

# Trish Nemore: Faith and Work

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Good morning.

Summer is over! School has started! Sunday school is in full swing, as we speak! Moreover, by the time Sunday school starts next year, we will, God willing and the Piney Branch don't rise, be in our new home on Carroll Street.

This is a good time, then, to take stock of how we're doing in bringing alive our call to inclusion of children and youth:

*Seekers is committed to participation by persons of all ages. We see children, youth and adults of all ages as valuable and valued parts of our community, and desire their inclusion in our care, our ministry and our life together.*

Well, duh. How hard is that? Of course we care for our kids, of course we share our life together with them. How hard can it be to realize a vision of such inclusion?

I look at how we expand our communion circle on Sundays, squeezing a little closer together to make room for one, two or ten more. It is not too hard. But reading the history of our efforts at inclusion of kids over the life of our community, as reported in 1993 by Lois Stovall, I have become keenly aware that faithfulness to this vision requires hard work, disagreement, compromise, pain, failure – as well as continual holding up of the vision and acknowledgment of our successes. This is faith at work. This is what James exhorts us to when he says, "What good is it to have faith but have no

deeds. ... Faith by itself, not accompanied by action, is dead."

David Lloyd has said, of this vision of Seekers that made it distinctly different from the early Church of the Savior, "*Since many of us were involved with FLOC, it seemed ludicrous to bring a message of hope and empowerment to others' children and not to our own.*"

A seminal event in Seekers' life was the visit by Fred Taylor, Sonya Dyer and David Lloyd to John Westerhof, a professor of religion at Duke University and one who, in the 70s, was thinking and writing about ways of "teaching" children in a church setting that were very different from the then popular public school-style approach to Sunday School. Seekers had a small group of children at the time. Our band told Westerhof of our call and desire to find new, meaningful and creative ways to include children in Christian community. Westerhof's advice: let the children see adults living out their faith, create rituals in which the children participate just as the adults do and expose the children to the wider world around them. Westerhof also encouraged us to emphasize *being with* our children, rather than *ministering to or doing for* them. Finally, he told us that there were virtually no materials available as resources for this approach to Christian education.

Some years ago, Sonya lamented that "the energy it has required to create and staff a Sunday morning program has increasingly drawn us away from more expansive, creative ideas. We have also failed to consistently restate our vision in explicit ways that would call forth responses to new levels of commitment." Is Sonya right? Are her words true today?

Flash forward – twenty-four years after the New Lands. How are we doing? Where do our children see us living out our faith? How do we involve them in rituals? How do we expose them to the wider world? Are we finding enough ways to be with them, rather than just *doing for or ministering to* them?

In the early years, Seekers gathered at 8 am for a 9:30 service and created a wildly energetic pre-worship time where children and adults together acted out the lectionary readings for the week, after which the children went off to Sunday school without attending any part of the worship service. This effort died, apparently, from the sheer enormity of effort and leadership required every Sunday.

Later, some parents wanted their children in worship; after all, seeing adults worship is one element of experiencing them living out their faith. This desire was in tension with the strong Church of the Savior value that includes a lot of silence during worship; what would have to be given up to make worship more child friendly. There ensued much conversation, discussion, trial of new approaches.

For a period of time, we adopted a plan for a certain number of inclusive services each year; these services were very explicitly to be more child-friendly and often had adults and children working together to bring the worship, such as in a clown service. While these services were very creative, some opined that they were too noisy, too often and too demanding.

The conversation continued; four or five years ago, we adopted the approach we now use which is that [communion services](#) are inclusive of all children above kindergarten age. The conversation continues today: how to make communion Sunday both more kid-friendly and more integrated, so that the kids are not just an add-on, dropping in once a month. Or showing up for "special" services. Or merely presenting to us in "performance" the fruits of their Sunday school study (although I confess I have loved many of the presentations we've had from Sunday School). We are more intentional about having young people read the lectionary and take the collection. We encourage preachers to make the first-Sunday word accessible to children. What we are doing now, to me, represents growth in our perceptions and realizations of how the children worship with us.

Family overnights were an early intentional effort to find fun and creative, non-classroom, non-worship ways to be intergenerational. For our entire history, we have lived with the tension of how structured they should be; for the most part, non-structure has won out. However, in order not to lose the opportunity to connect with those who are not in our age group, we have to avoid a somewhat natural tendency to be caught up in our adult conversation, while the kids entertain themselves with wild abandon. I like the way we can mix ourselves up during meals, giving us an easier opportunity for conversation with kids than we may have at a Sunday coffee hour. We have also had fun at the overnight with T-shirt making, toenail painting, pumpkin carving, scavenger hunts, talent shows. When we bring along toys and games or soccer balls, or the desire to climb trees, we can hook up with the kids in an easy and natural way. I want us to both reclaim and hold on to that value.

For years, David Lloyd tells us, he dreamed of the School of Christian Living having classes that would draw our children and youth. Since 1996, when we had a class for the intergenerational group going to El Salvador, the School has offered several classes with children in mind – Midrash, Quilting, Star Wars (our most intergenerational class yet as it included, I believe, Nathaniel Ogle, age 5 at the time). School of Christian Living classes offer each of us an intimate way of knowing others in the community; they model for our children the Seekers value that we let ourselves be known.

We have also had our youth participate in silent retreats in recent years.

In 1980, the Stovall report tells us, we were concerned, among other things, about being weak on rituals. I think about the rituals we have included our children in during my time at Seekers, and I think – what richness! Making and presenting quilts for families with new babies, honoring people who are

going off on adventures or missions, passing the legendary Seekers' plant to newest member at a Commitment ceremony, baptisms – Kate Amoss, Samantha Grace, Ali Leinbach, Casey Willkens (modeling to our children that people of all ages are baptized), intergenerational Maundy Thursday foot washing services, Ash Wednesday events with masks and burning of things we want to let go of, our new millennium bonfire at John and Kay Schultz's last New Year's Eve; coming of age ceremonies for some of our teens, tree plantings and other ceremonies memorializing children and siblings who have died: Jenny Dodge, Kate Amoss' brother, Carrick, and Erica Seat. I find it exciting that we have created such wonderful rituals over the years; and that we took a self-criticism seriously twenty years ago and we have moved forward. I encourage us to hold on to this important aspect of our intergenerational community life.

How do we help our children know the world around them? We have intergenerational potting parties for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, where then 3-year-old Caren Holmes declared, "*Mommy, I'm a worker!*"; we march with the Million Mom March and walk for FLOC and Hope and a Home; we hear children's words brought by foreign travelers among us, including Covey Willkens when he returned home from Vietnam with his new baby sister. We send our children off with an intergenerational work party to Vicki Guzman's Asaprosar in El Salvador. We take our children's collection to send to places to which we are connected that need relief from war or natural disasters; we have our own children – middle class, well dressed, well fed – acting the parts of homeless South African street boys in a play created by Roy Barber. We have MUKA come and live with us for a summer, and play with our kids and show us how to dance and play drums.

So, how are we doing? Many things indicate that say we are living out our vision as guided by the Westerhof advice. All of these things are both organic and intentional: they grow

out of our community life together, but they don't happen without planning, caring, nurture, paying attention and a lot of work. Just like all the things that matter about community life. Faith at work.

How are we doing with Sunday school? That specific period between 9:45 and 10:45 when our children leave us to go to other places in the building for a different kind of gathering? Where does Sunday school fit into this great banquet of inclusion that we have created over the years and that I hope we will continue to replenish?

I drew several conclusions about the place of Sunday school's in our history from Lois's report and from my own knowledge and experience in the community over the past 13 years.

- Since the beginning, an ongoing tension has been how much and what specific content to include in the program: our non-doctrinal, non-creedal nature leaves us without a shared understanding of what specifics we want for our children out of Sunday school. We are comfortable with not all being in the same place spiritually or theologically until we get to discuss a Sunday school program.
- We have moved in and out of using curricula designed by others over the years; sometimes we have used a common curriculum (but age appropriate) for all age groups, sometimes not. We used a curriculum that Lois Stovall wrote based on the Cavalletti approach to education for our youngest non-nursery group for several years; recently, we have chosen Bible stories that illustrate various themes we've identified, then let the teachers make up for themselves how to work with the stories. Last year, Sallie Holmes wrote a curriculum for Covey, Caren and Nathaniel. Some who are willing to teach are not willing to "make it up as they go"; they want the guidance of a written curriculum.
- For about five years, we had paid Sunday school

coordinators, but have not had anyone paid in that role since about 1985. For many years in the 90s, Brenda Seat served as the overall coordinator with responsibilities for planning inclusive services, as well, and with Journeying with Children mission group as her backup and support. Diane Willkens then served as coordinator for a period. Kate Cudlipp has provided leadership for the last several years, but Kate, though very committed to, caring of, and loved by our children, is clear that she is not called to this and would like other leadership to be called forth.

- We have waxed and waned in our efforts to hold to our original value that teaching is shared among all adults in the community, regardless of whether they have children or whether they are "called" to be teachers. In recent years, we've pretty much abandoned any serious expectation along those lines, though we do still encourage all to offer whatever special gifts they have in ways that might be folded into a Sunday school segment.

For some of the reasons I have just named, our Sunday school program lacks a certain overall cohesiveness and continuity. Nevertheless, we do have overarching themes that we have identified: learning about the Bible, justice, prayer and sacrament, stewardship, community. This year's specific themes are, for the younger children: courage in adversity, Thanksgiving and Christmas, abundance from scarcity, Easter. Moreover, for the youth: Disciplines of Seekers church, comparing Advent stories, Love, (sex) and Corinthians, The Book of Acts.

An overarching "goal" of Sunday school, as described in a 1980 document, was to foster relationships between adults and children, hence the desire to have as many adults as possible involved in the teaching. Yet this value itself exists in tension with some parents' concern about what, specifically,

their children are learning: We do not vet our teachers; we do not screen for content. We rely, a lot, on the creativity of the adult teachers, on their bringing some expression of their own spiritual journey to the Sunday school hour.

We are all, in this community, invited to shape our Sunday school, generally through meetings to which all are invited. The vision of inclusion in recent years has taken the form of having our children help shape the program. We have taken their suggestions very seriously. They named many Old Testament stories they wanted to know more about. What an exciting affirmation of their curiosity about the Bible! Some wanted Revelation instead of a segment on the Christmas story, or the Easter story. Hmm. Now there was a challenge to our adult teachers! They wanted to create a full worship service themselves, from prelude to recessional. After six weeks of working with members of Celebration Circle and others, they brought us the "Pay Attention!" liturgy. We listened to what our children want and found that they want to know more about the Bible and more about how we do things in our community. What a rich reward we got for listening.

Our version of Sunday school is demanding of the adult leaders: being fairly Bible illiterate, I personally find a commitment to teach Sunday school one that challenges me to learn new things and think creatively about ways to bring stories and ideas alive for the kids. It is a **big** commitment. It is also full of "getting messy and making mistakes" and missing the boat in efforts to connect with the kids. Everyone here who has ever taught a class knows the feeling of coming out at the end of a Sunday morning ready to throw in the towel and declare the children hopeless heathens, fully beyond redemption. (Here's where the Proverb about children's heads being full of folly, but the rod of discipline being the cure comes alive for us!)

However, we also know that much of the spiritual journeying with anyone involves hanging in, hanging in, hanging in. It

involves adults and children being in relationship together. Then, one day, you ask Nathaniel Ogle what is in the treasure box he made for his brother and, expressing both great generosity and clear self-interest, he tells you the treasure chest is filled with moms and dads because his brother needs a lot of moms and dads and takes too much time from the mom and dad that Nathaniel shares with him.

Another Sunday, you work on an illustration of the book of Daniel with Julia Dahlin and Andy Holmes and eavesdrop as they argue about how the characters in Harry Potter compare with Daniel and the people in his life. "Is Professor Dumbledore like God or like King Nebukenezzer?"

Perhaps, you listen as Alan Dragoo, after a segment on Daniel's dream interpretations, shares with a room full of teenagers a picture he drew about an important dream that he has been interpreting as part of his spiritual journey for years now.

Or you watch a roomful of teenagers sit around and brainstorm for a clown skit about how Seekers is different from and like the early Christian church, and Lauren Seat suggests we create a [Time Portal](#) to take us back in time to visit Paul and Lydia.

Sunday school is not where our children will find God – that will happen in the mountains, or at summer camp, or giving a homeless man a bag of food, or when they find a way to touch someone who is hurting, or when they dance with wild abandon in the sheer delight of being alive.

However, they can learn the stories of God's people – the ancients' and our own stories. Moreover, at least as we organize our Sunday mornings now, (and we do not need to remain wedded to this approach when we move to Carroll Street – another big conversation that we have not had as a community yet); at least as we organize our Sundays now, Sunday school is the place our children go while we worship. It is where

they form their groups – it provided the regular gathering place to grow a tight supportive adolescent peer community among our now college-age young adults – Erica Lloyd, Brian Dodge, Phil Amoss, Susanna Crumrine and others. It provided the regular gathering place for a group of middle school children who organized their own Help the Homeless program with virtually no adult assistance – Samantha, April, Margaret, Chris, Jennifer. Coming to Sunday school draws them into the community for other things to happen – to be here for rituals, for conversation with adults, for developing the relationships that make them want to come on the overnights where they deepen the relationships.

Perhaps I am slightly more sanguine about the possibilities of Sunday school than Sonya is, although I certainly recognize her point as a valid one. Sunday school does take a lot of energy; coordinating and teaching often feel like thankless jobs and our disagreements sometimes lead to deep emotional conflict creating lasting wounds. I agree with Sonya that we need to continue to generate the more creative, expansive ideas. Sunday school and expansive ideas are not mutually exclusive – the "Pay Attention" service is evidence of that.

For me, a core issue right now is the lack of a vision keeper, energy gatherer related to our children. We lack a person who gathers the seeds of possibility that may exist in each of us to create ways for adults and children to be together, and nurtures them into being.

Some years ago, we were poised to implement a recommendation to pay someone called to such a position, but other community changes intervened and we did not pursue that course. A reasonable theory of why a mission group has not come into being explicitly to respond to this call is that parents, the most likely members of such a group, need respite in their mission group from parenting. Moreover, those who are not parents or have finished their active parenting are less likely to be called to such a group. Journeying with Children,

my own mission group, has been very active with and caring of our kids, has sponsored many events and activities and supported Brenda when she was the coordinator, but we have never been willing to name this explicitly as our call.

We are in a transition moment. In the early 90s, we had more than 40 children and youth in our congregation. We now have about 17 children, with some attending more regularly than others do. Next year at this time, if we do not lose families because of our move, we will have 13, 11 of whom are from five families. Each of these families, each of these children is precious to us. We have had small numbers before and succeeded in creating a strong environment for them. Do we have the energy and creativity to feed our small number while we move toward our future? We anticipate that our move will bring families to us, but we do not know that, we cannot count on it, though we certainly need to be attentive to the possibility. We have a lot to offer families with children but it does not necessarily look like a standard denominational Christian Ed program. Are we comfortable with that?

Sonya's 1992 lament was balanced by hope. (Of course! It is Sonya!):

*The hope I see is that we continue to articulate and struggle with ways to offer our children and our community a richer life of valuing each other. I see hope in the commitment of adults to teach and lead the children, to friendship between families, to children's retreats and family overnights. I see hope in people expressing a dream for our Sunday program to have a sense of unity and direction.*

We are all part of this family. Let us continue the conversation and continue to get messy and make mistakes. Even if we find a vision keeper among us, each of us can claim the opportunity to hold the vision and keep it alive.

Amen.