

## SUNDAY SCHOOL, BARNS AND JESUS

### REST STOP #1: What's A Barn Got To Do With It?

The barn is why we bought this farm. The barn and the trees. The 3-story barn nestles into the Kansas sod; the trees canopy much of the yard. We fell in love with the place, were lucky enough to buy it, and then we began asking people who grew up on the farm to tell us about the barn.

We heard about the dairy stanchions in the lower level, the big fork and rope that brought hay into the hay loft, the specially constructed elevator that moved grain from a pit into the bins high above on the third floor. The stories were intriguing. What a practical showpiece this barn had been!

But we didn't have dairy cows, grain to dump, or loose hay to store. We couldn't use the barn the way it had been used in the past.

Instead, we could build stalls downstairs, and a tack room on the main floor. We could store small square bales in the barn, and add a lean-to for sheep, a tractor, and large round bales. We could modify the old barn into something useful for our post-modern farm.

And there was one more thing. Every year, the barn could share itself with the community for two unique nights.

On a weekend in December, the barn would open itself to a living nativity framed in straw bales. Teenagers in Mary and Joseph costumes, donkeys, llamas, a miniature horse, cow and calf, peafowl, doves, chickens, guineas, ducks, turkeys, sheep, a dog and cat would find their way into the nativity scene. And the people would come to sing carols, hear the reading of the Christmas story, and experience the simple surroundings. Worship would happen in this barn.

Worship in a barn? Ask the nearly 4000 visitors to Night in the Barn if it's possible to worship amidst the mooing of a cow and the musky smell of sheep. The answer might surprise the farmer who built this barn, but then, it wouldn't be the first time a barn sheltered a spiritual serendipity.

### REST STOP #2: Sunday School Survival

Things are not going the way we want with our high school Sunday school class. What we want is for youth to show up, every Sunday. We want them to come eagerly, with interest, happy to participate. If they want to bring snacks for the rest of the class and a special treat for the teacher, that's even better.

But it's not happening. We have a potential of approximately 15 students, and typical attendance is 4-5. We've tried different things—videos, different teachers, creative curriculum. We even played our version of the Survivor Game—people didn't get voted off but there was a \$100 reward at the end. Three students showed up for the grand finale.

All is not lost. One thing we've tried is to visit congregations of another denomination or faith. A dozen youth showed up to visit an African-American congregation; another trip to take in a Jewish service brought out twelve teens as well. The same number of youth showed up to watch and discuss the video "Bruce Almighty" and eat lunch at the home of one of the kids. Getting away together seems to work.

We have more plans to get away, but you can't do that every Sunday. What's a Sunday school teacher to do?

The answer, I believe, is hiding somewhere in that barn.

Barns and churches are common structures here in Kansas. Some are alive, vibrant, purposeful. You step inside and feel that this place is a shelter for those who enter, and a place from which to go out into the world, refreshed and energized.

Other such structures smell historic. You walk in and history crawls up your nose. History is good, and we need historic places to visit and help us appreciate from where we've come. But historic barns and churches won't feed the future unless they change to accommodate today.

That's the lesson we need to process as we discern what to do about the survival of our Sunday school class. For whatever reason, meeting in a group in a room on Sunday morning isn't cutting it for most of the youth.

That old structure isn't very functional anymore—at least not this year. Maybe a few years down the road, we'll have youth who can't wait to meet in the Sunday school room to hang out together. But not now. It's time to walk through the old barn and modify it for today. Maybe that will mean less gathering in the church, and more getting out together. Maybe it will mean walking where Jesus walked, teaching and learning the way Jesus did.

### **REST STOP #3: What Did Jesus Do?**

The Gospels don't record every move Jesus made during his years of ministry. We do read that it was his custom to attend the synagogue every Sabbath, as recorded in Luke 4:16. In today's terms, Jesus made a practice of going to church. Why? Why would Jesus—the man who knew all the answers, the Son who could talk to his Father anytime—choose to attend services in small town Nazareth with ordinary people? What could he get out of those worship experiences?

Jesus, of all people, would know that God is everywhere. And Jesus did find God among the Galilean lilies, under the silent stars, in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. But the human side of Jesus knew God in those places because he knew him also in the place where he had gone to think of him, in the house of worship consecrated to God's presence.

Another reason for Jesus to attend synagogue was its link of the past and present. The hopes and desires of past generations were recalled, as was God's faithfulness through those generations. Hope for the present and the future was based on God's involvement in the lives of the Jewish people in the past.

Thirdly, the synagogue was a place of fellowship. The body of believers is where our spiritual souls receive nourishment and encouragement. We learn from each other, from the reading of the Word and from the interpretation of the Word as given by the rabbi or minister. Jesus knew that corporate worship is vital to keeping the vitality in our spiritual lives.

All of that said, most of Jesus' ministry happened outside the walls of the synagogue. He ate with sinners, called people away from fishing boats and out of trees, met potential converts at the water well and the healing pool. He frustrated the religious We-Are-Right, and exalted the outcasts.

You know the stories. We all know the stories. But what does it have to do with a barn and the survival of our high school Sunday school?

For me, I think it means building community, inside and outside of the church walls. I think it might mean focusing out as a means to focus in.

### **REST STOP #4: Say That Again**

I'm still processing this, so process with me. If we know what attracts the youth (going away, in the case of our class), then we need to build on that. Let's go away more often. Let's build community among those of us who go away. Let's not only visit other faiths in order to broaden our minds; let's be of service to others. Let's take lunch to a homebound person. Let's do a prayer walk through the neighborhood. Let's visit the nursing home. Maybe we won't even tell the youth what we're doing. Mix it up. Just plan to be together Sunday from 11:00-1:00, and plan to do something different each time. Sometimes we'll eat pizza, watch a movie and discuss it at someone's house. Sometimes we'll have a unique guest speaker. Sometimes we'll go sit at Sonic and just talk.

"But...but...but..." you might say, "What about teaching the Bible stories? What about the new Gather 'Round curriculum that's coming out? Don't we need to be educating our youth?"

Yes, yes a thousand times yes. But in the case of our high school class, if they aren't there, they won't get educated anyway. We have to get them interested enough to be there before we can do anything. Maybe, as the youth enjoy being together outside of the Sunday school structure, they'll become more interested in what is being offered within the church walls.

And when they come, we need to offer them the Good News in as many different formats as we can, knowing that different youth will be open to different approaches. We need to refurbish that old barn so it works for the needs of today's post-modern youth.

It can be done. It is being done. Youth leaders and teachers all over America are finding ways to share and communicate God's love and God's calling in the lives of their youth.

What's working for you? Let either Michele or me know and we'll share tips and stories on this website. Our email addresses are: [micheleh@hesston.edu](mailto:micheleh@hesston.edu) and [carold@mennoniteusa.org](mailto:carold@mennoniteusa.org).

God's blessings to you!