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VAN WERT PLAN
OF
WEEK-DAY RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

A Practical Plan for the Rural Field, Large Towns and Small Cities

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INTRODUCTION.

Alfred Noyes, the poet, sees in the present day—

> "A thousand creeds and battle cries,
> A thousand warring social schemes,
> A thousand new moralities,
> And twenty thousand thousand dreams."

One wonders whether these will eventually merge in a great common scheme of practice. Happily "above the tumult and the shouting" is heard, with increasing distinctness, this word: There is hope in the religion of Jesus Christ. The church awakes and takes stock. What does it find? It has missed its greatest opportunity; it has failed to exercise adequately its teaching function with the youth of the land. While the Jewish Church provides for its children one hour of religious instruction a day and the Catholic Church four hours a week, the Protestant Church, by far the largest of the three in the United States, has been content with twenty-six hours a year—not for all its children, but for only one-fourth of them, since half of the Protestant children go to no Sunday School whatever and only half of the other half are regularly present, and most of these are instructed by incompetent teachers.

Dark as the picture is, we need not despair. One notes a nation-wide increase of interest in religious education, and the church is beginning to realize that its job is not completed when the doors are closed on Sunday. How to supplement the work done in the Sunday Schools, is the question before the church today. Some plan for giving religious instruction through the week seems to be the most hopeful solution of the problem. It should be the aim of every community to reach the largest number of its children in the most effective and economical way. If the church does not use its opportunity, it will be easy to predict the future. Benjamin Kidd in his "Science and Power" says, "the mentality of any race can be transformed in one generation by intensive work, especially among the young. Without a change of method on the part of Protestantism it will be the moving pictures rather than the Bible which will leaven the next generation."

"What you would have appear in the life of the next generation, you must put into the public school." That is true, but teaching the Bible in the public school is out of the question. Church and state have been separated, we hope, for all time. Yet any system of education is inadequate which does not provide for the training of the religious nature of childhood, and the church will miss its greatest opportunity if it fails to work out a way of giving religious instruction to the public school children of our country. By putting week-day religious instruction classes close beside the public school, we may not only reach all the children who are reached on Sunday, but we may reach them in a more regular and

efficient way, besides touching many who are not enrolled in any Sunday School.

Various experiments in week-day religious instruction have been made during the past six or eight years. Some of these have been in a denominational way, provision being made for the pupils of a particular church to receive instruction perhaps one afternoon each week after school. Gary, Indiana, was the first city to make the experiment of week-day religious instruction as a community movement, and with an all-day program. An all-day program was possible because of the unique plan of the Gary public schools, where each child has certain hours of the school day that are called play hours. By putting the religious instruction classes close by the public school it was possible to get pupils to come in recreation time for this work. Toledo, Ohio, has worked out a plan whereby pupils of a certain building are excused all at the same time on a certain afternoon each week to go to near-by churches for religious instruction. Evanston and Oak Park, Illinois, and many other places are introducing systems to meet the needs of their communities. But it has fallen to the lot of Van Wert, Ohio, to work out a plan which seems practical for most large towns and small cities, as well as for much of the rural field.

The Van Wert Plan.

In this plan, no pretense is made to originality. In the main it follows the Gary plan, although in adapting the work to the ordinary public school system, and by using school time for the classes, Van Wert has placed the work on a basis that is feasible for the average community, and so economical that smaller communities may dare to venture in a like experiment. The success of the third year in Van Wert warrants the passing on of the main features of the plan to others who are looking for help. The simplicity of the Van Wert plan is one of its strong characteristics. A large city might find it difficult to get the cooperation of the public school for an all-day schedule for classes, but Van Wert school authorities and citizens sensed the value of the work at the start and were willing to arrange for a continuous schedule of classes for the Bible teacher like that of the music or art teacher. This allows a trained teacher to use her full time in the work, thus giving greater unity to the instruction and requiring a minimum of supervision. Moreover, it reduces the liability of poor teaching which may result when many teachers are employed. There is also an economic advantage because the equipment provided for the classes may be used all day, and the expenditure for heat and janitor service may be kept at the lowest possible figure.

I. WEEK-DAY RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES.

1. Van Wert, a Rural Community.

Van Wert, though technically a city, having a population of 8,100, is really a rural community.

What is a rural community? Any community located in the open country or represented by a village or small town. But when we come to communities somewhat larger than villages and small towns it is difficult

to draw the line between the rural and the urban. All agree that population is not the sole determining factor in classifying communities, since some of considerable size are unmistakably rural while others, not so large, have an urban character. This general statement might be made. The Rural Field consists of the farming communities of the nation and all centers of population, regardless of size, which are more dependent on the surrounding country than on manufacture and industry. Van Wert is such a community.

2. Rural and City Problems Compared.

Religious movements, as a rule, make slower progress in the Rural Field than in our cities. There are two major reasons for this. The Rural Field has too many churches, and the population of the country has been decreasing. Most churches in the country are a heritage of an earlier day, when denominationalism was pronounced and when poor roads made long distance church attendance impossible. Denominationalism is not emphasized so much now, and good roads and automobiles have revolutionized travel. Yet many of the small churches of an earlier day are still with us. With most of them life is a struggle under incompetent leadership. What will the outcome be? Quite likely the old law, the survival of the fittest, will continue to operate as in the past.

3. Extension of Week-Day Work in Rural Fields.

The best route for week-day religious instruction to reach the Rural Field seems to be through a county organization. We can best make our thought clear with a concrete case. Van Wert (population 8,100) is the county seat of Van Wert County (population 28,210). There are a number of villages scattered through the county, and several townships have centralized schools. It would be quite practicable for all these to work out a plan whereby a group of teachers could acceptably give the pupils one full hour of religious instruction per week. The support in the case of each school could come from the churches in the territory of the school. This would lead to church co-operation where it is most needed, and would stimulate the centralized school movement, since religious instruction would be impossible in small district schools. The expense for a township school with 300 pupils or more ought not to exceed $1,000 if the school had half the time of the teacher, as the work could be done in the building during school hours. The churches of any township having religious instruction in a centralized school certainly should be able to raise annually the sum of $1,000. The same is true of a village having a high school. It should be easy for the village churches like the township churches to support the work.

There is one difficulty in many sections of the open country, having centralized schools, and in possibly a majority of our villages, viz., they are overchurched. This usually means three things: denominational jealousies, incompetent ministerial leadership and financial inability. Churches that are struggling with might and main just to keep alive are not in a position to help finance religious instruction for the public schools or any other good movement. The only way out of the difficulty is for the strong churches, if there be such, to underwrite the enterprise, as is done in Van Wert, where ten of the sixteen Protestant churches are behind the work, the others being too small and weak to render financial assistance. In case a number of villages and centralized schools in a county

should undertake week-day religious instruction, it would be advisable to have a trained director on part or full time that the work be kept on a high plane.

4. Necessity of Co-operation.

In giving our youth religious instruction our churches must co-operate or suffer the consequences. It is a great mistake that in the past we have allowed sectarianism to block the progress of so many good things. During the period of elementary training, there is absolutely no reason why children should be separated into denominational groups for their religious instruction. Any community which does not believe this is blocking the way of one of the foremost movements of the time.

Van Wert settled this problem in the Ministerial Association at the time the week-day work had its origin, and no word of sectarian strife has ever been spoken since the movement started. The ministers were broad-minded and agreed that they had plenty of opportunity at other times to indoctrinate the children of their congregations in the things peculiar to their own denominations, and that the week-day work should be free from sectarian bias. It has always been the aim in the class-room to stress the fundamentals upon which all may agree, and if a question arises which might entangle the class in an unprofitable or sectarian discussion, the pupil is referred to his own pastor for an answer to his question.

In a community of the size of Van Wert, with many rather small and weak churches located a considerable distance from a school building, it would be impossible from a financial standpoint to provide week-day religious instruction for all children in their own churches. A fine spirit of harmony among the churches has enabled Van Wert to work out a plan which conserves the time and strength of the teaching force, gets the best results with pupils because of the work being done in the school buildings during school time, and keeps the expense down to $2.50 a pupil for one year. Co-operation alone will win in this great movement.

II. ORGANIZATION.

1. How Van Wert Started.

The idea of providing week-day religious instruction for the children of Van Wert's public schools originated in the city's Ministerial Association. For months, during the winter and spring of 1917-18, investigations were conducted. Experts in week-day religious instruction were called to Van Wert. At the proper time the superintendent of the public schools and the board of education were taken into the confidence of the Ministerial Association. Finally, when all agreed that week-day religious instruction would be a good thing for our public schools, a meeting of select laymen representing most of the churches (April, 1918) was called, at which after a long discussion a committee was chosen to do three things: (1) raise funds to provide religious instruction for the first six grades of our schools, (2) make arrangements with the board of education for the use of the public school buildings, and (3) select a competent teacher for the work. These three things were done by the committee, which some weeks before the opening of the fall term of 1918 had raised

$1,600, had secured three of the four ward buildings for the conduct of the work, and had employed a competent teacher. One ward building was so crowded that it was necessary to carry on the work in a near-by church. The work of the first year was successfully conducted by the committee of organization.

2. Board of Religious Education.

By the close of the first year it was found that there were ten of Van Wert's churches actively behind the work. There are six other churches (not including the Catholic Church) in Van Wert, but these are small and financially weak. So the committee of the first year was expanded into a Board of Religious Education to carry on the work permanently. This Board consisted of thirty members, the pastor and two lay members (one woman) from each of the co-operating churches. From this number an executive committee of seven was chosen, consisting of the three officers and four others. The officers were the regulation president, secretary, and treasurer. The organization was made as simple as possible so that there might be no waste of time or energy. There was a great demand, at the end of the first year, for the extension of the work into some of the more advanced grades, but the times were not propitious for money raising, and the Board concluded that it would be better thoroughly to establish the work in the first six grades rather than to expand more rapidly than funds and public sentiment might justify.

3. Financial Plan.

At the end of the second year the Board of Religious Education placed the work on a permanent basis. The following is the plan:

Each of the ten co-operating churches agreed to assume such percentage of the total annual cost of the work as the aggregate subscriptions of its members during the first two years of the work bore to the sum of the expenses of the first two years. Each church also agreed to place the amount needed from year to year in its church budget. In order that this important feature of the Van Wert Plan may be perfectly clear to the reader, we will give the names of the ten co-operating churches, the amounts they contributed during the second year, and their respective percentages. We will add a classification of the pupils with reference to the church membership or non-church membership of their parents.

Churches.	Contributions.	Percentages.	Pupils.
First Methodist	$ 550.00	30	207
Presbyterian	500.00	28	58
Lutheran	200.00	11	72
Christian	100.00	5	76
United Brethren	100.00	5	78
Evangelical	75.00	4	41
Baptist	50.00	3	37
First Friends	50.00	3	68
Second Friends	25.00	2	32
Second Methodist	25.00	2	33
Other Churches and Non-Church Members	125.00	7	53
Total	$1,800.00	100	755
Pupils affiliated with no church			95
Pupils not electing the work			130
			980

III. INSTRUCTION.

1. Equipment.

Van Wert has four ward public school buildings. In two of the buildings, which happen to be far away from churches, there has been a vacant room each year since the religious instruction work started. In one other building there has been an available room part of the time. In the central building, which is always overcrowded, the classes are taken to a church just across the street. The laws of Ohio make it legal to rent school buildings for other than school purposes if seven responsible citizens sign a petition requesting the school board to grant such permission. A petition with the requisite number of signers is at hand, and the Board of Religious Education stand ready to pay for the use of the public school rooms used, should the school board ever submit a bill. However, the public school board are sympathetic with the movement, and are ready to give assistance to the project in any way that is legal for them to do. Whatever equipment in the way of desks, chairs, and tables is not needed for the regular public school work has generously been loaned for the religious instruction classes. This has helped very materially in lessening the expense of the work, and it has also been proved that the classes held in the school buildings, where there is a school atmosphere, do better work than the classes conducted out of the school buildings. Moreover, there is a saving of time between classes, and less cause for discipline, when the work is done in a school building.

In some communities it would not be possible to obtain the use of rooms in school buildings. The next most available buildings are the churches. In either school or church, the resourceful teacher should have little difficulty in securing for the work reasonably satisfactory equipment. To demand ideal equipment, essential as good equipment is to successful work, might prove an element of discouragement at the start. With a good teacher demonstrating from day to day the value of the work, the problem of equipment will solve itself. While some equipment may wait, Bibles for all pupils, maps, crayolas and plasteline are indispensable, even at the beginning.

2. Time and Schedules.

Religious instruction is too important a thing to be crowded into one day a week, so no apology need be given for taking school time for the work. There may be weight in the argument that the school day is overcrowded with subjects presented to the mind of the child. However, a comparison of values ought to give a right of way for the Bible.

Perhaps because it was a new venture to use school time for religious instruction, and also because most of the periods in the elementary grades were thirty minutes long, it was decided to start the work in Van Wert with two half-hour lessons each week. Since most of the classes have been held in the public school buildings, thus using almost no time for a change of classes to and from the Bible room, much has been accomplished even in the short half-hour lessons. If the classes have to be taken out of the building, it would be advisable to secure permission for forty-five minute periods, and of course two hour periods each week would be quite ideal. It would depend upon the community, whether that could be brought about or not. If half-hour periods are used, the teaching must be

intensive, everything must be in absolute readiness for lessons, and no detracting things must be allowed to creep into the precious short period.

In arranging a schedule for classes, the public school should be given choice of time for each grade as far as possible. A cordial, friendly spirit of co-operation with the public school teachers and officials will do much to help work out problems together. In small communities where one teacher does the most of the teaching, of course she must plan her time economically or time will be wasted going from one building to another during school time. A continuous program is essential to use the time of the teacher to best advantage.

If the public school teachers prefer it, half of two grades are taken together for the Bible lessons, thus leaving the other half of the grades with the public school teachers; then sections are reversed. The public school teacher can utilize the time with half her class to do more individual work. This plan involves a minimum loss of time from the regular school work, though in cases where pupils go out of the school building for their Bible work it disturbs the pupils more because of the coming and going of the two sections. As the curriculum is so planned that two grades may be taught together, it makes no difference to the Bible teacher whether she teaches half of two grades or one whole grade at a time, so it has been the policy in Van Wert to allow the public school teachers choice in this matter.

3. Teachers.

It has been estimated that 85 per cent of the efficiency of the school depends upon the teacher. If this is the case, great care should be taken in the selection of teachers. It goes without saying that no one but a consecrated Christian should be given the task of training the most important side of a child's nature. All the instruction should be of a high grade so as to command the respect of the public school and the intelligent people of the community. It would seem desirable that the leader of this work should be a trained person, but carefully selected local helpers can perform a very valuable service and can often be secured for part time for a compensation.

4. Curriculum.

Because of the fact that the week-day work is still in its pioneer stage, there is not much choice as yet in the way of available lesson material adapted to such work. Several publishing houses are working on courses of study. Van Wert is using the Gary Leaflets published by the Abingdon Press, 150 Fifth Avenue, New York, and information regarding them may be had at that address. Four years of the course are now on the market, and four years more are on the press. The lessons are proving to be very teachable, and the handwork is a joy to the pupils. Nearly all the lessons are from Biblical material, although there are occasional missionary or extra-Biblical topics introduced.

No direct correlation with the courses of the public school has been attempted in the Gary Leaflets, but it is desirable and helpful for the Bible teacher to keep in touch with what the pupils are doing in public school, and wherever possible through the religious work's relation to geography or history help the pupil to see that the places and people in the Bible are real places and real people

5. Typical Class Period.

Each class period is begun with a short devotional service, usually consisting of a song, a prayer, and sometimes the recitation of some scripture that has been memorized. Hymns, memory texts, psalms, and other choice passages of scripture are learned as time permits. Through Bible drills the pupils are taught to handle the Bible, and they are encouraged to find and study some of their memory work in their Bibles at home.

Expressional work is provided for each lesson, the younger classes usually coloring a picture on their handwork page, the older grades answering questions, or writing something to fix in memory the main points of the lesson. Sometimes, with the half-hour period, there is not time both to teach the story and do the handwork. If such is the case, the handwork is done at the next class period, and more time is taken for the memory work when no story is given. Pupils are encouraged to give, and to help missionary and other good causes through their own churches, Sunday Schools and Mission Bands.

6. Class Management.

The class period must be guarded against interruptions and detracting influences if good results are to be obtained. Pupils should be taught to come into the Bible room in an orderly fashion, or to march from the school building to the church or building where classes are held without disturbing the public school or the public on the way. If this is insisted upon, the pupils will drop into a reverent mood and be ready for their devotions in a moment of time. Good discipline must be insisted upon wherever the class is, or the cause is lost. Too much emphasis can not be put upon this point. Classes soon appreciate this, for they become so interested in the lessons that they are ready to frown upon any disturbance which robs them of the precious moments in the Bible room. In the selection of teachers it is all important that only such persons be chosen as can and will maintain good order. A disorderly class will command the respect neither of the pupils, the public school teacher, nor the public in general.

7. Credit.

No credit for the Bible work has so far been given in Van Wert through the public schools. As the work has not yet extended beyond the sixth grade, it has not seemed necessary in order to maintain good interest and effort on the part of the pupil. It has been considered doubtful in Van Wert if anything would be gained in the elementary grades by the additional work that would be required to carry out a system of credits, with classes large and periods too short to use the question and answer method of instruction. Because of the fact, also, that one teacher has carried the largest part of the work of instruction, it has not been thought wise to use time and strength in a doubtful effort. When the time comes that the work can be extended into higher grades, a system of public school credits will have to be introduced.

8. Co-operation with Public School.

Ever since the work started in Van Wert there has been a fine spirit of co-operation between the Bible teachers and the superintendent, prin-

cipals, and teachers of the public schools. The public school is interested in the Bible work, and has always stood ready to co-operate. Little matters of discipline have been worked out together, and the public school teachers have encouraged their pupils in the Bible work, and have cheerfully listened to things the pupils have wanted to report as they have come up in the regular school work. This splendid co-operation has contributed its share to the success of week-day religious instruction in Van Wert.

1. Growth of the Work.

IV. VALUES OBTAINED.

The third year of the experiment is well under way. The work has thus far been offered only in the first six grades of school. The first year 775 pupils elected the Bible study. This was 81 per cent of the number enrolled in the public school. The second year 86 per cent availed themselves of the opportunity, making an enrollment of 850. The third year started with 827, or 82 per cent of the pupils in the first six grades. The slight decrease in enrollment this year is due to the fact that the pupils were asked to pay fifty cents each for their work books. Note books were provided for those not able to purchase them. The first two years everything was furnished absolutely free. The fact that the enrollment is almost as good as last year, in spite of the small tax put upon the pupils, shows that parents have seen the value of the lessons.

The average attendance for the three years has been 90 per cent of the monthly enrollment. This regularity in attendance would compare very favorably with that of the average Sunday School for the same length of time. It is worthy of attention also that instruction has been given to about ninety children each year who are not enrolled in any Sunday School.

The director puts in the full week in teaching the same as a public school teacher. The first year she was able to reach all the classes twice each week without assistance. Since that time a competent local woman has taught from four to six periods each week for a compensation.

2. Effect on the Sunday Schools.

Teachers in the various Sunday Schools of the city testify that pupils are more interested in their work on Sunday than before they had the week-day work. This is partly due to the fact that they know more about the Bible in a general way. They can handle and use the book more intelligently, and they have come to love the stories as they have become better acquainted with them.

3. Results in the Home.

Mothers have frequently borne witness to the fact that their children are trying to exemplify in their daily lives the truths and principles of their religious instruction. The superintendent of the Associated Charities of Van Wert reports that mothers in the homes ministered to by this organization speak in warm praise of the work because their children are more helpful in the home since they have attended Bible classes, and in many ways their conduct is improved. The children ask for help at home

in finding memory work they are trying to commit with the result that many Bibles have been dusted and put into use. The children are also using some of the prayers they have learned in Bible class.

4. Benefits to the Community.

Anything that serves to bring the churches and the community together to work for the good of all is a benefit to the community as well as to the churches. Week-day religious instruction puts high ideals before the community, and the effort to maintain and support such an enterprise deepens the interest in a high standard of citizenship and a balanced type of allround education.

At the close of the second year of week-day work, an evening demonstration, held in the largest church in the city, gave an appreciative audience an idea of the scope of the teaching being done. The program was enthusiastically received. The same week a display of the handwork done by the pupils during the year was put in a large store window on Main street. Good results were seen from both efforts to bring the work more forcibly to the minds of the public.

V. A FORWARD LOOK.

1. Van Wert a Demonstration.

What Van Wert has done, other communities may do. The plan under which Van Wert is organized and carrying on its work is not complex. Its simplicity is one of the strongest arguments for it. It has machinery enough with which to do its work, but no unnecessary cogs. No energy is wasted in winding "red tape." Supervision is reduced to the minimum. There has been only a small outlay for equipment and incidental expenses, the money given for the work being largely used for the actual instruction of the pupils.

Perhaps the greatest contribution which Van Wert can make to the movement, is to show how simply the work can be done when the churches of a community pull together, and when the public school co-operates. Elaborate plans of organization tend to discourage people in small communities so that they will not attempt the work. It is hoped that Van Wert's experience may give courage to others.

2. The Future of Rural Religious Education.

That there is a future for rural religious education goes without saying. The very large city and the small rural community present the greatest problems. But large towns and small cities ranging from 5,000 to 25,000 population where a good percentage of the people are Protestant, should be fruitful fields for experiments. Through the co-operation of the churches in communities of this size, as also in the Rural Field with its villages and centralized schools, it ought to be easy to introduce the work. No finer piece of home missionary work could be undertaken.

As the tree grows from the center out it marks its growth by the addition of rings. May we not expect the rural week-day religious education movement to expand in like manner? From Van Wert, the center, our hope is that week-day religious instruction will extend to the villages and centralized schools of the county, in time demanding a county organization with county supervision. This ideal will some day be realized.

APPENDIX

In response to continued demands for copies of the Van Wert Plan, this third edition has been issued. In order to bring it down to date, this little appendix is added.

We are well along in the fourth year of the work in our city. Parents signed cards more promptly at the beginning of this school year than ever before. The enrollment this year is 915, which is 88% of the enrollment of the same grades in the public school. The average per cent of attendance for the year thus far has been 93%. All of these figures show a healthy growth over previous years.

The question has been frequently raised as to the effect of the week-day work on the Sunday Schools. In view of this, it is interesting to note that whereas in previous years reports have shown that there were 90 children in the city taking the week-day work who were not in <u>any</u> Sunday School, this year, with a larger enrollment, the number has been reduced to 58.

There is no evidence that interest is in anyway waning on the part of pupils in their classroom work, and the citizens are continuing to exhibit the same fine harmonious spirit in the support of the work that has been manifested in previous years.

We are hoping to raise more money, for the fifth year, employ another teacher and give the instruction in the seventh and eighth grades.