

Is Sunday School Obsolete?

I recently attended a ministry conference where several denominations were represented and, during a break, I overheard a discussion between several of the attendees about the value of Sunday School in today's culture. The implication was that Sunday School ministry in the local church is obsolete. Many Missouri Baptist's question the benefits of implementing the changes needed to revitalize their Sunday School ministry. In essence, they too are questioning the value of Sunday School ministry in today's culture. Space prohibits a full review of the subject but we can take a "quick glance" at some of the writings and principles that encompass this issue. First, we must acknowledge that, in several Missouri Baptist churches, the term Sunday School has been replaced by such terms as Bible Study, Adult Bible Fellowship, Life Groups, or simply Small Groups. No matter what the label, Sunday School is our primary small group ministry in the local church.

Early in the 20th century, Sunday School was affirmed as a foundational ministry for Southern Baptist churches. In 1902, Dr. E.Y. Mullins said "The Sunday School must, more and more, prove a factor of power in the pastor's work. Already in many churches the Sunday School is the chief and almost only hope for church growth. But whether in the family church, or the church among the masses of the great city, or the country church, the Sunday School will remain the most hopeful field of evangelistic endeavor." (*A Church Using Its Sunday School*, 1902). In his book *Building A Standard Sunday School* (1922), Arthur Flake states that the school (Sunday School) shall be positively evangelistic. He identifies the Sunday School as the church's greatest soul-winning opportunity. He further states that "...the soul winners of a church are found in the Sunday School." (Pages 98-99). Thom Rainer (*High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People In Your Church*, 1999) writes "Virtually all of the higher-assimilation churches in our study used a comprehensive plan to teach the Bible to all age groups. For most of these churches, the denominational Sunday School curriculum served this purpose well.' (Page 42). He further states, "The new Christians who immediately became active in the Sunday School were five times more likely to remain in the church five years later. And those churches that were emphasizing evangelism through the Sunday School were most naturally seeing new Christians involved immediately in Sunday School." (Page 45). He continued by saying "The research is clear if not overwhelming. Sunday School is the most effective assimilation methodology in evangelistic churches today. It is a place where teaching, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, and evangelism can all take place. It is the place where relationships are formed and people become connected to the church." (Page 47).

In his book *Revitalizing The Sunday Morning Dinosaur: A Sunday School Growth Strategy For The 21st Century*, Ken Hemphill (1996) summarizes Chapter Two (*Is Sunday School A Dinosaur in a Technological World?*) by saying, “Sunday School is no dinosaur. Its demise in some congregations and denominations can be traced to several causes, chiefly a loss of evangelistic fervor. Once churches lost their vision for Sunday School as a church growth tool, they could see no significance in the component parts in and of themselves. This integrated growth tool was slowly dismantled. Sunday School, when designed with a clear evangelistic purpose, becomes a vital integrated church growth tool for today’s church. It is simple to use and provides many advantages for churches of any size.” (Page 31).

It is hard to argue with the research and the time-proven principles that Sunday School is, indeed, a vital part of the local church’s ministry today. Maybe we ought to say that it should be a vital part of the ministry today. Sunday School is one ministry of the local church that can function as designed, regardless of the size of the church. The principles work in a church of 20, 220, or even 2,020!

I will be the first to admit that the journey to bring our Sunday School ministry back in line with the basic principles that we know are effective is not an easy one. The path is fraught with obstacles such as a comfort with the status-quo, a loss of passion to see the lost and unchurched reached, the “We’ve never done it that way before” syndrome, and unfortunately, outright disobedience to God’s mandate found in The Great Commission. The good news is that these obstacles can be overcome. It takes hard work, persistence, and a passion to see God’s Kingdom grow. As difficult as the obstacles may be, with prayer, a seeking of God’s will, and effective leadership at all levels; the Sunday Schools of our Missouri Baptist churches can be revitalized to become a vibrant, exciting, and effective ministry tool to reach the lost and unchurched. Is Sunday School obsolete? Absolutely not!

Bruce Morrison
Director of Sunday School/Discipleship
Missouri Baptist Convention

Published
The Pathway News Journal, May 2006