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Rev. Hugh H. Harris M. A.^a

^a Assistant Pastor M. E. Church, Evanston, Illinois

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The Grading of a Country Sunday School

REV. HUGH H. HARRIS, M. A.

Assistant Pastor M. E. Church, Evanston, Illinois

However well conceived his theories, every Sunday-school worker who attempts to grade a country school meets with new factors entering into the practical problem; in consequence we are always exchanging notes on methods and are eagerly asking of every new attempt, "How did it succeed?" For this reason I am glad to tell of a somewhat unusual method and what became of it.

The school was a new organization in a small country village. While officially a Methodist Episcopal Sunday-school it enlisted workers of at least five different denominations. The grading began the first day of meeting, the superintendent announcing that each pupil in the primary department ought to know certain things before being promoted to the next grade. To this the older pupils and the teachers gave ready assent. The next step was to define what the test of promotion should be, this outline being agreed upon: First, memory work should constitute the test. Second, it was thought that the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments (short form), the Twenty-third Psalm, and the names of the books of the Bible were to constitute the subject matter. At first consideration this seemed rather severe but upon reflection it was agreed that we were not demanding too much at the completion of two or three years of primary instruction. So far the school had been well enlisted: comparisons had been made between what the Sunday school ought to accomplish and what was being accomplished in the public school of the village, and pupils and teachers had pledged themselves voluntarily to a course of study *for the primary department*.

The next step was an appeal both to the heroic and to the sense of fair play. Ought we to ask of the little ones what we had not mastered for ourselves? It was pointed out that the older pupils could cover the ground in much less time than we had assigned to the kindergarteners; that as rapidly as this work was completed certificates of promotion would be given; that the graduates would be placed in classes by themselves and given a course of study entertaining as well as instructive: that this arrangement would insure self-respect, whereas to leave the school without such a definite plan of action would place it below the standard of excellence of the public school. The response was hearty. The plan was entered upon with enthusiasm. All agreed to become members of the primary department.

Within a month a class of boys and girls was ready for promotion. These were given a series of lessons in the life of Jesus,

each pupil writing, in his own words, a biography of the Saviour, for which the "Life of Jesus Christ Our Lord" furnished an outline. Other classes graduating later took up other lines of study, one class of younger children entering upon the course outlined in "An Introduction to the Bible for Teachers of Children."

The writer was with the school fifteen months only but in that time the foundation was laid for a thoroughly graded course of study. The problem of teacher-training and the equally difficult problem of parental interest and co-operation had both to be met, not by organization, but by personal interview, suggestion, and enthusiasm. The real battle was over as soon as the aroused interest of the children became evident. Such a plan might not work under any except the same conditions. I give it for what it is worth: it is one of the many methods that has worked with success once and is therefore worth trying again.

In the Local Church

Religious education receives a fair share of attention at the Second Baptist Church of St. Louis, the church which under the leadership of Rev. W. C. Bitting, D. D., is now finishing one of the finest church edifices in America. The following notes were clipped from the weekly church calendar. On the Sunday when the first appeared the pastor preached on "Religious Education":

"The offering this morning will be for the support of our morning and afternoon Sunday schools. We hope it will be exceedingly generous. We should like to see the time come when our Church will spend as much money on religious education in connection with the Sunday school as it spends on its church music. Meanwhile let us heartily support the work carried on by our faithful officers and teachers.

"Next autumn it is probable that we shall provide some extra courses in our Sunday School. It is hoped that Miss A. C. Fruchte will have a class in the study of the Bible as literature; Prof. F. W. Shipley of Washington University will have a class in biblical archaeology with special reference to the relation of Old and New Testament history to contemporary and secular history; that Mr. A. L. Abbott will conduct a class for the study of the Bible according to the historical method with special reference to its ethical and religious teachings; and that a competent leader will conduct a class for men for the study of the social significance of the teachings of Jesus. Provisions will be made for a place where these studies can be pursued without interruption during our Sunday School hour. Here is a chance for the best sort of work by all members of our church and the public. All four of these classes ought to be well attended."

1. Life of Jesus Christ Our Lord (junior historical course,) The Young Churchman Co., Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1904.

2. An Introduction to the Bible for Teachers of Children, Chicago, 1904.