



URBAN CURRENT

One man, one vision — one city, one world

Who can foretell the ultimate potential of one person with an idea?

He was born a child of the city in 1735. This son of privilege inherited his father's successful printing concern, which produced the *Gloucester Journal*.

Robert Raikes grew up in the spiritual vacuum of England. Cities were growing wildly, his included. The growth was marked by godless inhumanity, terrible physical conditions, gross exploitation of the lower classes, and the accompanying social problems those realities produce.

As a business man, not moving in the social circles of the "teeming masses," Raikes was aware of the urban landscape crammed with poverty-stricken humanity, rife with disease, and streets run by thugs and urchins.

Though influenced by Wesley and Whitfield, Raikes's idea did not grow out of a religious revival. He was not a religious leader. He did not recruit people with formal religious training to participate in his plan.

Raikes became convinced that he must do something for the thousands of people living in vice and poverty. He developed a program to serve prisoners. When prisoners were released, he would meet with them and try to help them start a new life. He worked this plan for almost 25 years. He hoped it would transform English society. He failed to see any measurable impact.

He shifted his focus. He determined that rather than wasting time on adults who were maybe already too far-gone, he would target children. He wondered if something could not be done to help "the little heathen of the neighborhood." He embarked on a new experiment he described as "botanizing" in human nature. He was convinced he must do something to break the vicious cycle of ignorance, poverty, and crime.

The children who most needed what Raikes had in mind worked in the mills and factories six days a week. They had no time for formal schooling and certainly not religious education. When Sunday came, they would enjoy their day off by running the streets. Ellwood Cubberley, the well-known educational historian, wrote "Sunday being day of rest and the mills and factories closed, the children ran the streets and spent the day in immorality and vice. For Raikes's idea, it was Sunday or no day.

Raikes's plan involved gathering children to teach them to read and write. He would add to this teaching on morals and manners by teaching them the Bible. In 1780, Raikes began his experiment. He chose the worst slum in Gloucester. Two teachers and two years later it looked like this effort would also fail. He had gathered about 90 children employed in the pin factories of Gloucester. He paid teachers about 25 cents to teach children on Sundays from 10 a.m. to noon and from 1-5 p.m. The children Raikes described as "miserable little wretches" who drove off the first couple of teachers.

Raikes persisted. He continued hiring teachers. He started one school after another. Queen Charlotte heard what was taking place. She granted Raikes a private audience to hear him tell his story. She gave her royal endorsement. When a fundraising drive was initiated, her name headed the subscription list.

Many churchmen opposed Raikes or simply ignored his work. John Newton, slave trader turned preacher, of "Amazing Grace" fame, supported Raikes in his work.

At some point Raikes stopped paying teachers. It became fashionable to volunteer teaching in Raikes's Sunday schools. The movement grew from four schools and 90 children to an enrollment of 250,000 pupils four years later. The schools morphed away from paid teachers,

secular subjects, and independence to being exclusively biblical in content, run by volunteers, based in local churches.

In a report issued in 1835, about 50 years after Raikes began, there were more than 1.5 million students enrolled in United Kingdom Sunday Schools served by about 160,000 volunteers. Over time, with the Bible as the focus, the Sunday school movement grew toward global impact.

Several observations...

Raikes was an urban visionary. Born in the city, raised in the city, running a business in the city; he was moved by the needs of the city and saw himself as a necessary part of the solution to its problems.

Raikes was not a native of the slums. It took him a while to figure out how to be effective. Because he was a man of means and influence, he was able to experiment, go the long haul, and "sell" his vision to people of prominence and means.

Innovation matters. Apparently nobody had ever tried to do what Robert Raikes did. Though his new idea was denigrated by religious leaders and mocked even by his own friends, he persisted.

This is another example of a Christian seeking to address social ills by spiritual means long, long before the contemporary fascination with "social justice." He did what believers have done down through history: love their neighbors, meet needs, solve problems, and point people to Jesus.

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