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Woke Schools: Your Opportunity for Christian Outreach

We recently were asked how a Christian should respond to the increasing influence of “woke culture” in today’s public schools. It has been all over the news for some time: “Parents rebel against public school board.” Most parents with school-aged kids have heard enough and formed an opinion. Some don’t care or think the trend is a step forward. Others, perhaps most parents, are at least somewhat concerned.

Many of the troubled parents are likely Christians from one of two categories: (1) some are active in a Christian church; (2) others are probably not active in a local congregation. That second group is expressing what outreach specialists call a “felt need.” They feel the need to protect their children from what they perceive to be an unhealthy atmosphere.

In that second group, there are parents who are “mildly concerned” observers. They aren’t pulling their children out of school, but they are watching carefully. These are families who are “late adopters.” Some will remove their children from public education at a later date. Some will tolerate what makes them uncomfortable and “hope for the best.”

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Tracee consult churches that want to effectively reach unchurched people through meeting needs and training God’s people in mission principles that work. God wants lost people to be found and brought into your church.

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Others are “early adopters.” Some are already church members. Based on national statistics, just over half are not involved in a local congregation. Their openness to “find a place for our kids that we can trust” provides an outreach opportunity for churches that (1) have facilities not used during the week, and (2) have learned the mission strategies God uses to provide a “safe place,” which also becomes an effective mission for Jesus Christ. This document addresses this second dimension. It is the greatest challenge and opportunity for many local churches.

Philosophy of Ministry

The most important strategic issues is clarity of purpose. In our ministry with almost 2,000 US congregations from 78 denominations and also from nondenominational and independent churches, there are many that have educational ministries beyond the context of the weekend worship structure. They include preschool, day care, grade school, and high school ministries.

Some of these educational efforts are primarily designed for members of the sponsoring church. Others include children from several local churches. A large portion of them also include those who are unchurched.

Our research shows that a large portion—around 80 percent—of these ministries have no serious, well-developed philosophy of ministry directed toward “gentle nurturing, intentional outreach to the students and families who are unchurched—with the Jesus-goal to make disciples.”

A mission-directed philosophy of ministry, to make disciples, is only effective when it provides (1) clarity of mission among all of the workers involved; (2) outreach as a priority; and (3) discipleship as the goal. This discipleship approach must be owned by (1) the church staff; (2) the leaders of the congregation; and (3) anyone involved in a preschool, day care, grade school, or high school. That includes the custodians, cooks, and groundskeepers.

The philosophy of ministry also articulates the target of mission. It is not just little Suzy in day care. The opportunity is to introduce mom, dad, Suzy’s siblings, and often grandparents to Jesus. This effort is not simply lip service. The goal is always to make disciples. This is not an invitation to be belligerent. It is a measurement of effectiveness. It is based on Jesus’ clarity of the mission of the church. This philosophy of ministry provides focus and intentionality to every aspect of ministry. Sadly, it is often lacking in many outreach ministries. It results in a mediocre “Kingdom harvest”—to quote Jesus’ philosophy of ministry.

Training Leaders: An Example

“Leaders” in a church-based day care, preschool, grade school, or high school, as well as church staff and congregational leaders—as mentioned earlier—all need to be trained in some mission basics.

My first placement as a pastor was in an inner-city church in Detroit, Michigan. In the decade before I arrived, the church had declined by 67 percent. The block-long building had a large gymnasium and numerous classrooms that were filled for Sunday school—30 years before my arrival. When I began ministry there, the church consisted of 300 worshippers, mostly older people. The children’s Sunday school totaled about 25 children.

The surrounding community was changing from all white to almost 40 percent black. Our white neighbors were elderly. Most of the black residents had several children who were grade school age or younger.

My seminary training was thorough: four years of college, four years of seminary, and three years of graduate school, where I earned a PhD in theology. To be honest, with all that training, I knew almost nothing that could help my church reach that community. After a year and a half of trying, the church was still declining. We averaged 50 funerals a year and gained no black members from our neighborhood.

One day, I received some junk mail that described a training mechanism for pastors. The training was led by American pastors who had served as career missionaries in various countries around the world. They had all been trained in the discipline of missiology. They had come back to the United States to train pastors to be missionaries to the American scene. I wondered, “Could this teach me how to help my church reach the people in our community?”

The leaders of my congregation were desperate—watching their church age and decline. They allowed me to take the training, two weeks at a time, three times a year, for two and a half years. I paid for everything myself, but they covered the church each time I was away.

Before every two-week training session, I had to prepare by reading numerous assigned books that taught missiology—the biblical concepts of mission. I immediately started influencing the members of my church with the new insights of missionary training.

One of the great strategies I learned in mission school was how to approach unchurched people. Prior to that, I had trained a group of our members to reach out to our community. I used a program of evangelism. We learned how to provide a “Gospel presentation” to others. There were no results.

One of the many biblical dynamics I learned in mission school was how to approach people to introduce them to Jesus. It was a breakthrough concept: Instead of telling them about Jesus (at first) or inviting them to church, effective missionaries learn about the “felt needs” that exist among the people you are trying to reach.

So, instead of visiting our neighbors with an agenda to “give them Jesus” or get them to “come to church,” we asked, “What do people in this community need?” Over and over again, we heard: “We need a good education system for our children. We want them to be able to go to college someday.”

We heard this so often, I decided to visit our local grade school and talk with the principal. What he said shocked me: “The Detroit public school system is greatly challenged. Our budgets are strained. Our teachers have 35 or more students per classroom. They can hardly teach. Mostly, they just babysit.”

“What if our church were to start an elementary school only one block away?” I asked the principal. He said, “I will personally contribute money to your effort!”

A year and a half later, we raised a significant amount of money to repurpose our Sunday school and pass code for a “public” school. We hired teachers for preschool through eighth grade. We trained every teacher in the basics of missiology. We had no idea what God would do. When the school year started, our school was filled! Almost all of our students were from black families. It

was the beginning of dramatic outreach and change.

Today, 30 years later, that church is full, thriving, and 100 percent black with a black pastor. I know—I recently worshipped there, and I was the only white person in the crowd! The pastor introduced me, and the congregation applauded. And all heaven rejoiced!

What happened? We met a felt need. We became missionaries. God brought the increase. We trained our teachers, leaders, and church staff in mission principles.

Your Opportunity

Your church may not be in the inner city. Today, it doesn't matter. If your church has the facilities for a day care, preschool, grade school, or high school, the woke challenge many parents perceive is a massive opportunity for your church. There are a few things you should pray about:

- 1) Not every public school has “liberal” school board members who may disturb you.
- 2) Nevertheless, many parents—even those who are not yet active Christians—are concerned about influences in our increasingly secular nation.
- 3) Many churches are declining and “aging” because the country has become more of a mission field while most pastors get little or no mission training. We have somehow adopted the lie that the “mission field” is *only* “over there” somewhere.
- 4) If you have facilities that are primarily empty during the week, think about how they can be utilized for a day care, preschool, grade school, or high school.
- 5) While your church is not in the “business” to obtain money, if you *meet a felt need*, people will pay you for the opportunity.
- 6) Don't even think about it if you just want to “fill the building.” Long-term, it will fail if it is not founded on mission principles.
- 7) If God is calling you to this serious need for what many consider “safe care” and education for their children, make sure that everyone involved gets mission training.

—That, God will honor. And your church will grow!