You tell me how much fun it could be working with the story of the Tower of Babel? How about the story of Creation? The Last Supper? What about The Ten Commandments? Sure you might have seen the movie, but you haven't seen the Seekers reprise.

Remember Noah's Ark of several weeks ago – we've already seen one rendition given to us by the youngest class. They worked with the story for several weeks and then presented Caren Holmes to us as a triumphant Mrs. Noah.

Just imagine how you would work with any of these stories. Start talking about it with each other. Share your brainstorms. I've already had commitments for the fall from several people who haven't taught in a long time. Why? I think it is because they will be in their element, sharing their passion. And, it's fun.

Think also about meaningful Bible stories for you. Over the summer, we will have several opportunities for interested adults and kids to lay out the stories for the next couple of years.

We become the curriculum.

Since this is the first time many of you have heard about this format, let me run through some of the attributes of the project model again that many of us have found so compelling:

- The project model is story based. Storytelling is an art as well as core to our culture and personal well being. Jesus knew this and often used storytelling as a way to teach.
- The project model works with one story for six-weeks. The time will allow in-depth probing and discussion of the story across time, across a shared interest, where the hands and the heart connect
- The project model offers choice: For the children and for the adults.
- The project model offers various means of creative learning. Again, engaging, creation-based, and imaginative.
- The children will have the opportunity to be an active part of the larger Seekers community by sharing their stories, and the knowledge and insights they learned.
- Finally, this model allows a format for learning with the adults and kids that are limited only by our collective experience, imagination, and energy. This is the point that may be the most exciting and, at the same

time, the most challenging for us.

Let me leave you with a few other possibilities to mull over:

The story of the paralyzed man lowered into a house where Jesus was so that he could be healed – think of the video or the dance interpretation possibilities of that story.

How about Joseph and the coat of many colors; I would love to see Kate Amoss, Jean Adams and Liz Vail, lead groups that bring the coats to life.

Then there is the story of the Seven Plagues, offered as puppetry, pottery or paper mache.

Creative, learning, story, fun, hands on, hands dirty.

I welcome your comments, enthusiasms, concerns, suggestions, and participation. This is an adventurous road we're on – and we've got great company for the journey.