

I was happy that Jesus wanted me for a sunbeam



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COLUMNIST

THE Methodist Church became a central part of my life when my sister Sheila and my father died when I was a teenager.

Apart from my mother and close family, it was the Church that cared for me. I attended Sunday morning and evening services, afternoon 'Sunday School' and the youth fellowship on Sunday evening.

Today many people may consider the idea of going every Sunday to Sunday School a bit odd or quaint. I have fond memories of Sunday School as an oasis of support, storytelling, singing, kindness and friendship - happy memories of some of the best moments of childhood. It's a world I recall with huge affection.

Sunday School had a crucial influence on my personal development. I remember vividly singing 'Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam' in Sunday School and wondering what it would be like to be a sunbeam.

Years later Max Schafer asked the question "What if all of the sun's output of visible light was bundled into a laser-like beam that had a diameter of around 1m once it reaches Earth?" The answer was, it would be like a hydrogen bomb going off, only much more violent. I am sure that was not what Jesus had in mind for me!

A big aspect of my early childhood at Sunday School was taking part in a charitable scheme called 'Sunny Smiles'. At Sunday School we were given a little booklet featuring detachable photos of 'unfortunate' toddlers.

We were asked to tout them around to friends and family in return for a contribution. The buyer was then given the photo of the toddler. I remember being shocked by a neighbour who warned me that 'it was hard to sell the photos of the really ugly babies'.

Two Sunday School events have left a lasting impression. The Sunday School Anniversary was the most terrifying, my 'birthday celebrations' the most disappointing. Each year I had to learn my 'piece' for the Anniversary. One year we were dressed as flowers and I recited 'I am a tulip' to my dotting parents. I used to be absolutely terrified that I would forget my words. However, it was at these classes that I learned the confi-



► Sunday schools can still be an oasis of support

dence to stand up in public and speak at the anniversary services.

The other event was the weekly celebration of children's birthdays. There were no presents. The 'cake' consisted of a wooden ring which had holes in which candles were placed.

Every Easter I was bought a brand new spring outfit, by my grandmother Bella Walton, to wear at the Sunday School Anniversary - my most memorable being a Harris Tweed matching jacket and shorts. Bella used to take me to Burtons tailors in Consett. She would agree to buy the outfit and then haggle with the salesman. Bella never accepted there were fixed prices and in the end would always negotiate a reduction.

The first Sunday School may have been opened in 1751 in Nottingham. However, the pioneer of Sunday schools is commonly attributed to Robert Raikes, editor of the Gloucester Journal, who saw the need to prevent children in the slums descending into crime.

In 1781, having seen the plight of children living in the Gloucester slums, Raikes opened the first school on Sunday in the home of a friend as it was the only day these boys and girls living in the slums and working in the factories could attend. Using the Bible as their textbook, he taught them to read and write.

Within four years over 250,000 children were attending schools on Sunday throughout England.

In 1784 many new schools opened, including the interdenominational Stockport Sunday School, which was constructed as a school for 5,000 scholars and became the

largest Sunday School in the world.

By 1831 it was reported that attendance at Sunday Schools had grown to 1.2 million, approximately 25% of the population. They provided basic literacy education alongside religious instruction. Robert Raikes' schools were seen as the first schools of the English state system.

The Sunday School movement had a deeply radical effect on British society. In the early days, it was seen as dangerous and subversive to give the tools of literacy to the lower orders. Well into the 20th Century, Sunday School students parading at Whitsun could turn out in their thousands, bringing city centres to a standstill.

The Sunday School I attended could certainly not be portrayed as radically subversive. The values that were promoted could be described as 'British Christian Values'.

At the time maps of the world still depicted the dominance of Britain over the world. We were repeatedly told stories of British, more exactly Scottish, missionaries such as David Livingstone and Mary Slessor, who worked in Africa, spreading the word of Jesus.

One missionary, Gladys Aylward, who worked in China, visited our village in the late 1950s - a film of her life, 'The Inn of the Sixth Happiness' was made in 1958, starring Ingrid Bergman. At Sunday School we all sang lustily 'Remember all the children, that live in far-off lands'. We were secure in the belief that our job was to make free all those children and bring them to our beliefs and way of life.

Whilst my beliefs may have changed since my childhood, values are more constant. I consider myself fortunate to have attended a school in which values for life, learning to love people, learning to live in diversity and learning to challenge many of the inequalities within the world were at the heart of the curriculum.

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