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CHURCH-BASED RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN EASTERN EUROPE
SUGGESTIONS FOR ROMANIA

by

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Prepared for the
International Faith and Learning Seminar
held at
Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S.A.
June 1993

137-93 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA

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1. Introduction

This paper was developed during the International Faith and Learning Seminar in 1993. Spurred on by many stimulating discussions, and by the challenge of the growing awareness of work to be done in Eastern Europe, a number of ideas evolved which could be useful for the future of Adventist education in Eastern Europe, especially in Romania.

In Romania we need a variety of approaches, one of them being church-based religious instruction, replacing or supplementing the work of schools. From the outset the focus needs to be on an integration of faith and learning - as will be explained.

Perhaps, an interest will be aroused in examining the need of a three-pronged approach to religious education in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, in harmony with the implied criticism of E. G. White's statement that, on the whole, our ideas on education are too narrow.

2. The situation in Eastern Europe

The geographical focus of this paper are the countries of Eastern Europe.

2.1. The Past

The countries of Eastern Europe have much in common. Marxist ideology was forced on the people, mainly through a centralized, tightly controlled education system. Knowing about the power of education, the Communist leadership barred active Christians from teacher training institutions, which explains a lack of teachers in the Adventist church. Private enterprise of any kind and with it the mentality favorable for taking initiative in starting private schools, was viewed with suspicion by the authorities during the Communist era. It was almost impossible to have private schools, let alone Christian private schools. And now that it is possible it will take time to build up a total educational system.

2.2. The Present

The great political changes of 1989/90 swept away the rigid control of education. The winds of change have also blown many teachers right out of their jobs because they had either been too close to the party or because their specialties, Russian language and culture, and Marxist-Leninist doctrines, are being replaced by other topics and other foreign languages, mainly English (1).

Certain trends are obvious. The first of these is the resurgence of political power of the dominant churches. They have been active in promoting nationalist sentiments leading to the overthrow of the regimes and now the churches claim their share in reordering society and in filling the ethical and spiritual vacuum which was left by the breakdown of Communist rule. The obvious way of re-educating the masses by the churches would be the introduction of obligatory religious instruction in public schools.

It remains to be seen if the dominant churches will succeed with their plan to monopolize moral education. If they do, the smaller churches may want to establish their own system of religious instruction in order to avoid confusion in the minds of their children who would be required to attend classes taught by Orthodox or Roman Catholic teachers.

Another trend is an invasion of popular national culture with a variety of new ideologies. In addition to very general trends such as materialism, secularism, and individualism which are characteristic of Western countries, there is a great receptiveness in the population for all novelties, be it religious cults, New Age ideas, or spiritistic seances. In order to prepare Adventist children for the swelling flood of subtle falsehoods, the church has to build a line of defense. Education will be an effective means to deal with a variety of questionable influences. If the influence of Western popular culture is so noticeable already after a few years of freedom, more of the same is likely to come.

2.3. The Future

During the last three years public interest in Adventist evangelism has been so overwhelming that most of the energies of the church have been concentrated on this type of establishing Adventist beliefs. Most recently, however, the hunger for biblical teaching has been on the decline. All the more reason to think of other ways to evangelize.

Schools have been effective instruments of evangelism in many countries of the world but schools are a very costly means of education. Other forms of Adventist education need to be examined, also.

3. Varieties in Adventist Education

There are three main agents in education: home, school, and church. They transmit the ethical and religious values, described by Roger Dudley in his book Passing on the Torch (2).

3.1. Home

As regards the formation of attitudes and values parents are clearly the most influential teachers. Adventist parents have been very successful in Eastern Europe. Quoting Alf Lohne, who had visited Romania in the 80s, Roger Dudley praises the dedication of Romanian parents;

"I was told that 70% of the church members are young people. After visiting several churches and speaking at several large meetings, I have no doubt that this is true. I also learned that 80% of the children in Adventist families join the church. How can this be explained in a country where not only do we not have any church schools or church operated educational institutions of any kind but also no youth paper or books for children and youth?

The explanation I received was that parents lead their children and young people to Christ. Parents demonstrate to their children that the values they have found in the church are greater than those offered anywhere else." (3)

Such optimal conditions for the transmission of Christian values, as observed above, might deteriorate as family cohesiveness crumbles under the impact of Western individualism. Christian education in the home is likely to become more difficult. Parents will need more help from the church. The leaders of our church in Romania, Czechia and Slovakia and other Eastern European countries, anticipate this need. A service structure of family life directors in unions and conferences has been developed. Even local churches have begun to appoint family life directors. One of their tasks will be to encourage our parents by parents' meetings or seminars, or by organizing training sessions for pastors and lay members. A first step in this direction was taken in 1992 when a Family Life Leadership Seminar was organized by the General Conference and Euro-Africa Division (4).

3.2. School

As mentioned before it was not possible to have private schools in Eastern Europe, much less Christian schools, during the Communist era. The new governments, however, look very favourably on the opening of private schools, and even promise to pay part of the teachers' wages. For many years, only one secondary school has been operating in Croatia. In 1992 a secondary school was opened in Cluj, Northern Romania. Two other churches in Romania look for a suitable building to start an Adventist secondary school. Also, by private initiative, a school of nursing has been established in Braila, Romania.

It would be a great blessing for the church in Eastern Europe if some more schools were opened. Schools are assets in several ways:

- a) they produce candidates for the seminary
- b) schools are good for church growth
- c) children who go to Adventist schools tend to grow in "denominational loyalty and Adventist orthodoxy" according to the North American Valuegenesis study (5).
- d) Where our church has schools, young people are more inclined to choose teaching as a life work. Teachers help the church by strengthening its teaching ministry in various ways e.g. by being Sabbath school teachers in the children division, and in giving religious instruction.

The opening of schools for Adventist children and a reasonable percentage of other children should remain a high priority in educational planning in Eastern Europe. But care needs to be taken to study the survival chances of a school before it is

opened. A hard look needs to be directed at the motivation of local parents and church members (not all of those who ask for Christian schools are going to sacrifice for this kind of education). There need to be suitable teachers and buildings. The financial burdens which result ought to be discussed with candor. Since in the near future we cannot have schools for all Adventist children in 835 churches and a fast-growing membership of 70,000 in Romania, we need to explore other possibilities. Something has to be done immediately. Also plans need to be made to provide the few SDA teachers we have with a clear 'philosophy' of Christian education, perhaps in a context of Faith and Learning Seminars.

3.3. Church-related religious education

The idea of passing on the teachings of the Bible to the next generation through what used to be catechesis is not new. The teaching ministry of the early church and of the Jewish community certainly is a response to the explicit command in Deuteronomy 6. Martin Luther and his associates did much to revive this idea. Most Christian churches have some kind of catechism for initiating the 12-14 year-old children into the community of believers. In many countries the Adventist church follows this pattern by offering baptismal classes or brief periods of similar religious instruction for this age group. Such a catechesis for the older children is not enough, not even in churches where the Sabbath school for children is working well. Our children need more teaching, and we need to begin teaching our children at an earlier age, like in Austria where religious instruction, in addition to Sabbath school, is offered to all children in Adventist families, age 6-16.

Austria

About 30 years ago the school authorities in Austria allowed the Adventist church to develop a substitute for religious instruction in school. It takes place on Sundays or on an evening during the week, depending on whatever time is found most suitable by the parents who often travel great distances to take their children to such Bible lessons. Local pastors are usually assisted by church members so that at least three age groups can be taught at the same time. The curriculum consists of Bible stories for the first four grades in school, with SDA materials for every class. The older children concentrate on church history and Adventist history, mainly taught through Ellen G. White's Great Controversy, a copy of which is given to every child. Much imagination and dedication is poured into this venture. By their own admission the leaders in this religious instruction movement consider the instructional materials as provisional and have embarked on a total revision of all the materials.

Germany

In Southern Germany a similar plan is followed, but does not usually start at age 6, but rather at age 11. There is a growing consensus, however, that religious instruction should begin at

age 8. In Germany there has been a concerted effort to produce suitable teaching material for several age groups in Sabbath School and - separately - for religious instruction. A degree of integration with non-Biblical experience-based themes has been achieved. Workbook type of material, called Schritte ins Leben (Steps into Life) has been published with enough lessons to serve three years of teaching. Also, a book for the teaching of Adventist and Christian church history has been developed (6).

There is an abundance of non-Adventist religion textbooks in the German language, constantly increasing in a well-established cooperation of universities and church-operated centers. More recently, however, the biblical content in these books has been decreasing, so we cannot use all of the literature from other churches.

Our SDA children often lose interest in the Bible. More and more we begin to realize that we need all the advice we can find in psychology and education in order to keep the interest of increasingly secularized children in the church. We begin to see the need for enriching the theology by other disciplines in order to avoid the worst - that children find Bible teaching so boring and unrelated to their life that they are turned away from it.

Croatia

Thanks to a doctoral dissertation by Jovan Mihaljcic (7) we are able to trace the first ten years of religious instruction in Croatia. It is a success story. In preparation for the first year of church-based religious instruction American texts were translated. But since one year of American school instruction was designed for five periods a week, while the church-based counterpart in Croatia requires one lesson a week or less, the translated material of an American school year lasted for much longer in Croatia. This caused a problem: some of the material was too easy for the older children. Mihaljcic found out about this by a carefully conducted survey. One reason for the American church to pour millions of dollars into the K-12 Bible textbook program had been the repeated complaint of young people that lessons were too easy because well-known Bible stories were repeated over and over again, reducing the challenge which leads to thinking and discussion. This again points to the need of choosing Bible stories with great care. There are mission stories, and all kinds of stories and experiences to bring out the needed educational effect. Here again an enrichment of Biblical knowledge through other areas of life and learning is called for!

Generally the comments of pastors, parents and children as regards religious instruction have been favourable. Through the exemplary research work done by Mihaljcic we have a good model for research. Also, we have proof that this form of Adventist education, once planted in Eastern European soil, will take root and - hopefully - bear fruit for eternity.

Southern France

A new approach was tried in the South France Conference where a unique experiment in Adventist education was started last year. When a church school was closed, one of the teachers joined up with another lady to work out a new system of religious instruction, by writing materials for our parents. The plan was to concentrate on themes which were likely to cause confusion in the young minds during instruction in their public schools. Predictably the first task was to immunize children against the subtle evolutionist teachings in public school.

This work could have been done more quickly and with greater professionalism if the materials already at hand in the North American Division such as God, Creation and You had been consulted. Nevertheless, this thoughtful piece of innovation deserves mention because of the integration of faith and learning which was attempted here. Instead of merely repeating Bible stories like in Sabbath School, it was realized that a clearer focus needs to be found. Biblical content was enriched with nature studies and ideas from the sciences, in order to build a bridge spanning the chasm between Bible teaching and the lessons which a child experiences in school.

Wherever plans for the introduction of religious education are made, there is a wealth of experience, of ideas and materials to draw from. In 1992 we counted 2,200 instructors and 23,500 children participating in church-based religious instruction in the Euro-Africa Division.

From experience in several countries, in teaching as well as in curriculum and material development the writer suggests the following plan of action for Romania. It could be modified to fit other places.

4. Project in Romania

4.1. Leadership

An associate director of education needs to be appointed. He should plan and promote. He, or preferably, she should know English or German in order to benefit from an exchange with the Euro-Africa Division and with specialists in the field. A knowledge of English would also help to evaluate existing sets of materials published in North America and Australia, and to organize some translation, or preferably free adaptation to the culture of the target country. The associate director of education should support kindergartens, schools and Christian education in general, while the main director of education would continue to lead out in what used to be the only kind of Christian education available in Eastern Europe, the education of ministers, an area which will need a great deal of attention in the near future. From the outset the associate leader in religious education should be given opportunity for developing a broad perspective for his work, so that he can give orientation

to teachers and ministers in a novel line of church work. The best means of preparation would be a course in the Integration of Faith and Learning, either in connection with a year at Newbold College, England, a M.A.-course in Education, or in one of the two-week sessions provided by the Education Department of the General Conference.

4.2. Aims and Curriculum

Once the Romanian SDA church has decided on the framework, the ages to be served and the time and financial resources available, a curriculum framework needs to be developed and approved by the Union.

The main aims chosen should guide in all planning and textbook production.

If we adopt the aims of the Austrian curriculum for religious instruction we would want to concentrate on Bible knowledge for children, and on the establishment of an Adventist identity through a study of church history. But if, instead, we aim at answering the questions which are likely to arise in the children's interaction with culture, society and school, in the context of age-related problems, we need a broad base from which to start. A narrow limitation to something like Bible readings for children would unintentionally harden the modern secular compartmentalization which associates the Bible with church, separate from other things in school and society. Why not teach the child to integrate faith and learning? Such an attempt at integration is quite successful with the latest materials published in Australia where the outstanding work of three full-time curriculum workers has brought results which will help the world field, including our Eastern European churches (8).

The curriculum document of our Romanian church could be modelled after the South Pacific (Australian) discussion paper of 1990, which can be obtained from the Euro-Africa Division (9). It would be a great loss to further development if the clarification of aims was neglected in the selection process. If an education director has clear aims and a well-established orientation in the integration of faith and learning, he will be able to select from the great wealth of materials what the children of his country are likely to need.

In fact, most modern curricula, especially in Germany, begin with needs of the children as established with the help of developmental psychology and other educational knowledge. Yet, it would oversimplify such a need-based approach, if we expected the description of age groups to give us clear recipes for curriculum work (10).

4.3. Integrating knowledge into faith

At this point it is necessary to add a brief basic philosophy.

According to Gaebelein, the great pioneer of the faith integration 'movement,' the chief purpose of an integration was to 'christianize' all aspects of a college or school. Gaebelein referred to 2. Cor. 5:10 in this context, "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (11).

The establishment of a "total world" in a school dedicated to a totally Christian world-view has been discussed in the first issue of the new Journal of Research on Christian Education (12). By reading this anthropological research report and the discussion it engendered one can study the application of some of the ideas which are found in the standard literature on the integration of faith and learning (13). Meanwhile a collection of Adventist responses to that literature has been built up (14). Most of these papers, the fruit of two-week seminars at the Institute of Christian Teaching, move in the direction of promoting the introduction of a Christian world view into classrooms and lecture halls. The title of so far 9 volumes Christ in the Classroom could accordingly be paraphrased as: Christ into the classroom.

Integration could also point in the opposite direction, or the other way around, that is: the introduction of other disciplines into Christian and Biblical content matter. It is not exactly the reversal of Gaebeleins "bringing into captivity". A certain superiority of theology over other fields of knowledge should be maintained in a Christian institution, but even an evangelical writer like Norman L. Geisler favors the enriching of faith through other disciplines.

"Biblical studies and arts and sciences enrich each other. Most often there is no serious conflict between biblical studies and the arts and sciences. Rather there is mutual enrichment... In a Christian university, the interaction between biblical studies and other disciplines should always be a two-way street" (underlining by R.S.) (15).

For many Christians in Eastern Europe, who have grown up with a clear cut polarity of Christian faith on the one hand and Communist ideology on the other, such a 'reverse' view of the integration of faith and learning may seem absurd. How can faith be enriched and strengthened by contact with science, reason, other knowledge, or experience? What could be the advantage for our church of strengthening the interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and other lines of knowledge? Several reasons can be put forward in support of the notion that not only in the West, but also in Eastern Europe our church will soon appreciate the need for opening a beautifully developed biblical faith to interaction and eventually also an integration of faith and learning. Learning is here a collective term to denote sciences and humanities, culture and arts.

a) Changing attitudes towards culture

There is a sequence of sociological development which seems to

characterize the stages through which a community of faith moves (and perhaps also some individuals). Typically a sect (a sociological, not a theological term in this context) will move on to be a denomination, and from being a denomination to the status of global church (16). In other words, and using the terminology of Niebuhr, a young persecuted church is usually against culture, that is, rejecting the philosophy and world view of the 'world'. As time passes, there may be a softening of this attitude, especially with university students who move into a more independent stage of faith, stage 4 according to Fowler (17), usually characterized also by a more tolerant attitude towards culture. Our church develops in a similar way. Greater openness for a dialogue of Bible-oriented believers with representatives of other disciplines would help us to better understand our children.

b) Interdisciplinary thinking in our seminaries

Our seminaries in Eastern Europe are typically 'theologia sola' institutions. This rather narrow intellectual environment can be enriched by the establishment of other departments on the campus, or by inviting guest lecturers from non-theological disciplines to the campus. The desire to do this is very strong in Friedensau and Bucharest and should be encouraged, because the students in our seminaries will one day lead the church in the ministry to the children.

c) Age-related considerations

Developmental psychologists like Ronald Goldmann remind us of the limited capacity of children to deal with 'undiluted' biblical presentation (18).

Here again, on a very different level, other materials have to be integrated into a Bible lesson e.g. on creation. Some nature studies which are not from the Bible "enrich" the biblical argumentation which otherwise might turn out to be too abstract for younger children.

d) The essence of Christian Education

According to the results of the Valuegenesis study, an openness to questions has been found to provide one of the conditions of learning which favor the development of an age-related maturity of faith. Questions often arise at the points of intersection of faith and reason, or of faith and science. Also, a closer look at the ground breaking book of Ellen G. White, Education, illustrates that Christian education includes all aspects of life and not the Bible only.

4.4. Contents

The aims must determine our choice of contents for teaching. It would be very simple to adopt the Austrian set of materials:

Age 6-10(11) Bible stories
 4 years of simple stories
 1 year, the fifth, with the more difficult Old Testament stories

Age 11-14(15) Church history and Adventist history

It is easy to find suitable sections in the American/Australian books, for translation into Romanian. In this process we need to do more than simply translate. For didactic reasons the principle of starting with something in the experience of the children and then proceeding to the Bible text must be applied rigorously.

A parable of Jesus is often told first and the connection with cultural reality established afterwards. How much easier for the children if we always begin a lesson with a non-Biblical introduction like Jesus often did.

Priorities need to be set. There is need for Biblical knowledge but it is also important that a positive attitude towards the church and towards the person who represents it is formed. According to some theories attitudes are best transmitted through a human model (19). In addition to the teacher, guests or suitable models through books or films can be chosen to transmit the values which are important in Adventist education.

We cannot teach faith, but we begin to unravel the mystery of what conditions of learning are conducive to the intellectual and emotional climate which enhances the growth of faith in children and young people. In order to develop young persons who have a level of faith maturity in keeping with their age, the educational agencies (home, school, and church) should strive to provide an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance, a readiness to answer questions and credit the young for their willingness to dialogue. These factors seem to impinge on the ability of young people to 'understand' the theological focus which the valuegenesis researchers call "grace orientation" (20). Although this research was done in North America where society is different from what it is in Eastern Europe, there are indications that, with time, Eastern Europe will become more similar to the Western world.

4.5. Personnel

There is a shortage of pastors in Romania as compared with most other European countries. How can they shoulder yet another burden? The ideal would be to have interested church members to share a part of the task. But the extra-clerical task force in Adventist education needs to be strengthened. A beginning for this was already made by inviting all those who are interested in children ministry to attend an education convention in April 1992.

We have a realistic chance of finding lay-members who are willing

to join the rank of church-based teachers. In South Germany, about 50% of religious instructors are not pastors! In fact, trained teachers can play an important role not only in teaching our children, but also teaching the pastors who are trained to preach, and not trained to teach. They need additional training in storytelling, leading a discussion or just simply let the children work silently. Sermonizing or drab school work could have an adverse effect on the children. Some children who hate school or who are not old enough to grasp a sermon need a more playful and active approach in order to love the instruction in church, to relate positively to the pastor or teacher and as a consequence come to love the Lord and HIS people. To lead children in this direction we need to activate some of the natural talent reserves in our church. Some church members, especially ladies, have a lot of empathetic ability and an intuitive skill to make children happy.

4.6. In-Service-Training

In the first years of a religious education project much training is needed. A typical weekend of training would include a short spiritual introduction and then group work where each tells the others about the most memorable incidents in his/her life with regard to learning to love the Bible. Some insights about what children like and how they respond will certainly emerge from such a Friday evening.

On Sabbath the assembled teachers should see a good children Sabbath School in action.

On Sabbath afternoon, a lively mix of practical exercises, for storytelling, singing and playing games.

The actual 'training' would be on Sabbath evening and Sunday. Not more than two lectures should be given: on the first encounter an overview of "Aims and Methods in teaching religion" will be appropriate. (There is a wealth of ideas for such a talk in American and German Adventist materials.)

Much time needs to be spent to explain the materials to be used. In order to encourage a broader view of religious instruction the second feature talk should be on some interesting details in church or Adventist history, or about the development of faith in children.

Besides practical training, the teachers should also be encouraged to develop their own ability to "think Christianly", and to strengthen their Adventist identity.

4.7. Evaluation

We have only one attempt at evaluating church-based religious instruction. The doctoral dissertation of Mihailjicic, mentioned above. Following his example, a teacher or graduate student of the seminary could develop questionnaires for students, parents

and teachers. In planning a new curriculum for our children in Romania, the evaluative component should be placed into the plans from the outset. Without evaluation and constant striving for excellence the Romanian project could soon stagnate and become listless duty work - like church-based religious instruction in many other places.

4.8. Implementation

Conclusion: Steps to be taken

1. A vote by the union committee to start a country-wide project, and perhaps a limited pilot project even before the beginning of the new school year 1994/95, in one of the six conferences.
2. The appointment of an associate director for planning and curriculum development.
3. The writing of a curriculum with general aims and with contents and methods for at least two age groups: 8-11, 12-15. And a tentative line on how to evaluate the project.
4. Translation of suitable materials. As soon as enough teacher copies for two years have been prepared, all children in one location could start out in two groups.
5. Teachers receive their books - as far as possible during a training weekend and not just by mail. They need to know how to use such books.

The five steps above will take the best part of a year if the assistant director of education can invest much time and travel. If nobody can work at this big assignment full-time, at least two years of preparation are needed. A venture of this magnitude cannot be started without thorough preparation.

An investment in time and effort will pay dividends in the form of children who learn early to integrate faith and learning, and to unmask and resist the subtle influences of a secular school in an increasingly secularized society.

Endnotes

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20. Roger L. Dudley, 1992, op. cit. p. 22, 99-102, 271-273.

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