
125th CELEBRATION

Our Heritage in the Uniform Series 1872 - 1997

“One lesson for all the school and for all schools”

- An early motto for Uniform
Lessons

The Committee on the Uniform Series
Ministries in Christian Education
Division of Christian Education, Inc.
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
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Introduction

APRIL 1997, marks the 125th anniversary of what Protestant churches have known as the International Sunday School Lessons or the Uniform Lesson Series. In April of 1872, the Fifth National Sunday School Convention, meeting at the Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, took the historic step which set in motion the cooperation of Protestant churches on curriculum for the Sunday School.

This booklet; the celebration of Sunday evening, April 13, 1997; and the annual meeting of the Committee on the Uniform Series, April 13-17, 1997, pay tribute to this great heritage.

125th PLANNING COMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE UNIFORM SERIES

Dr. Mary A. Love, Chair

Rev. Wellington Johnson, CUS Chair

Dr. Sam Crouch

Rev. Charles Powell

Ms. Dorothy Savage, MCE Director

Ms. Barbara Tilley, CUS Staff Administrator

Early American Sunday Schools

The TEACHING of the catechism and the Bible to children was a concern of the early American settlers, particularly in New England, but Sunday schools were rare. There is a record of only a few. The Congregational Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts, established a school in 1674 in which the boys and girls were instructed after morning service by men and women, respectively, in the catechism and Scriptures. In 1680, the Pilgrim Church of Plymouth took action requesting the deacons to assist the minister in teaching the children during the intermission on the Sabbath. Ludwig Thacker established a Sunday School at Ephrata, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1740, and conducted it personally until 1777, when it was discontinued because the buildings of that community were needed as hospitals after the Battle of Brandywine.

The years following the Revolution brought quite different conditions. The church and the state had become separate entities. Sectarianism was increasing. The practice of catechetical instruction by the clergy in New England was almost entirely abandoned. In the middle and southern states, where there had never been much love for learning or ardor for piety, little had been done during the war for the education of the children. In this vacuum a new movement began.

Bishop Asbury organized a Sunday school in 1786, on the Robert Raikes' plan, at the house of Thomas Crenshaw in Hanover County, Virginia. In 1787, a Methodist preacher in Charleston, South

Carolina, conducted a Sunday school for the African Children of that city. Knowing nothing of Raikes or of Sunday schools elsewhere, a poor African woman, Katy Ferguson, started a Sunday school in New York City for the benefit of the poor street children of the humble quarters in which she lived.

The teachers of this movement were usually paid, and the children were very often poorly educated and of the poorest classes. The principal books were the spelling book and the hymnbook.

It was in this same period, 1787, that a Protestant preacher was drenched with water pumped from a public cistern for the crime of conducting a Sunday school for the benefit of the African children of that vicinity. A young woman who had been teaching children on Sunday was told that she was "desecrating God's day in God's house." An old pastor of the church shook his ivory-headed cane at this young woman and the children in her class, and shouted with considerable venom, "You imps of Satan, doing the Devil's work!"

After these rough beginnings, the early nineteenth century saw increased interest in the Sunday school among the churches. There was a general change from paid to voluntary teachers and from secular to religious instruction. The change began about 1809 and was simultaneous with the transfer of the control of the schools from individuals to churches. Dr. Lyman Beecher was instrumental in getting the people of the middle and upper classes to participate in the schools.

Rise of Sunday School Unions

Societies were formed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for the purpose of promoting and establishing Sunday Schools. Many of these early societies were concerned with the instruction of the poor in a given community and, consequently, they were strictly local. It was on May 26, 1817, with the establishment of the Philadelphia Sunday and Adult School Union, that the step was taken which moved the Sunday school movement beyond the line of local organizations. In 1821, this union employed a missionary who organized over sixty schools in six different states.

Rapidly, the trend toward broad cooperation increased until, in 1820, the first public plea for a general Sunday School Union in the United States was made by the New York Sunday School Union. The name and constitution of the American Sunday School Union were unanimously approved May 25, 1824. From the outset, two distinct fields of labor opened before the union and were simultaneously entered upon: the preparation of suitable books and the establishment of schools. As early as 1826, a

system was started for selected uniform lessons.

The first of the great national Sunday school conventions assembled October 3, 1832, in what was called the Chatham Street Chapel in New York City. A second national convention was held in Philadelphia in May 1833. These two conventions appear to have been the last for more than twenty years. A third convention held in Philadelphia in February 1859, anticipated future meetings, but the plans were interrupted by the Civil War. A fourth convention was held in Newark, New Jersey, in April 1869. Twenty-eight states and one territory of the Union were represented, in addition to the Dominion of Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, Egypt, and South Africa.

The Fifth National Convention was held in Indianapolis, Indiana, April 16-19, 1872, with P. G. Gillett, LL.D., of Illinois, as President. The sessions were held at the Second Presbyterian Church, then located in the downtown area of Indianapolis. It was here that the Uniform, or International Lesson System, was inaugurated.

An Idea Struggles to Be Born

SCHOOLS all over the country uniting on the same course of Bible lessons, but each school teaching the lessons in its own way, and each denomination providing the best helps it could for its own schools - this was the dream of Benjamin Franklin Jacobs, an active layman in the Sunday school movement. Jacobs recognized the possibilities in the type of lessons conceived by John H. Vincent and had the indomitable will to overcome all obstacles to the adoption of the Uniform Lesson by the great Sunday school army of the late 1800's.

It was John H. Vincent who first raised the question of the practicality of a uniform system of lessons in all schools at an institute conducted under the auspices of the Chicago Sunday School Union in 1865. He attempted to carry it out in 1866 by preparing a course entitled "Two Years with Jesus: A New System of Sunday-School Study," for use in the Sunday schools of Chicago. His course was published in the periodical he founded and edited called the *Sunday-School Teacher*.

Shortly after starting the course, Vincent became head of the Sunday School Department of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In this capacity he began the Berean Series, which became widely used among Methodist schools. In the meantime, Rev. Edward Eggleston had become editor of the *Sunday-School Teacher*, which rapidly became the *National Sunday-School Teacher*. The Berean Series and the National Series became strong rivals.

Mr. Jacobs had charge of the superintendents' section at the Fourth National Sunday School Convention meeting in Newark, 1869. He presented the idea of a uniform lesson system and was rewarded with great enthusiasm. At least three fourths of the superintendents present, it is believed, wished the subject brought before the convention for immediate action. But Mr. Jacobs opposed this on the ground

that several of the leading publishers were not ready for the movement and the party action might endanger the success of the plan. He did, however, report this declaration to the convention: "That a uniform lesson is essential to the highest success of every school, and that it is practical and desirable to unite all the schools of our whole country upon one and the same series."

It was July 10, 1871. The Executive Committee of the American Sunday School Union was meeting in New York to arrange for the Indianapolis Convention of 1872. Mr. Jacobs again presented the idea of a uniform lesson system. It was decided to call a meeting of the publishers for August 8. By personal solicitation, correspondence, and publication, twenty-nine publishers were recruited for the meeting, which Mr. Jacobs chaired. After an earnest discussion, a committee was appointed to select a list of lessons for 1872 as an experiment. Drs. Edward Eggleston, John H. Vincent, and Richard Newton, Rev. H. C. McCook, and B. F. Jacobs were appointed to do the work.

The committee met immediately, and Dr. Vincent insisted that the outline of the plan be formed that day. Newton and Jacobs could not stay for the meeting but agreed that the other members might begin the work. Jacobs said he would join them in the morning. The three members held a meeting and, after a brief consultation, agreed to disagree and publish the following:

"UNIFORM LESSONS - THE FAILURE - The undersigned, having been appointed at the conference held at the call of the National Executive Committee, a committee to select a course of lessons for the whole Sunday-school public, find it impossible at this late day to select a list of subjects acceptable to all, or creditable enough to put the experiment on a fair basis. The compro-

mise necessary to effect a union at this moment renders it out of the questions to get a good list, and with the most entire unanimity we agree that it is best to defer action until the matter shall have been discussed in the National Convention

[Signed] EDWARD EGGLESTON,
 J. H. VINCENT,
 HENRY C. MCCOOK”¹

The problem? Dr. Eggleston was ready enough to consent to a uniform lesson provided the rest would consent to adopt his course of lessons. And Dr. Vincent, having created the first course of lessons which Eggleston was now publishing with such success, had originated the Berean Series, which he wanted all Methodist schools to use. By its intrinsic and conspicuous excellence, the Berean Series was fast gaining an extra-denominational and national character.

Upon hearing the results of the committee that evening, Mr. Jacobs got busy. A conference with one of the publishers and Mr. Vincent the next morning resulted in an agreement to move ahead with the assigned task. Mr. McCook still refused to have any part in the work. Dr. Newton did not return to the city, so Eggleston, Vincent, and Jacobs proceeded to make the selection of lessons for 1872. The lessons were adopted by many of the Sunday schools throughout the United States for the year 1872.

When the National Sunday School Convention assembled in Indianapolis, April 16-19, 1872, ample time was given to the question of uniform lessons. B. F. Jacobs gave the opening presentation. These words from the editor of the *Sunday-School Times* vividly describe the event:

“After the earnest speech of Mr. B. F. Jacobs, who had been appointed to lead the discussion, and during the brief speeches for and against which followed, the scene was indiscrible [*sic*]. A quiver of eager desire seemed to thrill the whole body. . . . There was scarcely a corporal’s guard of opponents to the measure. Although in the morning when the question was broached, repeated cries of ‘question’ were made, the council of caution prevailed, and the measure was not rushed through in hot haste, but left for the afternoon session. The ardor of its advocates had not at all cooled by the delay, the final vote being almost unanimous, and its announcement being greeted by the convention rising to their feet and singing the long meter doxology.”²

The resolution presented that day by Mr. Jacobs and so enthusiastically voted by the convention is as follows:

“*Resolved*, That this Convention appoint a committee to consist of five clergymen and five laymen, to select a course of Bible Lessons for a series of years not exceeding seven, which shall, as far as they may decide possible, embrace a general study of the whole Bible, alternating between the Old and New Testaments semi-annually or quarterly, as they shall deem best, and to publish a list of such lessons as fully as possible, and at least for the two years next ensuing, as early as the 1st of August, 1872; and that this Convention recommend their adoption by the Sunday-schools of the whole country; and that this committee have full power to fill any vacancies that may occur in their number of reason of the inability of any member to serve.”³

To that historic First International Lesson Committee the convention appointed the following five

¹ John Richard Sampey, *The International Lesson System: The History of Its Origin and Development* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, Southern Baptist Convention, 1911, pp. 75-76 quoting Simeon Gilbert, *The Lesson System* (1879).

² Quoted in Marianna C. Brown, *Sunday-School Movements in America* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901), pp. 60-61.

³ Sampey, *International Lesson System*, p. 85, quoting report of the Fifth National Sunday School Convention.

clergymen: Rev. J. H. Vincent (Methodist), Rev. John Hall (Presbyterian), Rev. Warren Randolph (Baptist), Rev. Richard Newton (Protestant Episcopal), and Rev. A. L. Chapin (Congregational). The five laymen appointed were Prof. Philip G. Gillett (Methodist), George H. Stuart (Presbyterian), B. F. Jacobs (Baptist), Alex G. Tying (Protestant Episcopal), and Henry P. Haven (Congregational).

The first committee, chaired by Dr. Vincent, met on Thursday, May 23, 1872, at the Young Men's Christian Association in New York. Rev. J. Monro Gibson and A. Macallum, both of Canada, took seats with the committee.

Three years later, Rev. Warren Randolph, secretary of the Lesson Committee, made the first report of the committee to the Sixth National (First International) Sunday School Convention held in Baltimore.

Beginning in 1873 with a constituency of about three million, the International Lessons expanded with scarcely a murmur of the dissent until by 1905 the committee was selecting lessons for more than seventeen million teachers and pupils.

Dr. John H. Vincent continued to serve as Chair of the Lesson Committee for twenty-four years. B. F. Jacobs served as a member of the committee for thirty years.

Through the efforts of Dr. Vincent, the London Sunday School Union was consulted by the American Lesson Committee from 1874 on. English and French members were listed as corresponding members for the Third Lesson Committee.

The Committee Continues Midst Change

The ELEVENTH International Convention, Toronto, Canada, June 23-27, 1905, changed the name from International Sunday School Convention to International Sunday School Association and took steps to incorporate.

Denominational Sunday school boards, finding their cooperative interests inadequately served through the International Sunday School Association, organized the Sunday School Council of Evangelical Denominations.

By action of the Fourteenth International Convention, Chicago, June 23-30, 1914, the Lesson Committee was reorganized so that it was not entirely controlled by the International Association. The Lesson Committee was now comprised of eight members appointed by the International Association, eight by the Sunday School Council, and one member from each denomination of the Council having a curriculum committee.

At the Sixteenth International Convention, Kansas City, June 21-27, 1922, the merger of the International Sunday School Association and the Sunday School Council of Evangelical Denominations was completed, forming the International Sunday School Council of Religious Education. Under this organization the membership of the International Sunday School Lesson Committee was defined as having sixteen members appointed by the Executive Committee of the International Sunday School Council of Religious Education and one member elected by each denomination having a Lesson Committee and eligible to membership in the Council.

By 1928, the name of the Council had become the International Council of Religious Education. This organization had an Educational Commission whose membership was composed of denominationally-appointed persons, plus twenty specialists appointed by the International Council. The Educational Commission functioned in two sections: the International Lesson Committee and the Committee on Program and Policies. The International Lesson Committee continued to have responsibility for Improved Uniform Lessons, Group Graded Lessons, and Home Daily Bible Readings. In 1933, the Educational Commission committees expanded to nine, one of which continued to be the Committee on Improved Uniform Lessons.

In 1940, the International Council of Religious Education approved a plan for a comprehensive curriculum to be known as "The International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching." The Committee on the Uniform Series was one of those committees charged with a specific part of the total curriculum enterprise.

The Committee on the Uniform Series was instructed to develop outlines which would be the basis for "a system of lessons," biblical in content, and maintaining the principle of uniformity by including a core of common material and emphases to be developed in all age groups, but providing for a graded approach through supplemental materials and adaptations within the several age groups. The first outlines prepared by the new committee were for 1945. The

Uniform Lessons begun in 1872 were modified to include specific materials for each of four age groups. From 1940 on, the committee members were named by direct appointment of the cooperating denominations. Only denominations proposing to use the Uniform Series appoint members.

The International Council of Religious Education was one of the thirteen national cooperative agencies that united to form the National Council

of Churches of Christ in the USA, in 1951. The I.C.R.E. became the Division of Christian Education of the National Council. Over the years the educational programs continued to evolve as the Department of Educational Development (DED); Education for Christian Life and Mission (ECLM) and currently Ministries in Christian Education (MCE). Thus, the Committee on the Uniform Series is one of the committees within Ministries in Christian Education.

Teacher helps in early publications provided a minimal amount of guidance on teaching procedures and interpretation of biblical passages.

Uniform Lessons for small children, 1899, reveal the ungraded approach to biblical data characteristic of that period.

The Uniform Lessons are comprehended in the framework of materials designed for the total task of Christian education. Hence, they are designed to contribute to achieving the objectives of Christian education stated as follows:

That all persons be aware of God through his self-disclosure, especially his redeeming love as revealed in Jesus Christ, and that they respond in faith and love — to the end that they may know how they are and what their human situation means — grow as sons of God rooted in the Christian community, live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and abide in the Christian hope.

The objective of Uniform Lessons is thus twofold: (1) to provide a plan for studying the Bible which will help growing persons, increasingly, to know its content and to understand its message in the light of their own experiences and relationships; and (2) to become a medium for achieving the objective of Christian education.

A distinctive aspect of Uniform Lessons is the emphasis given to the Bible: as the record of the revelation of God in Christ; as the major source of understanding the meaning of the Christian faith; and as the most effective means of confronting persons with the great concerns of the gospel as these relate to personal faith, moral values, human relationships, social responsibility, Christian hope, and the implications of Christian discipleship under the lordship of Christ and in the fellowship of his Spirit. Uniform Lessons begin with the content of the Scriptures only as a means of discovering the relevance of the Word of God in every area of human experience.

Other instructions to the committee include the following:

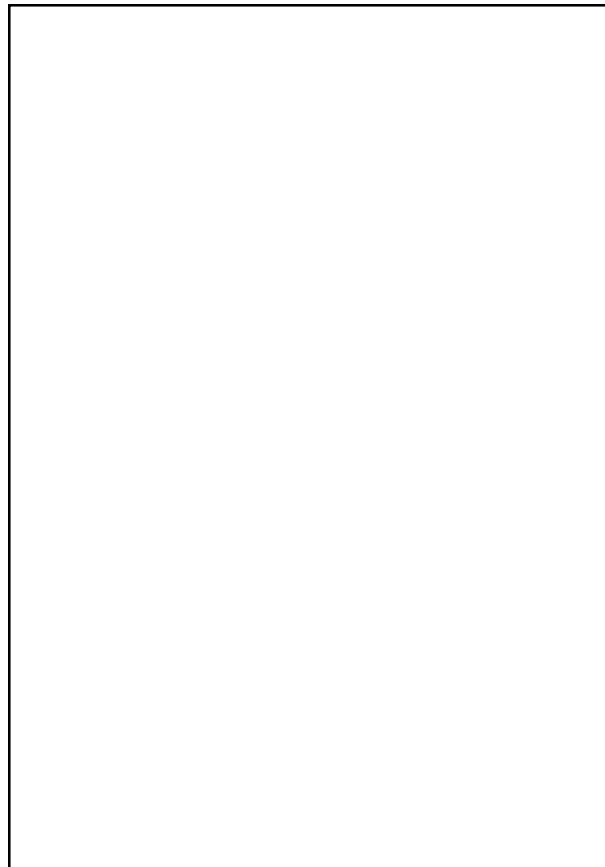
The outlines should cover all portions of the Bible fruitful for group study, though some portions afford more teaching value than others and are given larger place.

Topical studies should include, such topics as: world peace, problems of civic responsibility and Christian family life; studies related directly to biblical content, but not limited to biblical content.

Outlines should include Bible study on a literary, historical, psychological, sociological and racial-ethical basis.

The outlines, to date, are developed on the basis of a six-year cycle. With the planning of the new cycle 2004-2010, the Committee moves to a new concept of biblical scope, organized around major themes such as: creation, call, covenant, community and commitment.

It is a definite policy to include in each year's study a consideration of some aspect of the redemptive work or teaching of Jesus and some challenge to the Christian way of life. Special material should be included for Christmas and Easter, and wherever possible, help should be given for those who wish to emphasize the church year.



The Committee on the Uniform Series works in age-group subcommittees to prepare topics and short descriptions of the content the writers may use in the development sessions.

Present Committee on the Uniform Series

The PRESENT Committee on the Uniform Series is named by direct appointment of the cooperating denominations.¹ It is to be representative of education in all age groups but to include in its membership only persons from denominations proposing to use this series and such general resource persons as may be desired.

The Executive Committee guides the work. This committee consists of the eight quarterly subcommittees chairpersons, at work on the Uniform Lesson Outlines in any given year, the chair of the Committee on the Uniform Series, and the executive secretary, ex officio. The members of the Executive Committee for 1997 are:

M. Franklin Dotts
Michael Finks
Marcel Kellar
Tom Hudson
Susan Janzen
Wellington Johnson
Mary Love
Levi Miller
Deanna Patrick
Dorothy Savage, MCE Director
Barbara Tilley, CUS Administrator

Participating denominations in the Committee on the Uniform Series are:

African Methodist Episcopal Church
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
American Baptist Churches, USA
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
 U.S. and Canada
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
Church of the Brethren
Church of God (Anderson)
Church of God General Conference
Church of God in Christ
Cumberland Presbyterian Church
Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
General Conference Mennonite Church
Mennonite Church
National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.
National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.
National Missionary Baptist Convention of
 America
National Primitive Baptist Convention, Inc.
Presbyterian Church, USA
Seventh Day Baptist
Southern Baptist Convention
United Church of Christ
United Methodist Church

¹ Much of the material in this section is taken from the *Handbook of Principles and Procedures* (as revised March, 1993) of the Committee on the Uniform Series.

Chairs of the Committee Through the Years

Bishop J. H. Vincent
1872-1896
Methodist Episcopal Church

Dr. John Potts
1896-1907
Methodist Church of Canada

Dr. A. F. Schauffler
1908-1914
United Presbyterian Church, USA

Dr. John Richard Sampey
1915-1942
Southern Baptist Convention

Dr. Park Hays Miller
1943-1947
United Presbyterian Church in the USA

Dr. John L. Fairly
1948-1956
Presbyterian Church in the U.S.

Dr. Albert Harper
1957-1962
Church of the Nazarene

Dr. Clifton E. Allen
1963-1968
Southern Baptist Convention

Dr. E. Lee Neal
1969-1970

Dr. Maynard P. Turner, Jr.
1971 -1974
National Baptist Convention,
USA, Inc.

Dr. Horace R. Weaver
1975-1977
United Methodist Church

Dr. F. Benjamin Davis
1978-1980
National Baptist Convention of America

Dr. Wilbur C. Lamm
1981-1983
Southern Baptist Convention

Ms. Annice Snodgrass
1984-1986
National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

Dr. Marvin Simmers
1987-1989
Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

Dr. Robert S. Wood
1990-1992
Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America

The Rev. James McGuire
1993-1995
Cumberland Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Wellington Johnson
1996 -
National Missionary Baptist Convention of
America