

SUNDAY SCHOOLS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Every one of the circuit churches built in the first fifteen years of the century naturally made provision for a large sunday school. Attendances of pupils at one church in 1902 were as follows;-

Morning; 86 early, 19 late, 18 absent, 8 teachers

Afternoon; 222 early, 5 late, 25 absent, 19 teachers

At the same church in 1994 just 49 children were on the roll and average attendance was 25. The Junior Church, as it was now called, met in the mornings only.

The reasons for this decline you may deduce from your own experience, but the increasing secularisation of sunday, the advent of the family car, and the tendency for families to live at a distance from relatives (as distinct from 1902 when granny lived in the next street) played their parts. But attendance was high right up to the 1940's as evidenced by the building of a large sunday school complex at South Parade in 1926, including separate rooms for each grade of scholar, and a large hall for joint worship.

The Sunday School was an important part of church life and its highlight was the Anniversary. For several weeks the children would rehearse specially written songs and hymns, turning up regularly on a week night to do so. The Anniversary might extend over two sundays, with a week night concert. The presentation of large numbers of children in the church sometimes involved the erection of banked seating facing the congregation; this structure would be carefully preserved for use from year to year. On the day, the procession of pupils from the back of the church would be a great moment for proud parents, who of course ensured that best clothes were worn. At some churches in the 1930's white dresses for girls and white shirts with grey trousers for boys were unspoken rules. Often on these occasions the annual prizes for attendance or good conduct would be presented; to qualify there were sometimes texts or Bible passages to be learned as well during the year.

Sunday school teachers were recruited young; some were only 14 or 15, but they were backed by a devoted band of senior teachers headed by the Sunday School Superintendent, a figure of some importance in the church. He or she would organise the weekly preparation classes for teachers which it was important

PROCESSIONAL.

Stand up! stand up for Jesus!
Ye soldiers of the Cross;
Lift high His royal banner;
It must not suffer loss.
From victory unto victory
His army shall He lead,
Till every foe is vanquished
And Christ is Lord indeed.

Chorus.

Stand up . . . for Jesus!
Ye soldiers of the Cross;
Lift high His royal banner;
It must not suffer loss.

Stand up! stand up for Jesus!
The trumpet-call obey;
Forth to the mighty conflict
In this His glorious day!
Ye that are men, now serve Him
Against unnumbered foes;
Let courage rise with danger,
And strength to strength oppose.

Stand up! stand up for Jesus!
Stand in His strength alone;
The arm of flesh will fail you;
Ye dare not trust your own.
Put on the Christian's armour,
And watching unto prayer,
Where duty calls, or danger,
Be never wanting there.

Stand up! stand up for Jesus!
The strife will not be long;
This day the noise of battle,
The next the victor's song.
To him that overcometh
A crown of life shall be;
He with the King of Glory
Shall reign eternally.

INTROIT.

Holy Spirit, truth Divine,
Dawn upon this soul of mine;
Word of God, and inward light,
Wake my spirit, clear my sight.

HYMN 1.—PRIMARY.

I love my little garden,
And every spreading tree,
The robin with his red, red breast,
The lark so gay and free.

I think that God must love them,
Because He made them all—
The daisy and the buttercup,
And trees so straight and tall.

I think He loves the roses
That open red and white,
The violet so shy and sweet
Hiding away from sight.

I think He loves the mother
So patient on her nest,
Keeping the wee birds snug and warm
Close to her gentle breast.

And God would have us love them,
His little ones; so we
Must never hurt, but kindly care
For bird, and flower, and bee.

HYMN 2.—PRIMARY.

Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,
To shine for Him each day;
In every way try to please Him—
At home, at school, at play.

Chorus.

A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
Jesus wants me for a sunbeam;
A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
I'll be a sunbeam for Him.

Jesus wants me to be loving
And kind to all I see,
Showing how pleasant and happy
His little one may be

I will ask Jesus to help me
To keep my heart from sin;
Ever reflecting His goodness,
And always shine for Him.

I'll be a sunbeam for Jesus,—
I can if I but try,—
Serving Him moment by moment,
Then live with Him on high.

A typical extract from the programme of
hymns sung at the Sunday School
Anniversary, Stockland Green 1938.

The Wesleyan Sunday Schools,
PARADE, SUTTON COLDFIELD.



September 10th, 1922.

DEAR.....

WE ARE HOLDING quite a new and
Interesting Afternoon Service
WITH THE CHILDREN next SUNDAY,
the 17th, at 2-45 and **particularly want you to
join us.**

THE SCHOOL will be decorated by the Children as a
THANKSGIVING FOR HARVEST, and *all* will contribute
in some way towards a bright and helpful afternoon.

We shall be *especially* glad to welcome our old
Scholars, as we want this to be a RALLY DAY in
reality of all past and present Scholars, their Parents,
and Workers, which will give an enthusiastic start for
the Winter's Work, and encourage *all* in their efforts to
make "our School" of greater service for the Master,
and help towards the happy life of the town and
neighbourhood.

Be sure you come and bring another.

Yours sincerely,

Rev. FRANK COX, *Minister.*

W. A. WILKINSON, *Superintendent.*

C. S. WILKINSON, *Secretary.*

to attend. Standard published lesson series were used and children from the earliest age heard the Gospel stories and were introduced to the Bible. Relationships between pupils and teachers were close, and a favourite teacher would be remembered for the rest of a pupils life.

It was a common practice for the children to be present in church for the start of the morning service. The preacher would give a short address just for them, often illustrated by a picture or an object, after which the children would leave during or at the close of the next hymn. Afternoon school would be devoted to the prepared lesson, as the morning session might well take the form of a service when the children read the Lessons and perhaps read prayers. Afternoon sunday schools were closed in the 1960's in most churches.

There were sunday school concerts, well attended by parents; the efforts of the beginners department being especially well received. And of course there was the sunday school outing, in the early days to a field or farm, perhaps a short train ride away where races and games were followed by sandwiches, cakes and lemonade. In later years outings became more ambitious with a coach journey to a zoo or other attraction, or even a canal boat trip.

The 1939-45 war years saw an inevitable restriction in these events, but afterwards they were resumed until dramatically falling numbers in the 70's led to the dropping of the anniversary celebrations. By this time the term "sunday school" had fallen out of favour and for a time the term used was Junior Church. Eventually childrens groups in the 90's began to use space age titles such as All-stars and Planet X., in one case headed by a group known as the J Team. Over the last thirty years teaching methods evolved so that the children played a more active part by role playing and drawing illustrations of the Bible stories they heard.

Legislation to curb child abuse in the 1980's led to some staffing difficulties. Guidelines demanded increased supervision and avoidance of situations hitherto innocently encouraged where intimate contact with the children might occur. At the time some teachers despaired at the depths to which

human conduct had apparently descended, but the prevailing concerns for children required a new outlook and precautions soon became the norm.

The century ended without many signs of a revival in children's attendance, giving little hope for future church membership. In 1933, year of Methodist Church Union, the circuit listed 2233 scholars. In 1997 the figure was 297.

There were, however, present weekly on some church premises dozens of children taking part in the activities of the uniformed organisations. Many of the leaders of these are church members and the parade services bring the children into church at intervals. It is estimated that about 1500 children are involved in these organisations in the circuit.

Youth clubs developed strongly after 1945 and became very popular for about 30 years. Leadership was always a problem, the commitment necessary being a quality rarely found, for it was a difficult job. One problem was the assimilation of young people from outside the church, hopefully to encourage them in a different lifestyle. More often than not, however there were difficulties of behaviour which led in the end to the disruption of the club. It would be closed, and after an interval restarted. But some successful leaders are well remembered by the young people they entertained and educated for a few teenage years. Gradually youth clubs became smaller gatherings often meeting in homes for discussions as well as enjoying planned activities (ice skating for instance) together.