

AN EXPERIMENT IN WEEKDAY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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The experiment which is described below is now under way in a western Nebraska town named Palisade. The community has a population of about 800 people with surrounding rural areas contributing to the high school registration. There are several schools in the open country for the grade school children. The high school in Palisade has an enrollment of 72, and the grade school in the town is somewhat larger, with an enrollment of 116. The town itself is located on U. S. Highway No. 6, some 28 miles northwest of McCook, Nebraska. It is a community of forward-looking, progressive people whose interests are, of course, predominately rural and agricultural.

The community has five churches: Methodist, Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, Missouri Synod Lutheran, and Plymouth Brethren. Only one of the churches, the Methodist, has a resident minister. About 80 percent of the church-related children and youth of the community belong to the Methodist Church. The other churches are predominately conservative, some of them even Fundamentalistic in theology. Inasmuch as they have no resident pastors, their program is largely confined to the Sunday morning services.

Under the leadership of the Methodist minister, and in cooperation with the Public School Superintendent and the Board of Education of the Methodist Church, a program of weekly religious education which crosses denominational lines has been conducted during the past two years. It is organized and conducted upon a non-sectarian basis. The classes are taught by the Methodist minister who has had excellent cooperation from and en-

couragement by the two superintendents who have had charge of the public schools. The first, Mr. W. J. Bitter, was a member of the Lutheran Church, and the second, Mr. Allen N. Stroh, an active member of the Methodist church.

Registration for the classes in weekday religious education is voluntary. However, after a student has registered, attendance is compulsory. In the town grade school, the classes followed the divisions of the public school classrooms; in the high school, classes were formed on the basis of time and interest. The curriculum materials for these several classes were selected and adapted from all available materials, with the total church program in mind. Some of the curriculum materials which have been used are presented below.

Classes were given without credit during a period of released time from the Public School schedule, but in available rooms within the school building, so as to conserve the time and energy of the students as well as to secure the use of more adequate teaching facilities and a favorable environment. Such an arrangement obviously would not be practical in every community, but might have to follow the conventional pattern of going to the local churches. The legal status of religious weekday classes may be determined by writing to the State Department of Education within a given State, or from Denominational Headquarters.

The registration in the classes under consideration was fifty-six percent of the High School registration, and ninety-three percent of the Grade School registration. In the High School, the

time element prevented many from attending. Plans are being made to give extra-curricular credit within the High School next year.

In the rural areas surrounding the town, seven schools were served, one class being conducted in each, once each week. This involved a "circuit" of approximately 65 miles. Registration in these classes was one hundred per cent of the total number of pupils in the schools.

Class periods varied from 35 minutes to 50 minutes, depending upon the school schedule. The writer taught each class, 13 in all, with a total registration of 177 students. Consideration of personal problems for the older students and a continuing emphasis upon the development of Christian personality in the younger students were stressed. The courses which were offered dealt with the contents of the Bible as well as with problems of Christian living. Thus the former may be called courses in Biblical history and literature, and the latter courses in Christian citizenship.

One of the primary problems in organizing the schools was that of removing the questions which arose in the minds of the several Boards of Education in the communities concerned. These were removed by personal visitation of the members, by the enthusiasm evinced by students, and by beginning upon a trial basis. It was agreed to try out the program, and if it did not meet with the full approval of the community, to discontinue it. The promotional work was done, as might be expected, by the Methodist minister.

A period of six months was devoted to publicity and promotional work before starting the first classes. The first work was done in the high school, and only after a year of experimentation here was it begun in the grade school

in Palisade or those of the surrounding country. At the end of two years, all the communities served are enthusiastic in their support of the work, and conditions favor the further development of this type of education in both town and country. Neighboring communities are becoming interested, and it is quite probable that similar programs will be started in several of them during the next few years.

Principles by Which These Classes Were Organized:

The principles outlined here are not those which may be found in any text-book on weekday religious education. They are, instead, the guiding principles which were found useful in this one experiment.

1. Curriculum materials were chosen to supplement and complete our local church program of education. A list of these materials is presented below.

2. Thorough publicity was given to the plan before work was actually begun. This was presented by means of newspapers, church bulletins, presentation of the plan in church committee meetings, in meetings of the Board of Education of the Public Schools, in community clubs, Women's Clubs, and PTA's. The plans were not presented directly to the official groups of the several churches in this specific community. In most communities, this could very well be a cooperative venture in which case the several churches would have to participate officially.

3. Personal visitation prepared the ground for these public discussions. This appears to be an essential phase of the promotional work. Questions may thus be answered before they are raised, and objections met more simply in face-to-face discussion than in public meetings.

4. The Methodist Church sponsored the program, but the official invitation

to establish classes came from the public school officials themselves. The Methodist minister and the superintendent of the Public Schools had reached agreement upon the main points of the program before it was presented to the public. Cooperation between the school officials and the minister or ministers concerned appears to be a primary factor if such schools are to be organized and maintained.

5. The active promotional work was confined to children related to the Methodist Church. Children from other churches came into the classes either because of vital personal interest, or because of the general interest in the classes.

6. The time schedule of the classes was determined by the curriculum of the schools concerned. Classes in weekday religious education must not interfere with the regular schedules in any unfavorable way. This principle is vital since upon its observance depends the cooperation of the public school teachers.

7. No student was permitted to attend classes until he presented a written request for such attendance signed by parents or guardians.

8. No tax money was involved in the plan, nor was any time taken from the schedule of the public school teachers. Time and money were provided by the churches, a fact which was emphasized in all of the publicity.

9. It is assumed that the knowledge gained and the attitudes and habits acquired in these classes are of definite and specific value to the student, the schools and the communities.

Curriculum Materials Used:

Complete lists of materials for programs of weekday religious education may be obtained from any denominational publishing house. Various co-operative series of texts have been

published for this purpose, and continue to be published in increasing numbers. Some leaders may wish to build their own curriculum, as was done in part by the writer of this report.

The materials which were used in the several grades may well be stated specifically. Of course the Bible was used by all groups.

1. For third and fourth grades: Taylor, F. M., *Child Life in Bible Times*. Supplementary material consists of Faris, *Standard Bible Story Readers*; children's stories from various sources; constructive activities and dramatic work.

2. For the fifth and sixth grades: Magnuson, M., *The Bible in the Building of Life*. This is an excellent text, supplemented by pupils' workbooks, with suggestions for creative activities and for individual consideration of applications of materials to the pupil's life situations. (This was used in the country schools as well as in town because it could be adapted to a wide grade level when properly used).

3. For seventh and eighth grades: Griffiths, L. B., *Becoming a Person*, and Desjardins, L., *What Boys and Girls Are Asking*.

4. For High School classes: No specific text-book was used. Certain basic materials were used for reference work and readings, always with specific regard to problems under consideration. Three courses were taught: (i) "Know Your Bible," (ii) "Jesus and the Problems of Life," and (iii) "The Bible and Personality Problems." The following reference and supplemental materials were used: Bowie, *The Story of the Bible*; Grant, *The Life and Times of Jesus*; "Toward an Understanding of Jesus," a series of lessons which appeared in the *Highroad* during 1942; Harlow, *Honest Answers to Honest Questions*; *The Classmate*, "Personal Living" columns; Weston, *Jesus and the Problems of Life*; Weston, *The Prophets*

and the Problems of Life. Visual education materials which were related to the units studied, including 16 mm. motion pictures as well as 2 x 2 Kodachrom slides, were used.

An available list of materials which proved to be helpful is included in a pamphlet published by the Council on Christian Education of the Northern Baptist Convention, 1944-1945. It is entitled "Materials for Administering the Weekday Church School, What-Why-

When-Where." From the materials suggested in this pamphlet, any individual who has at least a general knowledge of the field, should be able to plan and direct a program of weekday religious education in his community. Such other topics as bibliographies on Administration, on Methods, Reference Bulletins, and Legal Status of Weekday Religious Education, as well as Graded Curriculum materials, are included.