

AN ELEPHANT IN THE CLASSROOM

Teacher council meetings aren't just changing the way we teach; they're changing the way we learn.

By **Jessica Griffith and Richard M. Romney**
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Mzwakhe Sitole faces a challenge. As ward Sunday School president, he has a God-given responsibility to help improve gospel learning and teaching in the ward.¹

But the members of his ward in Johannesburg, South Africa, have, in some cases, vastly different backgrounds and expectations. Some are well educated; others are not. Many have been taught that a student's place is to listen, not to talk. Others face an uphill cultural battle in understanding that *both* men and women should be involved in teaching at church and at home.

"We also have people who speak different languages," Brother Sitole says. "But the Spirit wants to prompt each one."

When teacher council meetings and *Teaching in the Savior's Way* were introduced last year, wards and branches throughout the Church began holding teacher council meetings to discuss, learn about, and practice what it means to teach in the Savior's way.

That's when Brother Sitole began to see how teacher council meetings could bless his ward. Cultural challenges could be addressed, class participation could be increased, and different perspectives of members could become blessings.

Like many others around the world, Brother Sitole realized that the Lord isn't using teacher council meetings just to change how we teach; He's using them to also change how we learn.

An Elephant with a Twist

One of the most interesting discoveries for Brother Sitole was that as teachers empower students to participate in their own learning, everyone benefits from the expanded view that different perspectives provide.

That understanding came to Brother Sitole during a teacher council meeting, when a ward member shared the parable of the blind men and the elephant, only with a twist. The

Rope



Wall



Fan



parable tells how six blind men each describe an elephant differently (a leg is like a pillar, the tail is like a rope, the trunk is like a water spout, and so forth) because each is touching a different part.²

“But suppose the elephant represents gospel teaching,” Brother Sitole says. “Then we need to enable each class member to share their perspective, so that together we come to a common understanding of how the gospel blesses us all.”

That’s why teachers in Brother Sitole’s ward always sit around a table during teacher council meeting—to facilitate discussion. “It reminds us that everyone has an equal voice,” he says.

According to *Their* Needs

In Tokyo, Japan, Natsuko Soejima doubted she could teach well. “When I was called to be a youth Sunday School teacher,” she says, “I told the bishop I would be scared. But he said the call was from God, so I accepted.”

As a group, the class intimidated her because of the individual challenges they presented. Two of the youth had hearing disabilities. Some class members who had moved to Japan from other countries spoke only English. She also feared the age difference between her and her class members.

Then, in a teacher council meeting, Sister Soejima found an answer. “We talked about loving each class member, learning their names, praying for them

one by one, and teaching—guided by the Spirit—according to *their* needs,” she explains, “so that’s what I began to do.” She also did something else she’d learned in the council: “I used language that conveyed my love.”

The result? “My heart changed. I began to feel affection for my students. I cared about those who were missing and prayed for them too. As soon as one lesson ended, I started preparing for the next, to have time to think about teaching opportunities. I was overflowing with joy.”

Specific Answers

Brad Wilson, a Sunday School president in Minnesota, USA, makes sure teachers in the teacher council

Pillar



Hose



Spear



meeting don't leave until they've discussed how they're going to change because of what they've learned.

"We follow the outline provided in *Teaching in the Savior's Way*," says Brother Wilson. "We discuss teachers' experiences, then we discuss one of the suggested topics. As a facilitator, I ask questions and summarize thoughts. Then we practice implementation. We break into small groups and discuss, 'What am I going to do differently because of our meeting today?'"

Ron Goodson, a deacons quorum

instructor in the same ward, says he's impressed to see how Brother Wilson "coaches" the council. "We talk about how the Savior would teach," he says. "Then as you feel the Spirit, you think, 'This is something I should try with my class.' Thinking about the Savior changes your approach. It becomes less of 'I've got to prepare a lesson,' and more about, 'What do these deacons need and how can I help give them that?'"

He remembers writing in his journal, "I attended teacher council

meeting today, and here's what I need to do." In fact, his journal is full of such notes. He now prepares in advance: "Start early and you get promptings all week long." He asks the deacons what's going on in their lives: "I'm more effective in helping them when I know them better." And he's inviting deacons to help teach: "As they do, they learn better too."³

I Kept Singing

"In our council, we talked about how music can invite the Spirit," says



MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about teacher council meetings and *Teaching in the Savior's Way*, visit teaching.lds.org.

Jocelyn Herrington, a Primary teacher in the same Minnesota ward. “Later, I was teaching the Sunbeams. I thought, ‘I’ll sing while they’re coloring, and it will be nice.’ I started to sing, and they all stopped and listened. So I kept singing. It did bring the Spirit, and when I was done, they were reverent, waiting for me to speak. We had talked about that [in council] too, to bear your testimony when the opportunity comes. So I bore testimony in words they could understand.”

Sister Herrington says she appreciates Primary teachers being included in council meetings. “We talk about teaching adults,” she says, “but then Brother Wilson will say, ‘What about teaching youth? What about teaching children?’ He brings it back to our attention that all the different age ranges are there.”

From Council to Council

Adam Martin, a ward Sunday School president in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, says he appreciates suggestions from the ward council. “The Relief Society president or the elders quorum president will say, ‘We’d like teachers to focus on this,’ so we bring that up in teacher council [meeting],” he says.

When teacher council meetings first started, teachers weren’t sure what to expect, so he extended lots of personal invitations and introduced training materials available at teaching.lds.org. “Now the ball is rolling,” he says. “They know it’s a place to discuss what’s going on.”

CHANGES TO SUNDAY MEETINGS IN 2018

Beginning in January, changes are coming to Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society meetings. These changes build on what members have learned in teacher council meetings. An explanation of the changes, including new lesson materials, will be provided—starting next month—in conference editions of the magazines, on the Gospel Library app, and on LDS.org.

One recent meeting focused on following the Spirit. “We talked about preparing well but not worrying about covering everything,” he says. “One sister said she had always felt she needed to talk about every item in her lesson plan. You could see the light go on for her when we talked about following inspiration as you guide a discussion.”

Finding Solutions Together

Each teaching situation includes its own opportunities, challenges, and potential blessings. That’s why councils are effective, because they allow teachers, with help from the Spirit, to seek and find answers to *their* specific challenges.

Geoffery Reid, a stake Sunday School president in Arizona, USA, says teacher council meetings work best when teachers understand that their purpose is to counsel: “Then they see that they can help each other.”

The stake, he says, is focusing on helping teachers to shift from thinking, “Am I performing well?” to thinking, “How is the message being received?”

Marisa Canova, a Primary teacher in the stake, says that in response to a prompting she felt in teacher council, she now encourages her Valiant 8 class members to pray for each other. That was effective, but it might not work the same way for an adult class. “Praying for every member in a large Gospel Doctrine class might be overwhelming,” she says. “Fortunately, those teachers say, ‘How do you think we can adapt that for our class?’ And we find solutions together.

“What I appreciate about teacher council meetings,” she says, “is that they give us time to reflect on how we’re doing and what we’re doing. It’s helpful having support and feedback, feeling that you’re all working toward the same goal. I also like the different perspectives that multiple people bring to the table. It helps me consider things I definitely wouldn’t have considered on my own.”

As we participate and share in teacher council meetings, our vision of the elephant called “gospel teaching” begins to become clearer. Like Brother Sitole in Africa, many members around the Church are finding that as our ability to teach in the Savior’s way improves, it changes not only the way we teach but also the way we learn. ■

NOTES

1. See *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 12.2.2.
2. The parable is included in Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “What Is Truth?” (Church Educational System devotional for young adults, Jan. 13, 2013), broadcasts.lds.org; and Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “What Is the Truth?” *Friend*, Mar. 2017, 2.
3. For more suggestions, see Brian K. Ashton, “Helping Youth Teach,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2016, 66–67.