

COOL TOOLS FOR SABBATH SCHOOL

Community-friendly Sabbath Schools

Many community members would be willing to attend Sabbath School if they were not made to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. Community-friendly Sabbath Schools should be conducted in such a manner as to draw, not repel, honest seekers for truth. There are a number of things the Sabbath School can do to become guest friendly.

Hospitality

People who simply drop in, attend with a friend, or return to Sabbath School after a long absence, usually don't want to be ignored, but neither do they want to be smothered with attention or singled out.

Guests should be greeted with a friendly smile and perhaps a question like, "Are you familiar with our program and/or facility?" This is not too invasive yet may help to set the guest at ease. A pre-arranged hospitality host could be introduced to the guest. This member may engage in light conversation by introducing themselves and telling a bit about their family, work, how long they have lived in the city, and so forth.

The hospitality host may then answer questions and show guests to appropriate rooms for children's classes and give the locations of restrooms. They may invite the guest to their own adult Sabbath School class if appropriate. The host should select a class that is community friendly. The host family may sit near guests during church, accompany them to fellowship meal, and/or invite them to their home for Sabbath dinner.

Community-friendly Class

The best seating arrangement for a community-friendly class is most often a circle. The class facilitator should be present early so guests are not left sitting alone, waiting for class to begin. Guests feel most comfortable in a class that is warm, friendly and social, yet not invasive or coercive.

Simple introductions around the circle may be followed by an ice-breaker question that is easy for all to answer and allows members to become more at ease. For example, the facilitator might ask members to share a bit about their first memories of school. When asking class members to read, share, pray, or answer questions around the circle, the facilitator should make it easy for guests either to participate or to remain silent. A simple statement like, "If anyone does not feel comfortable participating, that is perfectly fine. Just look to your right. We will understand and continue around the circle."

It may be even better not to go around the circle. For example, praying spontaneously in sentences allows all who wish to pray to participate and others to pray silently.

Classes that are friendly to guests must be aware that visitors may have very little knowledge of where to find Scripture texts or Bible stories in general. It would be well to have extra Bible study guides and Bibles on hand to offer to them.

Denominational jargon such as "the truth", "the Spirit of Prophecy", "Ellen White", "the conference", "the ABC" will seem like a foreign language to guests. Unless they have a background in Bible knowledge and experience, they will most often understand only the language of news media, television, the working world, or the street.

Concepts like justification, sanctification, new birth, atonement, sanctuary, and many others must be explained with words that are meaningful to them.

Many seekers for truth would consider themselves spiritual people. They will most likely have been exposed to a great variety of spiritual teaching. Facilitators should seek to bridge the gap between cultural religion and the concepts of Scripture. There are ethics common to most spiritual faiths and philosophies. Some of these would be: (1) benevolence to all; (2) universal value of people; (3) love, kindness, understanding, sympathy; (4) humanitarian causes (5) acceptance of all regardless of race, color or attire.

Modern society is influenced not so much by scriptural content as by people who manifest a dynamic experience of peace, love, joy, longsuffering, goodness meekness, temperance, faith. Visitors will generally not be opposed to scriptural content if it is a means to helping them manifest this kind of life. For this reason the class discussion should focus on a life-related study of Scripture.

The class facilitator should avoid putting people on the spot by asking them by name to respond. Guests may be frightened off by this, even if the facilitator



knows he or she will not offend a regular member in so doing. Facilitators should not come across as harsh authoritarians or religious bigots. They should not compromise truth, but should teach with kindness, sympathy, understanding and benevolence.

It would be well to have a ground rule for discussion and to state it often as new guests arrive. One example would be for the facilitator to say: "We like to have open discussion and want everyone to feel free to participate. We welcome honest questions, no matter how simple you feel they might be. We simply ask that we allow the Bible to provide the final answers." If a guest might express an opinion that is contrary to sound doctrine, the facilitator may call attention to a qualifying text and while contemplating the text together, may give a testimony of their understanding without argument or debate. The facilitator should help regular members to refrain from argument, debate, or insensitive comments that might offend visitors.

Drawing Interested Guests

Research reveals that people who do not attend church often would be interested in programs that might help with improved people relationships, better family life, addiction recovery, or life management skills. It would be well for the Sabbath School council to consider conducting outreach programs, classes, or branch Sabbath Schools that would focus on these or other topics of interest to the community.

Some have advertised and conducted a "Saturday Morning Bible Prophecy Class" open to the community with positive results.

Summary

Sabbath Schools that manifest a community friendly presence will show an understanding and sensitivity to what is important to guests. Leaders, as well as regular members, will be sensitive to the mindset of people; to what attracts and what repels. They will strive to use a common language and be ready to apply the Bible to daily living.

