

"In Their Own Language: Kids, Computers and Christian Education"

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At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the gift of speaking in a different language, -the language of the hearer. In today's church that includes sharing the Gospel through the language of multimedia and computers.

Many churches have begun supplementing their curriculum with Christian software. The children of the electronic age love computers. They are eager to learn in Sunday School when the teacher pops in a CD, and they want to come back to do it again. This movement merely recognizes some simple facts: you can't teach a kid who isn't there, doesn't want to be there, or isn't coming back. In a world of competing attentions and alternatives, Christian software is a language that attracts and keep kids.

I first began experimenting with computers in my Sunday School back in 1990. The computers were slow and expensive, and the software left a lot to be desired. But after class, we couldn't get the kids out of the room. They hovered around the computer, -eyes wide open. And when their parents arrived and hovered, they became part of our wonderful problem. I'll never forget the day one of my teachers said to me, "Imagine what this is going to be like when we learn how to actually teach with these things!"

Yes, computers and Christian software are more expensive than construction paper and popsicle sticks, but they also get better results. The most expensive type of Sunday School is one that drives away families, and bores young people into membership oblivion. Denominations pay for boring Sunday School with decreasing membership, budgets and mission. Worse, children are raised without a biblical foundation that can help them know God more fully.

Getting started with computers in Christian is often easier and less expensive than most people realize.

1. Our pews are filled with computer literate members.
2. Many members have laptop computers which can be brought to church.
3. Good used computers are widely available from business and individuals who regularly upgrade.
4. New inexpensive computer equipment is within the range of many C.E. budgets or special donations.
5. Many churches already have computer equipment sitting idle on Sunday morning.
6. Bible story software is not very expensive and is reusable.

Today's families immediately understand why computers in Christian education make sense. They are using computers in unprecedented numbers and ways. They have them at home, use them at work, and support their use in the schools. They are eager to support a Sunday School experience that puts smiles on the faces of their children. Few want their children to go through the kind of Sunday School they themselves experienced.

But this isn't just about attracting kids. If it were, cable tv and donuts would be cheaper and just as attractive. It's about teaching them with an attractive tool. I've spent a lot of time with kids at the computer in my Sunday School. Something special happens when students begin to interact with software. They are eager, they are cooperative, they are intrigued, and they ready to open up. And because they enjoy software, they will happily go over the material more than once.

Software is a tool for the teacher and students to use together. It doesn't replace the teacher. At the computer, the teacher becomes the "guide by the side." We go through the software with our students. The software does not replace us or the lesson plan.

We begin every class with Bible study, and after using some software often find ourselves in discussion or some other related activity. Typically, we have two or three students per computer. Any more and they become passive observers. My small church has four computers in our lab. My co-teacher and I will each sit between two computers. Usually we're all working on the same program. That means we have to have four copies of it. That's a bit expensive, but you can't copy the software, and it would be very difficult to lead one class using four different programs at the same time! Each week a new group of students is rotated into our lab. We might have preschool/early readers one week, teens the next, and grades 3-5 after that. It depends on the schedule and the software we have.

Other than the "lab" model, many churches simply support a teacher who has a computer in their classroom, or brings in their laptop from time to time. Some pastors bring software into their Confirmation programs. Others provide software for families to take home. Software is one type of Christian education material that families are eager to use.

We use interactive Bible story software which often has discussion questions built right in. These are kid-friendly, animated and interactive multimedia programs. We also use scripture memory software, creative writing software for reflection, and Christian game software that has content. Many pastors and educators are surprised such software even exists. The denominational catalogs and corner Christian bookstores rarely carry much of a software selection. Back in 1996, that prompted several of my Sunday School teachers and I to form a ministry educating people about the use of C.E. software and providing churches with a consistent source that was reviewing software for theological content and quality. We also began developing our own software in 2000. Ours is the first Christian software designed by educators who also TEACH with the software. You can visit our website mentioned at the end of this article.

Most Christian education software is traditional and ecumenical in nature. About 70% of Christian software runs on both Windows and Mac. But the 30% which is Windows-only is a significant set of titles, so we recommend starting with PCs. Start with something that has at least a 400mhz processor, 64 mb of RAM, and an 8 mb videocard MINIMUM. (Please note: this recommendation has a date of 2003. With each passing year, this minimum goes up as new software comes out. It is not going up fast, but it is moving.) A good quality graphic card or chip with at least 8mb of RAM memory is a must for running multimedia software. Quite frankly, if you want your equipment to take you into the future, you will want PCs with a higher minimum. Older PCs are easy to find, but "making do" is rarely a good philosophy where computers and multimedia are concerned. They end up wasting precious volunteer and student time when they do not work right. And PCs that are too antiquated limit the software you can run.

Like the disciples at Pentecost, every teaching innovation has its nay-sayers standing off to the side slinging arrows. Some say we are drunk on technology. But those of us who have experienced computers in the classroom are reveling in a new language that connects with this generation. Like Peter we say, "No, we're not drunk. It's only Sunday morning. A time for amazement and astonishment. A time for our sons and daughters to dream dreams, and the old to see visions...." (Acts 2)

Neil MacQueen is a Presbyterian minister and founder of Sunday Software, 1-800-678-1948. More start-up information can be printed from his ministry's website -- www.sundaysoftware.com. For a complete catalog of recommended software, you can email neil@sundaysoftware.com or visit the website.

A Few Recommended Titles

Here is a range of popular titles that also demonstrates the wide variety of content styles found in Christian software. Each of these can be found on the Internet at our website, www.sundaysoftware.com. We're picky about our own software, and about including other people's software in our catalog. We're even more persistent about providing free teaching materials for most titles we carry. You can view outlines and graphics and video demos of all these and more at sundaysoftware.com.

Play & Learn Children's Bible CD

For preschoolers and early readers. 50 short animated Bible stories with clickable screens and additional Bible learning activities, including Bible pictures to paint and a Bible songs sing-a-long. Win/Mac 133mhz and higher.

Good Sam the Samaritan CD

A lesson-like multimedia program for ages 5 through 16, hosted by Bildad the Bible Explorer an animated host. 3D animated story, study notes, interviews with the characters, discussion starters, creative "dig deeper" content, such as, "what is a Samaritan anyway?" and a quiz show titled "Who Wants to Be a Samaritan." Win/Mac 266mhz and higher.

Discovery Interactive's Life of Christ CD

40 presentations on the Life of Christ, each followed by a quiz and multimedia study content. The content can also be played through like a game with certificates to print as students reach each level. Quite an impressive program and favorite of computer labs around the country. For ages 8 - 18. Win/Mac 133mhz and higher.

The Ten Commandments CD

Students climb Mt Sinai by exploring three 360 degree photobubbles taken on location at Mt. Sinai. Interactive learning activities and discussion starters are embedded in the photobubbles for students to find. Animated characters, video, terrific multimedia and music. Ages 6 to adult. Win/Mac 300mhz and higher.

Cal & Marty's Scripture Memory Game CD

Create, study, then unscramble the verse. Comes with a verse editor for students or teachers to create their own verses. Add quizzes and comments to each verse. Hosted by humorous animations of John Calvin and Martin Luther. Ages 8 - adult. Windows Only. 266mhz or higher.

Bongo Loves the Bible CD

Four 3D Nintendo-style games exploring concepts and content "about the Bible." Includes a four level Bible proficiency game, and "how the Bible came to be." Some content is editable. Watch out for the surf mummies and lava pits! Ages 7 to adult. Windows Only. 500mhz or higher.

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