When you hear the words Sunday school, do you experience a little shudder of dread, quickly followed by a stern correction from the part of your mind that knows the difference between right and wrong? (Something like: “Stop that! Sunday school is a good thing!”)

If this happens to you, don’t worry. You are not alone. All across the country, groups of quietly disaffected adults gather for coffee and fellowship in lieu of going to Sunday school.

But Sunday school is a good thing, and here’s some good news—a new curriculum, designed and produced by people from the Conservative Mennonite Conference, is on its way to your church, small group, or discipleship class. It will be released at conference this year (July 31-August 3). Check it out!

What is Kingdom Come?

The Kingdom Come curriculum is a set of 13 lessons designed to help CMC congregations explore and understand what it means to follow Jesus daily.

“The curriculum is not a call to tradition,” said Phyllis Swartz, who chaired the project’s writing team. “Rather it is a call to live in the New Covenant, which was provided at such great cost – the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Here is the project’s guiding purpose statement:

When Jesus came to earth, he changed things for the people of God – ushering in a new phase of the Kingdom. Over and over in his famous Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus described these changes, he said, ‘It has been said ... but I tell you ...’ In that same sermon, Jesus taught us to pray these words: ‘Your kingdom come.’ These lessons explore how to live in ways that answer this prayer.
Whose idea was this?

Orville Miller, chair of CMC’s Publication and Literature Committee, joined the committee in 2009, just after it had completed a survey with a number of CMC churches about Sunday school curricula. “It became apparent that there wasn’t a curriculum being used in CMC that was both well accepted by our people, and that also contained some Anabaptist distinctives,” he said.

On his first day “on the job,” the Executive Board gave him a directive “to oversee the writing of a 13-week curriculum that could be used by CMC churches to teach Kingdom principles from an Anabaptist perspective.”

Begun in 2010 at the recommendation of CMC’s Publication and Literature Committee, Kingdom Come is the result of many people’s creative efforts. Phyllis Swartz gave leadership to the project. Elmer Lehman and Conrad Showalter were also part of the original writing team; Chris Jones joined them a bit later.

More than 50 people made significant contributions to the curriculum; many agreed to appear in video clips, talking about God’s work in their lives. The team, said Phyllis, was “in awe of this generosity of God’s people.”

The team was generous as well. They volunteered their time, skills, equipment and travel expenses. “The passion of the writing team was to provide a rich curriculum at little or no cost,” said Phyllis. They are grateful for the donors who gave $3500 to cover unavoidable costs.

The writing team found rewards in the work itself. Phyllis appreciated what everyone contributed: Elmer’s “years of wisdom and his compassionate understanding of people and theology”; Chris’s “love for discipleship, his passion about New Covenant living, and his immense artistic and technological skills”; and Conrad’s “sharp editorial mind” and ability to combine “his understanding of the Bible with his understanding of people.”

Elmer Lehman was quick to point out that “had it not been for Phyllis and her leadership to keep this moving along, we would be far from finished.” Orville concurs: “Her passion for the project and her organizational skills were what kept this project moving forward.” He added, “She invested a good part of her life the last three to four years because she believed this project was worthy of her time.”

What’s it all about?

Elmer explained, “We did not want to merely print a traditional ‘Sunday school quarterly.’” The team wanted to present the material in a way that would “impact the younger generation and get them excited about evangelical Anabaptism.”

To do this, they listened to people from all generations and then brainstormed about which scriptures and topics to use, and what people, events and stories to highlight. They also discussed overarching themes, curricular approaches, ways to accommodate learning styles, and possible resources.

“We recognized the challenge of reaching both high-tech and low-tech churches,” said Elmer. The solution was to have “a variety of material to be used in both situations.” There is, he said, “too much material to use in a 13-week quarter of Sunday school classes,” but this way, local churches can choose what they need, “taking more than one quarter or using it in other teaching settings.”

The curriculum is designed to reach multiple generations, with greater emphasis on young adults, but including teens and older adults.

The writing team wanted to provide a curriculum that focuses on scripture and that can be taught peacefully. “Some concepts in these lessons may be new to some people, and some concepts are controversial to some people,” explained Phyllis. The goal, she said, is to “teach the truth, but in ways that bring peace.”

Here is a statement from Kingdom Come’s Teaching Tips: “People learn more and remember longer when they discover truths for themselves. Rather than stating main points up front and explicitly, help the class release and articulate these points during discussion.”

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RBC faculty member Reuben Sairs did a series of word studies for the curriculum called “In a Word.” Here’s what he had to say about it: “Chris Jones made suggestions about interesting words or concepts that could be used as a springboard for conversation and maybe provide a fresh or deeper look at words we use all the time in church. Sometimes I explored words and grammar, sometimes church history, and sometimes I just reflected on my own experience as a pastor. I liked the idea that users could take or leave ‘In a Word’ depending on how useful they thought it might be in a given class.”
How is it working?

Five churches of different sizes and cultures piloted the program in the last year. Their feedback was generally positive, and led to some editorial and conceptual changes. “What we heard most was that there was too much material to fit a lesson into one session,” said Phyllis. “However, this is a teacher-led curriculum. The options available are like a menu – teachers choose what they think is best for their classes.”

Nathan Miller taught one of the pilot classes at Shiloh Mennonite Church from January to April of this year. He found the multiple modes of learning approach to be helpful. “Some people learn through visuals (videos), others learn through hearing (discussion questions), some learn best through reason and analysis (factual, scriptural input), and others through emotional connection (storytelling),” he said.

He also valued the way the curriculum “specifically addressed areas of identity” for CMC churches. “How do we connect with our historical identity and how is the message God has given us relevant for the world we live in?”

Overall, the response he got was positive. One young man in the class was engaged to someone from another denominational background. He told Nathan that the class was helpful to them because “it provided a natural venue . . . to discuss their different theological backgrounds and arrive at some common understandings.”

Other comments he heard ran along these lines: “It’s great to be intentionally focusing on who we are and what God has called us to be”; “Finally, we’re studying and discussing what our Anabaptist moorings mean for us today.”

The only negative comments Nathan heard were about the color and audio quality of the video components. In response, said Phyllis, “We adjusted the color and the audio levels to enhance the learning effectiveness and pleasure of the participants!”

Overall, Kingdom Come’s “attention to scripture and its application to cultural realities was helpful and unique,” Nathan said. Many curricula do an excellent job of studying and interpreting scripture, he said, but “few push the participants towards application in the way that this one does.”

What else can you do with these lessons?

How about a sermon series?

Plainview Mennonite in Kansas did the pilot program as a Sunday school class. Associate pastor Orville Miller reported that people were favorably impressed with both the content and the methods used to communicate the lessons. After Kingdom Come is released at conference this summer, Plainview hopes to teach all 13 lessons to all the adults in the church in conjunction with a sermon series.

“I think the final product is both captivating and controversial,” he said. “I hope that as we wrestle with the tensions presented, it will help us define who we are and what we believe.”

Jeremy Miller, pastor of Mennonite Christian Assembly in Ohio, also plans to create a sermon series that tracks with the lessons.

Jeremy and his wife Sarah contributed to the curriculum by being videotaped as they discussed how they answer one of the most difficult questions about Jesus’ call to love our enemies, protecting our families.

“I grew up in Anabaptism,” he said. “Sarah adopted it, and is actually more convinced about its understanding of Jesus and the Kingdom than many Anabaptists I know.”

Asked why he’s enthusiastic about Kingdom Come, Jeremy gave several reasons. Most accessible, well-crafted and creative curricula come “from the Reformed

HIGHLIGHTS FROM

KINGDOM COME

"I am thirsty for this kind of accessible curriculum that articulates our understanding of Jesus more helpfully."

Kingdom Come will be released at conference this summer (July 31 - August 3). It can be used by high-tech and low-tech churches and groups – enough material is included to accommodate both approaches. The curriculum includes more than 70 media clips of experts and “regular” people, spotlights on history and word studies.
theological perspective,” he said. Although he hasn’t seen the entire Kingdom Come package, he’s excited by what he has seen. “I am thirsty for this kind of accessible curriculum that articulates our understanding of Jesus more helpfully.”

This curriculum, he said, “can help define who we are.” Churches and church leaders get help from places that are most easily accessed, he said. “I’m a pastor and I read John Piper regularly, not because I agree with him on everything, but because he offers his commentary on scripture freely.”

Many churches and church leaders read what is current and listen to Christian radio, but most of these sources do not understand Jesus and scripture the way we have historically understood them. “This causes theological drift, confusion, and, in the end, a lack of unity.”

Projects like Kingdom Come can “help define the way clearly and helpfully.” This curriculum, he said, “provides an argument for what we believe, and the time is overdue for us to provide access to our churches and leaders to this theological perspective.”

Who can use Kingdom Come?

Anyone who is interested in exploring what it means to live in the New Covenant could benefit from studying with Kingdom Come materials.

Elmer Lehman hopes that it will be used “in our conference churches and in other congregations who share a similar theological position to ours. I would love to see every CMC congregation use this material, but I do not anticipate that this will happen, as some of our congregations keep their Anabaptist identity quite low-key.”

The writing team designed Kingdom Come to be used in Sunday school classes, in small groups, in discipleship classes, or in any setting where people want to come together to explore what it means to follow Jesus today.

Orville Miller would like to see this program used “by all our CMC churches to teach who we are as Anabaptists and how what we believe corresponds with what Jesus taught.”

He dreams that it will be used by many other churches that want to understand what the coming of Jesus’ kingdom means for them today. “This is a labor of love by the writing team, done in the hope that the good news of the Kingdom will expand to reach more people.”

Sample titles:
A lesson title: The In-Group - Belonging: Bloodlines to Choice
A story title: Baptism in Filth
An activity title: In a word - Uncovering the Meaning of the Word simplicity
A lesson hook title: Children on Heaven
A video title: A Bad Thread

Big questions:
Do we really need to read the Old Testament?
Did God change between the Testaments?
Which part of your identity is more important to you - your nationality or your church?
While we are in the world, how can we be transformed rather than conformed?
In the church, who “belongs”?
What are kingdom responses to evil?

Spotlight on history questions:
Why were all the children from one church expelled from school?
Why did a young man choose baptism over his family?
Why did one Christian shoot another at point-blank range?
Why did people choose to worship in a cave instead of a cathedral?