

# The Sunday School Experiment

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Evangelism And An Entrepreneur.

When setting out, in the mid-1990s, to investigate the significant decline of children's attendances at Sunday Schools during the post-WWII period in Australia, it became necessary to also confront the profound cultural shifts which had taken place in society during that time. George Miller, filmmaker and producer of the children's movie *Babe* captured some of this in his assertion that 'cinema is now [1995] the most powerful secular religion, and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively, the way they once did in church' (source: Janet Hawley in 'The Hero's Journey', *Good Weekend*, 14 Oct 1995, p.57). Fast forward to 2010 and, for 'cinema', also read 'YouTube', 'MySpace', 'shopping malls', 'computer games'... at least in many urban centres of the world.

There are various strategies that the church has used over time to pass on the Christian faith to children and Sunday School is one of the more enduring models. It was intriguing to revisit the early history of 'the Sunday School experiment' and its propagator, Robert Raikes, through the research of Revd Dr Mark Griffiths in his book *One Generation from Extinction: How the church connects with the unchurched child* (Monarch Books, Oxford 2009). Griffiths' comparative study of early 21st century child evangelism in the UK and Raikes' initial Sunday School model is well worth a read, not least to be reminded that when Raikes started his first Sunday School in 1780, the idea grew rapidly to reach 300,000 unchurched children within five years!

Raikes was an entrepreneur and social reformer, using his own newspaper, *The Gloucester Journal*, to propagate the concept of the Sunday School and to publish teaching materials for it. This, in an era of modernity when, as Griffiths suggests, it is possible that 'the written words of the newspaper were beginning to carry more weight than the preached words of the pulpit' (*One Generation*, p.29). With regards to the methods used in Raikes' early Sunday School, these were heavily influenced by his own philanthropic work in the prisons and his perception about the role which could be played by both literacy and education in 'preventing vice' in the lives of children. He understood that education was a 'currency' of the times. In addition, Raikes encouraged children to influence other children around them and adopted a personal practise of visiting the homes of the children as he interacted with the wider community.

Several questions arise: Do our 21st century Sunday Schools retain the focus on evangelism, outreach and social reform that gave rise to their creation historically? Are the entrepreneurs, experimenters and businesspeople within our 21st century churches engaged in the process of evangelism to children? How can we encourage this kind of vision? How are we, in our evangelism to children, seeking to understand and engage with their whole context, families and culture? If literacy and education were cultural 'currencies' for 18th century children, what are the 'currencies' for children in our context today? How can we incorporate these effectively into our models of evangelism, discipleship and care for children?