

Recommendation to Christian Education
1st – 6th Grade SME program
SME Task Force
April 14, 2008

Background

In the fall of 2006, a new Sunday Morning Education program (SME) was implemented. The teaching methodology follows the principles of a Montessori program and uses the curriculum called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The program has come to be known as the Atrium. The Atrium represented a significant change from the “traditional” SME program that has been offered at Good Shepherd since its inception almost 25 years ago.

The Christian Education Ministry Team (CEMT) held a meeting in October 2007 to educate parents and hear concerns of the Atrium. Approximately 20 parents attended the meeting and those that had issue and concern with the Atrium were the most vocal. As a response to the concerns, a task force was formed.

Formation of Task Force

The task force was intentionally formed to consist of members with different opinions. We set and agreed to ground rules that helped us to express our ideas in a thoughtful and non-threatening manner and enabled us to actively listen to each other. While members of the task force had their own feelings and ideas about the SME program, we agreed that we were primarily here to represent the voice of our members and listen for how God was calling us to respond in this situation. We desired to work together to model how Christians with varying ideas can live together in community.

We were charged to report back to the CEMT in January 2008. Due to the scope and complexity of this assignment we were unable to meet this deadline. We began meeting in early December and have held 12 meetings since this time. As part of the discernment process, members of the congregation were invited to submit concerns and ideas for the task force to consider. Also as part of the discernment process we agreed to visit the Atrium and make our own observations about the program.

Task Force Mission Statement

Our purpose is to make a recommendation to Christian Education for the 1st – 6th grade SME program.

Findings

1. Historically, curriculum for SME was selected and approved by a staff member. In 2006, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was presented to Pastor David and Brenda Dozer as coordinator of the SME program and determined to be a program that could address space and volunteer teacher shortages while offering a quality curriculum. It was not recognized at the time that this new program represented such a significant change and parents were not engaged in discussions around the decision.
2. In the first year (2006-07), the Atrium program was implemented before materials and lessons to support the curriculum were fully developed and the Atrium was not adequately staffed with teachers with a full knowledge of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. As a result, the first year of the program was less than optimally implemented. This led to dissatisfaction of several members who withdrew their children from the program and have chosen not to return to SME.
3. To address these issues of staffing and curriculum, in the second year (2007-08), more materials and lessons have been created, there is better organization and volunteers have received more training in delivering lessons and assisting in the Atrium. In spite of the changes made, some parents remain dissatisfied with the program.
4. The Atrium represents a different learning environment than most parents choose for their children Monday – Friday. It is difficult for some children to engage in this learning style. This environment becomes particularly difficult for children who come as visitors. The aspect that was most troubling to parents was the amount of freedom given following a lesson.
5. In an attempt to address the learning environment concerns, in the second year, the Atrium began following a planned weekly lesson, and the children are allowed to choose to have another lesson or work with materials. This encourages artistic endeavors, reflection, copying scripture or creating a take home item. There are educational tools to reinforce the themes of the lessons. The children are not free to choose to just play or do nothing.
6. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd utilizes hands-on materials as part of the lessons. These were thought to add value and meaning to the lessons for 1st – 3rd graders because it allows a child to touch and feel the Biblical characters and objects and were age appropriate.
7. Parents expect their children to bring home materials from the lesson to enable further dialogue in the home throughout the week.

8. The Atrium provides an opportunity for the older children to complete a special research project. Not everyone wanted to participate in a research project and some parents understood this to be mean extra “assignments” at home and too much time away from the classroom lessons. Due to volunteer shortages, the research project area was not well supervised and this contributed to further dissatisfaction with this concept.
9. The prayer service at the end of the program is a unique experience for children to practice prayerful concern for others, develop leadership skills as they lead the service, hear God’s word and come together to recap on learnings for the day. Some parents, who objected to the Atrium in general, did voice support for this component of the program.
10. Several parents expressed concern at the lack of the ability to develop friendships as part of SME. While parents expect meaningful Bible-based lessons, they also want an opportunity for socialization and friendships as part of the program.
11. The wide-open gymnasium made it difficult to hear and focus.
12. Parents expressed a desire to have their children grouped within their grade.
13. The SME Task Force received feedback from approximately 16 different families with 12 of those families speaking out against the Atrium. This represented approximately 29 children of the Atrium age group. The concerns most frequently heard were:
 - Concerns with the curriculum, specifically around the teaching of the Creation Story
 - Too much freedom of activity choice following the lesson
 - Too wide of an age range together in the gym
 - Parents want to see learning materials from the lessons so they can continue discussions at home
 - Lack of the ability to socialize and develop friendships

Recommendations

We are providing both short-term recommendations (2008-2009 school year) and long-term recommendations. Through this process we have discovered how very much parents care about their child's Christian Education. Praise God!! Through our discussions with parents and as part of the task team discernment, we have identified the following qualities that should be part of an SME program:

- Assure the curriculum is fully developed and has been approved by the Good Shepherd Pastoral staff
- Assure that parents are adequately educated and support the idea
- Contains a detailed implementation plan
- Bible-based
- Contains prayer and reflection time
- Encourages parent involvement
- Provides teacher training
- The primary focus of SME is to educate our children where they participate in peer learning and faith formation.
- A prayer service where everyone gathers at either the beginning or end of each SME session is a valuable time for practicing prayerful concern for others, developing leadership skills and hearing God's word.

Short-term Recommendations (2008-2009)

The SME Task Force recommends that the Atrium program be tabled at the end of the school year in May and return to the traditional SME program delivery mechanism for the next school year. This will give CEMT time to address the long-term recommendations that follow later.

Short-term – Grades 1st – 3rd

While we are recommending returning to the traditional SME program for the next school year, we suggest that CEMT consider how they can incorporate the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd curriculum (1st – 3rd) into a traditional SME program and supplement the curriculum to meet the requests of the parents. This would include:

- Assure Pastor David has reviewed the curriculum. He has currently addressed and made recommendations around the Creation story which was of concern to some parents.
- Deliver only one lesson per week and add reinforcing activities for the lesson.
- Deliver lessons via a traditional classroom environment. This means grouping children by grade. We recognize this may mean 2 grades need to be put together due to space limitations.

We realize this will take considerable effort. It is worth considering purchasing published curriculum to supplement the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd lessons with additional activities (e.g., games, crafts) related to the lessons. If CEMT feels they are not resourced to put this blended plan together before September, they should consider purchasing published curriculum as recommended below for 4th-6th grade.

Short-term – Grades 4th – 6th

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd curriculum for this age group is not complete. We recommend purchasing published curriculum to be implemented in a traditional classroom setting. This means grouping children by grade. We recognize this may mean 2 grades need to be put together due to space limitations.

Long-term Recommendations (2009 – onward)

We recommend the CEMT develop a long-term vision for SME. The “traditional program” and the Atrium are not the only options to be considered as parents have also suggested other formats. We recommend that CEMT research and evaluate other teaching methodologies as part of their discernment for a long-term plan. For any program to be successful, Christian Education needs to:

- Make it a part of a long-term vision for SME
- Decide what resources are needed
- Involve parents. Take the time to educate and communicate with parents
- Develop an implementation plan
- Make sure it is supported by the CEMT

We would be remiss if we did not recognize the time and effort that has gone into the Atrium program over the past year and a half. Therefore, it is worth noting that this is NOT a vote against the Atrium but rather an acknowledgement that in order for this program to be optimally executed at Good Shepherd, it requires specialized resources (people and materials), support of parents, an implementation plan and consideration of the space issues at Good Shepherd.

We hope that you find these recommendations helpful. Please know they are the result of considerable debate and prayer. We are thankful for the deep and abiding desires of our community to nurture the faith of our children.

God’s peace to the CEMT as they are called to further discern how God is calling Good Shepherd to faith formation for our children.

Respectfully submitted,

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