

## Uniform bible lessons committee still looking ahead after 140 years

New York, March 27, 2012 -- Each Sunday, thousands of church schools open their bibles to the same passage to study the word of God.

That's more than a coincidence: it's called the "uniform principle." Common bible lessons have been prepared by the National Council of Churches' Committee on the Uniform Series for 140 years next month.

"It's the ultimate form of ecumenical cooperation," said the Rev. Dr. Roderick Lewis, General Secretary of the General Department of Publications of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, who presided over an anniversary celebration of the curriculum series last week in San Antonio, Tex.

"Many decades ago, Christian educators and publishers saw the wisdom or working together on common lessons and themes," Dr. Lewis said. "Imagine the power of tens of thousands of Christians reading the same passages, focusing on the same messages, and expressing the same witness in all parts of the nation and the world."

The Uniform Series Committee is lodged in the NCC's Education and Leadership Ministries Commission (ELMC). Dr. Daryl Ingram, Executive Director of the Christian Education Department of the [African Methodist Episcopal](#) (AME) Church, is chair of the Commission. [Brenda Tribett](#) is the program specialist who provides staff coordination for the uniform series.

The objectives of the series have always been 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 to become a medium for achieving the objective of Christian education.

Clare J. Chapman, Interim General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, said the celebration during the meeting of the NCC's Education and Leadership Ministries Commission "was a wonderful event, an important commemoration."

In remarks during the anniversary dinner, Chapman said the Uniform Lessons have been so successful over the decades, "it's tempting to think America and the Sunday School were forged in the same fell swoop."

But that was not the case, Chapman noted. "In the early days of our republic there were few Sunday schools, and the ones that existed often found themselves under siege."

Chapman cited anecdotes recorded in a sprightly history, [Our Heritage in the Uniform Series](#).

In 1787 in New York, Chapman observed, a Protestant preacher who conducted a Sunday school for the benefit of African children was drenched with water pumped from a public cistern. At the same time, a young woman who had been teaching children on Sunday was accused of “desecrating God’s day in God’s house” and an old pastor shook his ivory-headed cane at her and shouted, “You imps of Satan, doing the Devil’s work!”

"It took nearly a hundred more years before Sunday schools became an integral part of the U.S. church landscape," Chapman said. "In 1871, a layman with the auspicious name of Benjamin Franklin Jacobs raised the idea of a uniform lesson system with the American Sunday School Union."

The idea was not immediately embraced, but in a convention of the Sunday School Union in Indianapolis April 16 through 19, 1872 – almost exactly 140 years ago – Benjamin Franklin Jacobs made what the minutes taker described as an “earnest speech” calling for a Uniform curriculum. The scene, the minutes say, was “indescribable.”

Chapman quoted from the 1872 minutes: "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."

"No one writes minutes like this any more," Chapman said, smiling.

Virtually every communion that participates in the series has a hero or anecdote to illustrate the importance of a common approach to Christian education. Presbyterian Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher (among other famous Beechers of the 19th century) also sired the Sunday school movement in the U.S.

Scores of political leaders and social activists testified their moral judgments were honed in Sunday school, including Baptist Helen Barrett Montgomery, an early champion of universal suffrage who wrote her own translation of the New Testament, Martin Luther King, Jr., and a virtual Olympiad of founders of the National Council of Churches: Dulles, Taft, Stassen, Dahlberg, Wedel and many more.

Twenty-two denominations and their representative staff form the Uniform Series committee which meets annually. They are working on outlines that will build that six-year cycle around several biblically rooted themes. Efforts are underway to adapt the outlines to a more Afri-centric approach for use in African American congregations.

Since 1872, Protestants of many traditions have worked together to create outlines for church school curriculum based on "the uniform principle. This ideal has motivated what is surely the most ecumenically and racially diverse group related to the NCC to work together faithfully on producing the most widely used approach to Bible study in the Protestant churches.

"When the Sunday School Union finally voted to create the series in 1972," Clare Chapman said, "the delegates rose to their feet in a spontaneous rendition of the Doxology. One hundred and forty years later, the chorus of celebration is still important. Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow.

Also see:

<http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/curriculum.htm#uni>

<http://www.nccusa.org/news/080414mennonitecus.html>

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*Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA has been the leading force for shared ecumenical witness among Christians in the United States. The NCC's 37 member communions -- from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American and Living Peace churches -- include 45 million persons in more than 100,000 local congregations in communities across the nation.*

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