

Why one of the church's loneliest ministries doesn't have to be

## THE MORE WE TEACH TOGETHER

by Eddy Hall

Every summer in thousands of churches, children's pastors and Sunday school superintendents scramble to find enough teachers for fall Sunday school. As tempting as it may be to blame this annual frustration on low commitment, the heart of the problem may well lie elsewhere. The problem may be the way we are structuring our children's ministries.

Solo teaching with small classes, our most common way of structuring Sunday school, can make teaching children a lot harder--and less effective--than it needs to be. A team ministry approach, where each team works with a larger group of children, can bring out the best in children's workers and make children's ministry a lot more rewarding. Here are some of the benefits a ministry team approach offers.

*\* Team teaching empowers every team member to minister out of his or her spiritual gifts.* Almost every church has a few people who can make the Bible come alive for children, but I have yet to find a church that has enough master teachers that they can put one in every small children's class. Some people are great at leading children in singing and worship. Others are gifted at working with crafts or memory work. Some of the most valuable children's workers may not be good at Bible teaching, leading worship, or doing crafts, but they're great at loving kids. Rarely is one person good at all these things, yet we expect solo teachers to do them all. Should we be surprised then when teachers feel overwhelmed or frustrated? In structuring teaching positions this way, we ignore a basic biblical principle--that every member of the body is to minister out of his or her spiritual gifts.

A teaching team can include a master teacher, a worship leader, people to work with crafts and activities, and people who are just great at loving kids. When every member of the team is ministering out of his or her gifts, ministry is more fun, effective, and rewarding.

*\* Team teaching provides built-in support.* I wonder if whoever first said "one is the loneliest number" was a solo Sunday school teacher. Members of a teaching team encourage each other, pray for each other, celebrate with each other, cry with each other, and work together. When teaching is no longer so lonely, teachers enjoy it more.

*\* Team teaching cuts preparation time.* If five classes of six students each are combined into one group of thirty, only one teacher, not five, needs to prepare a Bible story.

There are different ways to form a teaching team. One way

is for a master teacher to do all the preparation and for the other team members to just show up for the class to assist. Each of these care givers can work with one table of children, keeping order and helping with crafts and memory work. It's a lot easier to find people who enjoy working as care givers than it is to recruit solo teachers.

Another approach is to divide the preparation among the team members--one tells the Bible story, another leads the music and worship time, another prepares a craft, another leads a game or activity. In one class, after an opening time in the large group, the children divided into three groups. Each group went to one of three activity centers, with a different teacher supervising the activity at each center. After ten to fifteen minutes, the children rotated to different centers. Each worker led the same activity three times with a different small group of children. These teachers loved this way of teaching, partly because it took only a fraction of the preparation time required for solo teaching.

*\* Team teaching makes it easier to find qualified, enthusiastic workers.* When people minister out of their gifts, ministry is more fun and rewarding. When workers have teammates, they have built-in support. With less preparation, the work is less likely to feel like a burden. For all these reasons, worker burnout is reduced and turnover is lower. Also, many people not qualified to teach solo are qualified to join a team, which enlarges the pool of prospective workers.

*\* With team teaching, you need fewer workers.* Consider, for example, a church that averages twenty-four children in grades 1-3--a first grade class of four students, and second and third grade classes of ten students each. To have one teacher for every six students, this department needs five teachers (one for grade one, and two each for grades two and three), plus a primary department supervisor--a total of six workers.

By going to a team approach, the work now being done by six workers can be done, and done more effectively, by four. When the twenty-four children are combined into one group, a team of four will provide the needed one to six ratio. Since each team has internal leadership, no separate department supervisor is needed. One church eliminated seven department supervisor positions when it transitioned to team teaching.

*\* Team teaching solves the substitute problem.* If one member of a four-person team has to be gone one Sunday, the other three may feel able to carry on without a substitute for one day. Even if they do bring in someone, they probably won't expect him to do any advance preparation, making it much easier to line up a substitute.

Even more important is the impact on students. The heart of Christian education isn't the printed curriculum, but the loving

relationship between teachers and students through which a Christlike life is modeled. When a solo substitute who does not have a close relationship with the students comes into the class, the greatest value of the Christian education hour is lost. A teaching team guarantees that students will be relating to teachers they know well, even when one team member can't be there.

\* *Team teaching models community and ministry as God intended it.* As children watch adults ministering together as a team, they learn more about how God designed the body of Christ to work than they can learn from any Bible lesson on body life. As they watch mature Christians love, support, and forgive each other, they learn what it means to live in Christian community. This teaching by example is some of the most important teaching that will take place in that classroom.

\* *Broader age-grading can reduce competitiveness.* Imagine a class of first-graders. When the teacher calls on students to read, some can read well, others not at all, causing embarrassment. Now imagine a larger group where grades one through three are together. When a first-grader struggles with a task, the third-grader sitting next to her helps out. The competitive dynamic is replaced by a mentoring dynamic. A rule of thumb is that when there is at least a two-year age difference, younger children will look up to the older children as role models, and the older children will enjoy mentoring the younger ones.

\* *Larger groups reduce social isolation.* My fifth grade son once attended a Sunday school class consisting of one other boy and several girls. The other boy regularly tried to escape to the fourth grade class where there were more boys, but was always forced to return to the fifth grade class. If grades four through six had been meeting together, this boy would not have felt so isolated.

On the other hand, at certain ages--older elementary and middle school--some boys tend to show off in the presence of girls. I know of a couple of situations where disruptive (and obnoxious) behavior was eliminated by forming separate groups for boys and girls. But even if a church has separate boys' and girls' classes for junior or middle school children, those classes can be broadly rather than closely graded to make team teaching practical.

\* *Team teaching improves quality of ministry.* For all these reasons--workers ministering through their gifts, a climate of mutual support, more continuity in relationships with students, the opportunity to model body life and Christian community--team teaching enhances the quality of Christian education.

\* *As a bonus, team teaching saves money on facilities.* Team teaching in larger groups uses space more efficiently than solo

teaching small groups does. Some churches can take advantage of this without making any changes in their buildings; they just have to start using their space differently. Other churches will need to knock out walls between a few classrooms. Yet others will need to do major remodeling.

Olivet Evangelical Free Church in Muskegon, Michigan, was having trouble finding growing room for their Sunday school classes for children and youth. They considered adding a new 3000-square-foot building for the youth, but even that didn't solve the problem.

The breakthrough came when someone suggested removing all their interior basement walls to eliminate their little classrooms, and creating a few large open areas--one for grades 1-3, one for grades 4-6, and one for teens. They would reconfigure their small classes into larger team-taught groups meeting in flexible multi-purpose space. Each space would have multiple tables or work stations so children could work in smaller groups as appropriate. All the furnishings--table, chairs, supply cabinets, dividers--would be portable with a room for active storage nearby so that the space could also be used for large group activities such as recreation.

Melinda, Olivet's Director of Children's Ministries, didn't have to be sold on team teaching. She simply hadn't had a facility that would let her do it. Remodeling their basement and switching to team teaching will give Olivet's children's and teens' classes room to grow by 60% to 70% without adding on any more classroom space.

Making the change to team teaching usually isn't a hard sell. Almost every teacher who has tasted team teaching will jump at the chance to do it regularly. If your teachers have never done it, you might want to let them try it out in vacation Bible school or a weeknight activity program. Or, you can introduce it in one or two classes and let the other teachers see it in action before suggesting the whole children's department take the plunge.

What you'll discover, I suspect, is that the more we teach together, the more rewarding and effective our ministry with children will be.

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*This article is adapted from WHEN NOT TO BUILD: An Architect's Unconventional Wisdom for the Growing Church, second edition (Baker, 2000) by Ray Bowman and Eddy Hall. The book is available at a 10% discount through the Living Stones Associates website ([www.living-stones.com](http://www.living-stones.com)).*