

The Sunday School Movement

When an 18th Century England newspaper editor, Robert Raikes, looked out his kitchen window one Sunday morning in 1781 and saw children playing in the Gloucester streets – the light went on in his head with sudden inspiration. What he saw were “street urchins” enjoying their one day off from otherwise daily work in the mills. It would be centuries away before labor laws would prohibit child labor. Even my own grandmother worked in the mills as a child picking up threads from the floor. But there was something that he could do about other social ills. He knew that these children were illiterate and easily subject to crime, and never mind – if they should learn to read they might one day be able to buy and read his newspaper.

We all have our motives for the actions we take. And perhaps that’s how the Holy Spirit works – through our natural skills and interest – to bring something new and more wonderful into being – and most of all to benefit the dignity and well being of another person. In this way we glorify God, as we have pledged in the Baptismal Covenant promise: To strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

Using natural interest and skills along with what is at hand, are the basic ingredients of invention and innovation, whether building a new machine or addressing a social ill. In this case the problem to be addressed was basically one of illiteracy; and because it was a Sunday morning – it was apparent that the children were obviously not in church – so two issues needed to be addressed.

He turned around to see what was at hand - the kitchen table, his wife and the Bible. She began inviting the children in, and no doubt with a few fresh cookies from the oven, they sat around her table to hear Bible stories, and eventually would learn to read these stories for themselves. This meager beginning later evolved into the only formal schooling these children had – and it was on a Sunday morning – the only day they had free. So the seeds for Sunday School were planted. Thanks to the warm hearts, keen minds, and the evangelical zeal of John and Charles Wesley, the vision of this newspaper editor was embraced - and carried forth to become what was known as The Sunday School Movement.

When you look out your window into the street and around the community, what are today’s children doing and what are their pressing unmet needs? Are they hungry and homeless, easy victims of drugs and gangs? Are they in need of tutoring or medical services, in need of After School or weekday care? What are your skills and interest that can meet this need? How about your church – is there empty space available, financial resources or volunteers? How will you be able to respond to the current needs of children, and become a part of the church re-envisioning its mission and ministry for the 21st Century?

Genelda Woggon has been ministered to and by children for over 40 years in her professional work as a Christian Formation Leader, most especially through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the past 20 years.