

Should Church Housed Schools be Christian?

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Dr. Kathy L. Dawson

Columbia Theological Seminary

A School Portrait

The signs on the church were in four languages: Mandarin, English, Taiwanese, and Korean. The four services in this Southern California church from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination were performed in each of these languages every Sunday in the order listed. The total membership of this light-colored stucco church was 151 last year. Christian education (when it happens) addresses about 23 people, but the last time that attendance was reported was 1999. This is not atypical of smaller churches within mainline denominations, especially those in changing neighborhoods as this one is in the suburbs of Los Angeles.

Behind the church on this weekday can be heard giggles and conversations of young children. With much acreage this particular school can have two playgrounds, one recently designed with \$30,000 of new climbing equipment and shaded table area for activities, another a fenced in yard with trees, grass, and balls in it. Today the four and five-year old children have chosen to play in the second yard. They are running and throwing balls to one another, oblivious to the teachers and visitor in their midst.

In the classroom a teacher works with the younger children, all seated around a table. They are learning language skills, naming different things that transport people. For some this language is different than the language of their home. Some are very vocal, wanting to answer for everyone else. Others sit quietly staring down at the table, appearing to hope that the teacher will not call on them. She affirms each according to his or her ability and all accumulate a collection of cars, trains, and boats with which to play as the teacher calls on each in turn.

The director of this school speaks of the changing neighborhood during her tenure. She has been with the school for more than fifteen years. The recent construction of a Buddhist temple has brought many new families to the area. Most of her 50-75 families are Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian, and Korean. Very few have ties to this church or to the Christian faith.

The motto of the school is "We teach your child to think." Their curriculum is designed around the five principles of the High/Scope approach: active learning, positive adult-child interactions, a child-friendly learning environment, a consistent daily routine, and team-based child assessment. These principles are typical of many early childhood programs regardless of setting. What sets this school apart from many of its secular counterparts is a later paragraph in the Parent Handbook:

As a Christian School we strive to provide an environment in which children can experience and learn of the love of Jesus for them personally, and to delight in the wonder of God's creations. Once each week the children and staff join the Pastor in the sanctuary for a 15 minute worship service consisting of songs, story, and prayer. Additionally, we say grace at every meal and talk informally during the day about God's work in our lives.

Should this church-housed program be Christian?

Methodology

We will return to this question by the end of this paper. It is one of many that propelled this author into recent research on the relationships between such schools and the churches on whose property they are housed. This particular research project relied on mixed methods of electronic survey and qualitative interviews and observations of specific programs. The scope was much broader than this particular question, but the data relating to what of a spiritual nature was going on in these programs will serve to inform our exploration of an answer.

The first part of the research consisted of an electronic survey of all Presbyterian (U.S.A.) churches with emails listed on the denominational website. 7,300 electronic surveys using EListen software were sent with 6,681 being valid functioning addresses. Of these latter, 849 electronic surveys were completed and submitted. Thus, this shows a response rate of approximately 13%.¹ A blank facsimile of this survey can be found at the conclusion of this paper [Appendix A]. Questions explored the many ways that congregations and schools might be related to each other with space given for other models to be shared. Explicit and implicit Christian teachings and practices were also explored. This latter will be utilized in our present discussion.

The second method of research was a focused day visit to 20 programs around the country affiliated with Presbyterian (U.S.A.) churches. These schools were housed in ten states: Alabama, Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Most were chosen either because they had received the Sarah Hill Brown Award in Early Childhood Education from Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia or because they had received child advocacy grant money from the Presbyterian denomination in the early 1990s. Two programs were chosen because they are nationally known for providing workshops on church/school relations and Christian curriculum.

The author visited each of these programs for a day, interviewing the director and church staff at each location, and collecting any handbooks or policy statements developed. Observations of classes were part of the visit in most cases and attendance at Christian lessons or chapel as possible. Notes from each visit were typed into text files and coded via HyperResearch software for easy comparison.

It was felt that the combination of these methods would give both a broad picture of church/school relations in this mainline denomination and would allow the particular stories of individual congregations and schools to be heard. This researcher is grateful for the hospitality of all of these programs and churches and looks forward to the opportunity to hear the stories of others.

¹ Even though 10% is considered a good return for survey research, I am happy that the Presbyterian Child Advocacy Network (PCAN) has agreed to fund a question on the annual report that all Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations are required to submit. Thus within a year, we should have an even more comprehensive picture of the number and location of church-housed schools.

Findings

Of the 849 survey churches, 315 or approximately 37% house one or more weekday programs for children between the ages of zero and six. The churches, which house these programs are predominantly of European descent as are the majority of churches in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination. The program families tend to be slightly more diverse than the congregations themselves with 89% of congregations of European ancestry having the same ancestry as the dominant group within their school. 12% of schools indicated "other" as their choice for ancestry. In most cases this was due to having no dominant ancestry with a real mix of participants.

This block of over three hundred churches, then serve as a basis for the remaining queries regarding the spiritual nature of these programs. 63% of these programs consider their school to be a ministry of the churches in which they are housed. Another 20% have formed separate non-profit corporations, but still consider themselves attached to the churches. The remaining 17% are totally separate programs that rent space from their host congregations.

What sort of connection do these schools have with actual members of the congregation in which they are housed? One third of the directors of these programs were church members. A slightly lower percentage of teachers in the program were members of the congregation. A slightly higher percentage of congregational members volunteered to help in the school. By far the greatest participation of church members was in a governing capacity as members of the school advisory board. By far the least participation was among the students of the school as baptized children of the congregation.

Chart 1- Church/School Member Relations

Director is a church member	36%
Some teachers are church members	32%
Church members volunteer in school	38%
Church members serve on advisory board	76%
Some children are baptized members of congregation	19%

The spiritual curriculum of these programs takes many forms. The most prominent practice within these programs was the celebration of religious holidays. Two thirds of programs who celebrate religious holidays, confine this to days of the Christian year. The others celebrate holidays of other traditions as well. Second to the celebration of holidays is the recitation of prayers before meals or snack times. These tend to be predominantly, but not exclusively Christian. Explicit Christian education, including the telling of Bible stories in the classroom was the next most frequent occurrence, followed by regular chapel services.

Chart 2- Explicit Religious Education

<u>Explicit Practice</u>	<u>Total Programs</u>	<u>Christian Only</u>
Celebrating religious holidays	88%	67%
Prayers before snack or meal	81%	78%
At least monthly classroom Christian education	63%	100%
At least monthly chapel	38%	90%

This is a summary of the explicit religious education practices from the survey. However, numbers alone do not speak to the diversity of different approaches within these practices that are reflected in these programs. Taking the classroom Christian education as an example, resources for this enterprise ran from conservative non-denominational curriculum resources to self-created lessons using children's Bibles and storybooks to daily Godly Play lessons in a separate classroom set aside for spiritual development. Some teachers had also developed ritual openings and closings to the day's education that involved scripture. Of the explicit Christian education practices, this classroom time was the most likely to be done by program staff rather than relying on the pastor, church educator or volunteer congregation members.

The survey and interviews also concentrated on implicit spiritual practices that could be classified as Christian. The most prominent of these among the surveyed churches were: hospitality to those who are different from us, singing about our faith and life, and forgiveness. Even some of the programs visited who initially said they did no religious teaching, could see themselves somewhere in this list of practices. They tended to call this being attuned to children's moral development rather than linking these practices to religious beliefs.

Chart 3- Implicit Christian Spiritual Practices

Hospitality to those different	73%
Singing our faith and life	64%
Forgiveness	64%
Listening to children's faith expressions	58%
Offering resources to parents on topics including spiritual development	54%
Praying for others	54%
Shaping the community through rituals	48%
Approaching grief and loss with hope of new life	35%

From the visits the author learned of other spiritual practices that were not a part of the electronic survey. One church offered daily morning prayer with the whole program staff before the start of each work day. Another talked about the efforts that their pastor made in meeting program families, who then sought him out for pastoral counseling in times of need. One associate pastor was offering a weekly Bible study for program parents. One resource center director was taking Christian books and resources monthly to the school housed

in her local church. Several churches were involved cooperatively with their respective churches in local and global mission projects.

Two schools stand out as having particularly strong ties to their churches' Sunday Christian education programs. One of these was in Florida and the other in Illinois. They also happen to be the only two of the churches visited that are using Godly Play as their Christian education curriculum. The church in Florida sent the Director of Christian Education and the Preschool Director to be trained together in this model. The church and the school also pooled money from their budgets to purchase the needed resources and then shared the materials between both programs. The church in Illinois had a slightly less connected approach in that they had program families each take one of the stories and either make or buy the kit. These materials were housed in a room set aside for spiritual development that was also used for this purpose on Sunday mornings. In both of these cases, there were higher percentages of church families as program participants than in the larger sample from the survey. Thus, the cultures of school and church were more homogenous.

Interpretation of Portrait

But, what can we say of our opening school portrait, chosen because of its heterogeneous mixing of races and faith traditions? Here there is little connection between church membership and school families. The surrounding neighborhood is dominated by a faith other than Christianity. Should this church-housed school be Christian?

The conclusion of this author is that the simple answer to that question is "yes." The complexity of this answer becomes—how? As noted above the parent handbook of this school already contains the answer as this particular program sees it. While, emphasizing the basic academic needs of young children, they still claim their identity as being a part of the ministry of the church in which they are housed. The specific practices that form their identity as they see it are weekly chapel services, prayer before meals, and informal conversation about faith. They also tie beliefs to these practices by mentioning a foundation of the "love of Jesus Christ" and "wonder for God's creations." This speaks of a theology of practice grounded in the doctrines of creation and incarnation.

With such an explicit statement in the parent handbook, they have left the choice of whether this is appropriate religious education up to the parents' discretion. Some schools worry that such an explicit statement might drive away potential families, thus creating a financial crisis for the program. This has not been the case with this school, because of their reputation in the community for developmentally appropriate academic excellence in a loving environment.

The director encourages parents to attend the chapel service, if they have any concerns about the content of the faith being expressed or simply want to know more about the beliefs of the church in which the school is housed. She tells the story of one Buddhist mother who did this on a regular basis and told her that even though her faith remained Buddhist that she had learned a lot of moral lessons from the service that she attributed to making her a better parent.

Conclusions

Should all church-housed schools be Christian? There is certainly much research being done in the area of early childhood spirituality to indicate that the spiritual development of the child should be addressed along with all the other ways children this age are growing and changing.² Not all schools or churches would make the same decision that this church has made about how to live out their Christian identity, but as we have seen above the majority of schools do express their spiritual nurture in some way.

Part of what drove this research was a field trip made to some local church-housed schools in Georgia with students in the Preschool Religious Education course at Columbia Theological Seminary. In two cases, we were told that the school did not do explicit Christian teaching, because of accreditation or state licensing. In a deep reading of these guidelines both national and by state, the author found that there is nothing written that forbids religious curriculum. However, some programs may still choose to do no religious teaching, because of their mission to diverse families and a commitment to anti-bias curriculum. *The World of Difference*, published by the major preschool accrediting organization--National Association for the Education of Young Children or N.A.E.Y.C.—contains a selection of essays on accommodating religious diversity, while still addressing the spiritual needs of children.

The onus is on each school to discuss this issue in staff meetings, parent conferences, advisory board meetings and by the governing body of the church. Through these conversations and possible cooperative mission or research opportunities, the church, home, and school have a common goal—to address the spiritual needs of children. By making this the focal point, the ties between these entities can be strengthened and the faith of those involved in the discussion can also be nourished.

Even though this particular study focused on church-housed schools within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination, the author hopes that others will explore these programs within their own denominations or religious traditions. Young children grow in body, mind, **and spirit**. Should we not as religious communities find faithful ways where those that attend weekday schools housed in our midst can do so?

References

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- Dawson, Kathy. "When Does Faith Begin?" in *Children Among Us: Foundations in Children's Ministry*, Cassandra Williams, editor. Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2004.

² Much of this most recent work in child spiritual development is being collected by the Search Institute in their latest initiative funded by the Templeton Foundation. The two-volume initial set of research is listed in the references to this paper. Additional resources may be found at <http://spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org>.

- Dawson, Kathy and Shin-Kyung Park. "Reformed Spirits: Christian Practices in Presbyterian Preschools in South Korea and the United States," in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*, Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, and Eugene C. Roehkepartain, editors. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
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- Roehlkepartain, Eugene C. , Pamela Ebstyn King, Linda Wagener, and Peter Benson, *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006.
- www.pcusa.org – Provided demographic information for the church portrait

Appendix A

Blank Survey-Facsimile of EListen version PCS (Presbyterian Childcare Survey)

Name of church:

Name of presbytery:

ZIP Code of church:

Approximate number of church members:

(Choose one)

under 100

100-299

300-800

over 800

Dominant racial ancestry of congregation:

(Choose one)

Latino

African

European

Asian

Native American

Other

If other please describe the racial ancestry of the congregation:

Does your church house a weekday program(s) for children between the ages of 0 and 6?

(Choose one)

Yes

No

If so, what year was the program first established?

Does your program consist of a full-day day care?

(Choose one)

Yes

No

Does your program consist of a half-day preschool?

(Choose one)

Yes

No

Does your program consist of a parents morning out?

(Choose one)

Yes

No

Does your program consist of some other type?

(Choose one)

Yes

No

Please describe your program:

What is your program's official status? [Mark all that apply]

(Choose all that apply)

Religious exemption, but registered

State licensed

Accredited through N.A.E.Y.C.

Exempt from all registration and licensing because of nature of program

Other

Please describe your program's "other" status below:

Dominant racial ancestry of program participants:

(Choose one)

Latino

African

European

Asian

Native American

Other

If other, please describe the racial ancestry of the program participants:

Which best describes your program's relationship to the church in which it is housed?

(Choose one)

- Ministry of the church*
- A separate corporation, but attached to church*
- A totally separate program that leases space in the church*

Which of these ways is your program connected to the physical plant, staff, and membership of the church in which the program is housed? (Mark all that apply)

(Choose all that apply)

- Director is a staff member*
- Director is a church member*
- Program teachers are church members*
- Children are baptized members of church*
- Church members serve as volunteers to program*
- Church members are PRIMARILY the governing board of the program*
- Church members are AMONG members on governing board*
- Congregation offers a reduction in rent or utilities to program*
- Congregation offers space free of charge*
- Congregation periodically recognizes/commissions teaching staff and children during worship*
- Early childhood program tithes money or gifts back to the church annually*

Other connections to the church not mentioned above:

What is the number of program teachers that are church members?

What is the number of children that are baptized members of the church?

What is the number of volunteer church members that serve the program?

Prayers before snack or meal

(Choose all that apply)

- Christian only*
- Faiths represented by children*
- Broad array of different faiths and cultures*

Celebration of religious holidays

(Choose all that apply)

- Christian only*
- Faiths represented by children*
- Broad array of different faiths and cultures*

Chapel Services

(Choose all that apply)

- Christian only*
- Faiths represented by children*
- Broad array of different faiths and cultures*

What is the frequency of your chapel services?

(Choose one)

- daily*
- several times a week*
- one or more times a month*
- Christian holy days*

Who leads your chapel service [mark all that apply]:

(Choose all that apply)

- pastor*
- Christian educator*
- program staff*
- parent volunteers*
- church volunteers (non-parent)*

On average, what is the frequency of explicit Christian education in classroom (including telling of Bible Stories):

(Choose one)

- daily*
- several times a week*
- one or more times a month*
- Christian holy days*
- never*

Who teaches or leads this Christian education [mark all that apply]:

(Choose all that apply)

- pastor*
- Christian educator*
- program staff*
- parent volunteers*
- church volunteers (non-parent)*

What are the curriculum resources used (if any):

What are the Christian spiritual practices used regularly in your program(s) [Mark all that apply]:

(Choose all that apply)

- Listening to children's faith expressions*
- Hospitality to those who are different from us*
- Shaping community by beginning and ending day with same rituals*
- Forgiveness*
- Singing about our faith and life*
- Praying for others*
- Attending to grief and loss with emphasis on hope of new life*
- Offering resources to parents on the development of their children in mind, body, and spirit*
- Other*

Please describe the other Christian spiritual practices:

Is your program detailed and/or linked to the church's website?

(Choose one)

Yes

No

If so, what is church's URL (e.g., www.ctsnet.edu):