

# The Case against Church School Fees

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When I was a boy, I made my rounds of the available Sunday schools and Bible classes in the neighborhood, despite the skepticism of my liberal parents. The Lutherans offered choir robes and catechisms, not to mention the loving attention of Mrs. Honey. The Baptists let me play on their small electric organ and offered “pennies from heaven” as a reward for bringing other children to class. (Alas, I never earned any!) The Mennonites served the best snacks and gave us trading cards with pictures of legendary figures on the front and key biblical passages on the back. While each of these churches had a children’s offering, none of them levied any user fees for attending their children’s program. Motivated by their faith, the religious education of children was their gift to the world.

So you can imagine my concern when I first realized how many of our congregations count on revenue from church school fees to support their operating budgets! Nearly thirty percent of our largest churches charge some fee for their children’s religious education program. Some churches levy a registration fee while others view it as a materials fee. Some charge a reduced rate for the children of pledging members while others charge the same amount for all. Some offer scholarships to families with low income while others make allowance for waivers.

In most cases, the registration fee amounts to little more than a nuisance tax, generating less than one-tenth of the actual cost of the program, which begs the question — why bother? Indeed, in the long run, church school user fees probably cost our churches more than they bring in! We can examine the reasons for this in more detail.

Church school fees create an inequity in Sunday programming. The same arguments made for charging fees in the church school — providing snacks, purchasing supplies, subsidizing curricula, acknowledging the value of religious education — can all be made for the Sunday worship service as well! Where do we think those orders of service, or bulletins, come from? Or the candles and hymnbooks? We would think it silly to ask adult worshippers to pay a fee, over and above their pledges, to underwrite the cost of the worship service. On Sunday morning, the same standard should prevail in both the sanctuary and the classroom.

Church school fees also communicate the message that religious education is not central to the congregation’s mission, but is instead an “add-on,” since churches typically support their core services from a unified budget, sustained by the generous gifts of members and friends. The church school is an essential service in any vital congregation! It’s best to restrict user fees to those activities that are truly extras.

Church school fees undermine membership growth. One of the most frequently heard reasons that Unitarian Universalists give for having first visited one of our congregations

is that they were searching for a place where their children could receive a liberal religious education. In other words, the church school is often the “hook” that brings new families into our communities. If the first thing that newcomers encounter is a fee for service, however reasonable it might seem, they will be far less likely to view our congregation as friendly and hospitable.

Church school fees subvert efforts to cultivate responsible stewardship. Parents aren’t stupid — if they know that a fee will be charged for their children to participate in the church school, there’s a good chance that their pledges will be less generous than they might otherwise have been. When user fees are charged for a service as basic as religious education for children, there is a real danger that a “cafeteria culture” may develop, where members expect to pay for services *a la carte* rather than contribute to the whole mission and ministry of the church. And user fees rarely do more than generate a fraction of the revenue that would result from more effective efforts to cultivate generosity and a sense of stewardship.

Lyle Schaller, a renowned church consultant, has chronicled the history of changing expectations among church-goers in North America. This history has included, at every step, an institutional resistance to providing what became, in time, basic services. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, people kept themselves warm at church by bringing burning coals from home in metal containers called footwarmers. When churches began to install central heating, those who were satisfied with footwarmers argued that central heating would impose an unnecessary burden on the operating fund. The same thing happened with electrification, indoor plumbing, and off-street parking. (It wouldn’t be surprising to learn that pay toilets and parking meters were invented by churches as a means for generating revenue!) Sadly, church school fees are just one more example of this resistance. If we believe that our children are more important than off-street parking, then we need to remove the “parking meters” from the doors of the church school!

Happily, more than two-thirds of our largest churches charge no fees at all, choosing to support their religious education programs entirely from their operating budgets. Perhaps no church expresses the rationale for this approach better than the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, in stating “We believe that the religious education of our children is the responsibility of the entire congregation. We charge parents no fees for our classes for children and youth, and urge all families to provide strong financial support to the church through their annual pledge.” The religious education of children is a responsibility we share and we should feel privileged to joyfully support it, entirely from general revenues, as our gift to the world.

