

Book Reviews

A School for God's People: A History of the Sunday School Movement in Indiana. By Grover L. Hartman. (Indianapolis: Central Publishing Company, Inc., 1980. Pp. xiii, 106. Illustrations, notes. Paperbound, \$2.95.)

Hoosiers who are celebrating the bicentennial of the Sunday school movement will especially welcome *A School for God's People*. Although Grover L. Hartman has space only for the bare bones of institutional development, his work fills some of the vacancies that have prevented a complete understanding of the progress and regression of Indiana's Sabbath schools. Observers knew, vaguely perhaps, that midwestern Sunday schools began as powerfully influential offspring of Protestant evangelism and noted sadly how they have become, willy-nilly, the worrisome stepchildren of modern church programming. Hartman's service is to trace the descent of the institution from those early "big little schools" to the latter-day "little little schools," from times when the movement was a radical departure in frontier society to its present state of conservatism and lassitude. The movement expanded vigorously throughout the nineteenth century, entered the twentieth with great expectations intact, then foundered in the crosscurrents of the 1920s when professional educators began to tinker with the traditional formula. It split between "church school" advocates and "Sunday school" advocates, between denominationalists responding to rapid social and theological change and interdenominationalists who held firm for an ecumenical—and uniformly bland—program of Biblical studies. In succeeding decades schools in mainline churches atrophied, abdicating the popular front to fundamentalist groups.

Hartman is a product of the Hoosier Sunday schools, which he unapologetically defends as the wellspring of Protestant vitality. His purpose, in part, is to suggest that future growth of mainline denominations is linked to their efforts in behalf of the movement. For church leaders the theme is timely; evangelism is a favorite emphasis right now among traditionalists, such as the Presbyterians, who helped found the pioneer schools but who have lost interest in the cause during the past thirty years. One of Hartman's best chapters reviews by-products of successful Sunday schools: the Chatauqua, adult Bible classes, vacation church schools, even a style of church architecture (the once ubiquitous Akron plan). More important, perhaps, were reforms that schools abetted in earlier decades when they sometimes represented the only means of formal

education in pioneer neighborhoods and were the forerunners of public schools. The movement's original crusade for literacy and social responsibility is surely a more significant heritage than the Chatauqua circuit and drafty sanctuaries. Readers may wish Hartman's emphases were different in some places, and his viewpoint less personal, but it is also true that he touches nerves common in all Christian educators. For them, his concluding queries are on target: "What have we now to serve as the nursery of the church . . . [and] can we reclaim the Sunday school as the church's instrument of renewal and evangelism" (pp. 97-98)?

A *School for God's People* is not the thorough piece of scholarship that is needed to measure the social impact of the Sunday school movement in Indiana. Hartman writes as an advocate of the institution and as a prophet crying for renewal in Zion. This is perfectly legitimate except that it limits his audience to those who share his instincts about religious education generally. For social historians there is an outline of main events, a suggestion of available resources, and an indication that much has yet to be written. Hartman supports his narrative largely with statistics from various "annual reports" and with information about venerable leaders of the movement. This is a view from the top, which defines success as any huge, enthusiastic convocation of students kept busy with Bible recitation and hymn singing. There is too little analysis of the schools' influence on community life, on religious and moral values, and on Indiana politics. By the end of the last century such influence was probably immense. It is surprising, also, that the author chose to take sides against the Yankee preachers in the debate over who contributed most to the founding of Sunday schools in Indiana. Hartman's own selection of eminent leaders includes many of those Yankees and argues against the idea of an indigenous movement in the pioneer period.

Because Hartman did not set out to satisfy social historians, he is excused from doing penance for sins of omission. With those transgressions set aside, his book is a highly informative account of the Indiana Sunday schools and will be especially helpful to ministers, Sunday school teachers, and interested church members. Those who worry about church growth in the 1980s may find in Hartman's devotion to the cause a guidepost toward that "right path" which he is certain exists somewhere in the present darkness.

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