

TEACHING GOD'S GRACE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

BY GAIL TAYLOR RICE

The groundbreaking Valuegenesis' research, the largest study ever done of any denomination's youth, has helped to shape Adventist schools in many ways. We have learned a great deal about the importance of Adventist education, the factors that increase our schools' effectiveness, and about areas of special need. We know that:

- The Adventist school helps develop strong Christian young people.²

- A quality religious education program is essential to a good Adventist school.³

- Schools need a balanced religious education program that includes Bible classes, weeks of prayer, chapels that focus on spiritual content, and classroom worship periods.⁴

- Teachers need to model Christianity in their behavior, talk with students about their own faith, help young people learn more about religious issues, and explore personal experiences that nurture faith.

Some concerns that arose when Valuegenesis researchers talked to students about Adventist schools include the following:

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- Of all the types of religious teaching in the elementary school, classroom worship periods have been the least likely to affect religious experience.

- Students in Adventist schools have difficulty understanding grace in their lives.

- Students want more opportunities to talk about Jesus and how to live the Christian life.

Students and teachers alike want a grace orientation in religious education that helps them experience the peace that comes from accepting the saving love of God. Such an orientation stands in sharp contrast to a behavioral emphasis, "in which we experience the condemnation that comes from representations of a critical God."⁵ Teachers want to improve the quality of classroom worship periods and to speak more openly about their own spiritual quest, but they often lack resources and ideas for doing so.

One response to teachers' pleas for help in planning worship periods is the book *The Textures of Grace in Our Schools*,⁶ which contains ideas for students in the middle grades. Most of these can be used as morning worship periods or adapted for use with older or younger students.

Of course, teachers must do more than just "tack on" grace-oriented activ-

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ities to an otherwise grace-less classroom. These suggestions should be part of a total program—a logical outgrowth of classroom climate and instruction. They must not be the only time grace is ever talked about or modeled in the Adventist school.

Amazing Grace

Students in grades three to six are particularly good at memorizing Scripture and hymns. A beautiful song to carry in one's heart about God's saving grace is the very popular "Amazing Grace." Use this as a theme song for at least a week. Each day, play recordings of different artists performing it, and have the students sing it together.

Play a memorization game with the students after they have sung the song a number of times. Give each student a big card with one of the song phrases written on it. Ask them to put the

phrases in proper order. Do this exercise for several days and see if the students can do it more quickly each time. After the students have learned the song well, have them talk about what they think the phrases mean.

God's Grace Puzzle

Students acquire knowledge in many ways. Often, they learn better by doing something than by hearing about it.

Choose a good text on God's grace—maybe 2 Corinthians 12:9 or Hebrews 4:16. Take a large piece of sturdy cardboard and cut it into a heart shape. After writing the text on the heart, cut it into puzzle pieces and have the children put it back together. Instead of writing part of a Bible text, you could write something like "God Loves You 2 Pieces."

Gift Unwrap

Good illustrations leave lasting im-

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pressions. This one, about receiving God's grace, your students will remember. Bring a beautifully wrapped present to class and place it on your desk where all can see it. Tell the students it will be given to someone at the end of the day. If students ask who will get the gift or what criteria will be used to choose the recipient, tell them that they will find out later. For worship, read Romans 6:23: "the gift of God is eternal life . . ."

Later in the day, use a random method to determine which student will get the gift—draw a name from a hat, or select a number and have students write numbers on slips of paper. Give the gift to the person who chooses the number closest to the one you selected. After the student has unwrapped the gift, discuss God's grace, which is a gift He gives us. Ask, "Did the student do anything to deserve the gift? Did the student earn the gift? Was it his or her

birthday?" God's grace is just like that—an undeserved gift. All we need to do is accept it.

The Color of Forgiveness

To understand grace and mercy, we need to explore the concept of God's forgiveness for sin. Read Ephesians 1:6 and Romans 3:23 and 24 to the class.

Tell the students, "Use a crayon to draw a picture of yourself that represents how you feel when you do something you are not proud of. Choose a different-colored crayon to draw a picture of yourself after God has forgiven you." Discuss the pictures. Ask, "How do we feel when we have done something wrong? How did you illustrate forgiveness? Why does forgiveness make you feel that way? Which picture do you like best? Why did you use these two colors? What color makes you think of forgiveness?"

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A Letter Home

This assignment combines many good things. It improves communication skills, offers writing opportunities, and teaches students to express appreciation and make others happy, while increasing their awareness of God's love.

Set aside 20 minutes every Friday for students to write a letter home. Have them focus on sharing their love and appreciation for their families. Let them pretend they are living at a school a long way from home. Have them share part of their school lives that they may not have discussed with their family, especially positive feelings about a class, a teacher, or another student.

Give students an envelope in which to put their letters. Have them write the address on it. You can either mail the letters (with an explanatory note, perhaps) or allow the students to deliver the letters themselves.

Talk about what God has done for us in writing us letters in the Bible. Take time to discuss how we are part of God's family. What does He do to remind us how much He loves and appreciates us? Read Ephesians 1:3 to 8 to the class.

Burma Shave Signs

If the school has an entry road or a hallway that the children walk down on their way to the classroom, you might do a Burma Shave posters type of display. Create your own series of signs, using any message about God's grace and forgiveness or love.

*Nothing Can
Separate Us
From the Love
Of God.*

God's Love in Rounds

Appreciating and accepting God's love for us is not always easy, especially when we are disappointed in ourselves. Make up a simple song about God's love for us and sing it to the old tune, "Frere Jacques."

**God loves Crystal, God loves Crystal.
She's a dear, she's a dear,
What a lovely person.
What a lovely person.
Glad she's here, glad she's here.**

Try it in rounds with students inserting their own names.

Surprise Gifts

Leave a small surprise gift (such as stickers or a new marker) in an odd or unexpected place—the pocket of a coat, a lunch box, or a desk. Put this little note on it:

God loves you no matter what you do. Remember, you can never get away from God's love. Read Romans 8:32-39.—*From your teacher.*

Treasure Hunt Message

Create a series of signs like those shown on pages 16 and 17 for students to discover on a playground treasure hunt. Start them out with a clue similar to this: "Look close to the water fountain for your first sign." Tape on the back of the sign the next clue—such as: "Look under the slide for your next sign." Their task is to find all of the signs and bring them back in order. Once they have returned to the classroom, find a place to display the signs.

**NO MATTER WHAT
YOU SAY OR DO,
REMEMBER ALWAYS
GOD LOVES YOU!**

Romans 8:38, 39.

To use this activity for primary-age children who haven't learned to read yet, draw sketches showing where to look next.

Love by Candlelight

Young children do not always understand that there is enough of God's love to go around in this big world. Using candles, show how His love can be spread about without being diminished. Light one candle to represent God. Then light a candle for each child. Point out that each flame is equally bright.

If you cannot use matches and candles in the classroom because of safety requirements, perhaps you can do this outside. If you feel the children are not mature enough to participate, you may have to act out or describe the activity. This can be a powerful illustration, however, especially if done in a darkened room.

Read John 3:16 together and paraphrase the verse to include the "lights every candle" analogy. Talk about how we receive God's light. Ask the students,

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"Does our parents' love for us diminish when a new baby is born in the family—or does it spread to the new child and shine just as brightly as for each child already in the family? Does it work the same for God?"

Word Scramble

Give each child a piece of paper with "God's Grace" or "God Loves You" written on the top. Let the students take a few minutes to see how many words they can make from the letters.

Afterward, talk with the students about how far-reaching and varied is God's love for us—just like the many words that can be found by scrambling the letters and arranging them in new ways. Ask, "What else does the exercise teach us? Do we each experience God's love a little differently? Did each of you get a very different list?"

Grace in the Dictionary

Have the students look up the word *grace* in the dictionary, as well as every synonym listed. Ask them to watch how the word is used in magazines and newspapers ("she brought *grace* to the stage . . ."). Let them discuss how the definition applies to God's love for us. How is God's grace important in their lives? What does it mean to be living in God's grace?

Free, Free, Free

Create a FREE collage. Have students bring from home or look through old newspapers and magazines in the classroom for ads and pictures that use the word *free*. Ask them to cut out words, letters, pictures, or advertisements that talk about free things and paste them on a piece of poster board. Discuss the meaning of *free*. Does it always mean the same thing? How is God's free forgiveness and acceptance different from some of the free offers we find in magazines and newspapers? Have students use different fonts and letter styles to create a poster that displays the word *free* in dozens of different ways.

Secret Code

Create a secret code message for each of your students. Use a simple code such as 1 = a, 2 = b, 3 = c or a more complex one with symbols such as ☉ = a; Ⓞ = b; ™ = c; etc. (Use the Zapf Dingbats or Wingdings font on your computer.) Make up an index card for each of the students that contains a coded message, such as "God Loves You." See if the students can break the secret code by themselves. Allow several days, if needed.

After all of the cards have been deciphered, have them read them out loud. Discuss how God's messages of love to us often come hidden in different forms. Where should we be looking for the hidden messages of God's grace? What can help us understand God's messages?

Hymn Rewrites

Rewriting an old familiar hymn or Scripture passage is a wonderful way to help personalize the ideas in it. Children from grades three to six might not be able to rewrite a whole hymn, but they often do quite well with individual phrases.

Use one of the "grace" hymns from the Seventh-day Adventist *Hymnal*. "Marvelous Grace," Number 109, is a particularly good one. Have the class read it together interactively, then have each student rewrite one of the phrases in his or her own words. If students have trouble, you can allow them to

work in pairs or discuss the ideas with the entire group. Share the contributions with the group and discuss them together.

Experiencing God's Acceptance

Give each student a worksheet with the words of John 8:11 on the top. Ask the class to read it silently several times and then try to write it in their own words on the bottom half of the paper. They may do this anonymously, if they wish.

Collect the papers and read each paraphrase to the group. Share positive comments about the responses. Ask students to tell what they like about the paraphrases. Students love it when their work gets recognition, and having the teacher share their contributions with the class helps motivate many students.

Labels of Acceptance

Have students form groups of three and sit in circles. Ask each student to make a label for the person to his or her left that says something good about this person (kind, encouraging, intelligent, helpful, etc.). Pin the labels on the back of the students thus described so they cannot see them. Then invite students to ask yes or no questions of each other until they figure out the attributes on each label.

When all of the students have guessed their labels, discuss with the group how they felt about being labeled. What if any of the labels were untrue? Or negative? What is the danger of labeling others? How does it affect

our ability to accept God's grace in our lives?

Conclusion

Translating theological truths, statistics, philosophy, and Valuegenesis findings into practical Christian applications is one of the most complex tasks for teachers in Adventist schools. The activity ideas listed above should help underscore the importance of faith talk in the classroom and show how to accomplish it at a level appropriate to the age and maturity of the student.

Christ taught by using simple examples and familiar experiences. Maybe it is time for us to go beyond just reading a Bible text and saying a prayer for worship. We need to plan ongoing opportunities for teachers and students to think and talk as they grow in faith and grace. One teacher said, "I want my students to bring religion into every aspect of their lives. I want them to understand God with all of their minds, their bodies, and their emotions."7 Isn't that what the Adventist school is about? ☞

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an author and member of the Valuegenesis research team. Dr. Rice developed the activity suggestions in this article in response to the Valuegenesis data. She is interested in hearing about readers' experiences with the activities in this article, and other ideas for teaching grace in the classroom. E-mail: grice@sph.llu.edu.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For a complete report of the Valuegenesis research project, see Roger Dudley, with V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992), Gail Taylor Rice, "Have You Hugged Your Kids Today?" *Spectrum* 22:2 (May 1992), and "Warmth: The Missing Ingredient in Adventist Schools," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 55:4 (April/May 1993), pp. 4-9.
2. Adding a strong Christian school to a loving family and nurturing church increases the chances of a young person's developing a mature Christian faith from about 30 percent to more than 50 percent.
3. Students agree that the religious programs at their schools have an impact on their religious faith.
4. While students stated that classroom worships were helpful to them, this part of school religious programming seemed to be the weakest area. Only 40 percent of the students agreed that morning worships helped develop religious faith a fair amount or more, as compared with 52 to 60 percent of the students who said chapels, Bible classes, and weeks of prayer impacted their religious faith.
5. Gail Taylor Rice, *The Textures of Grace in Our Schools* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press/Pacific Union Conference Resource Center, 1996), p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Activities are based on ones in *The Textures of Grace in Our Schools* and are used with permission from the Pacific Union Conference Church Resource Center.

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