

STEVE MAY 2010

How to Increase the Health of Your Sunday School

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by Steve Gladen

After the number of responses from last month's article, *Small Groups Versus Sunday School*, I decided to dedicate the next two months to this important issue of Sunday School and small groups. This month I will discuss how you can bring health to your small groups. Next month, I will be discussing the question, *How can I add small groups to my Sunday School church?*

Once your church has decided how to define a healthy follower of Christ (for Saddleback it is someone balancing the Great Commission and Great Commandment in their heart—fellowship, discipleship, service, evangelism and worship), then there are some practical steps you can take to help your Sunday school class maximize health. Here are some suggestions:

1. Strategically set up your room. Use round tables with participants facing one another instead of the traditional classroom setting with everyone facing the teacher. Using round tables accomplishes two things. First, it will facilitate stronger discussion through since people will be face to face. Second, it will help you identify a table leader if you don't already have table leaders identified. If your church can't afford round tables, just set your chairs up in circles or horseshoes (open end of the horseshoe to the front of the classroom).
2. Understand ratios. If your class size is over ten people, then you will need to start thinking about who can help you build health into class members. If one of your goals is to know the spiritual health of each person in your class, and then encourage them to take their spiritual next step; realistically you can't know and follow up on each person. Raise table leaders or people who have a passion for discipleship to help you encourage everyone to grow.
3. Build consistency at the table. Once you set your room in tables, circles of chairs, or horseshoes, you will start to see people sitting with the same folks. Encourage that so they can get to know one another. When a group of new people come into the class, start a new table. People will not dive beneath the surface level conversation and feel safe enough to share what's really going on in their lives unless they build authentic relationships with one another. This will only happen over time.
4. Set the table for evangelism and it will build attendance accountability. First, if your tables or circles seat eight, don't fill the table full of eight people. Fill it with five or six and ask class members who they could invite to fill the table. Also, once you are seated in smaller circles, attendance accountability is a natural by-product. Why? When a group of six is sitting together it is pretty hard to not notice when someone is missing! This will build an organic accountability through your classroom.

5. Know your sheep; help your sheep know themselves. Plan a time for everyone to take the Spiritual Health Assessment and build a Personal Health Plan. When your class members take the Spiritual Health Assessment, they will see which biblical purpose (Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, Evangelism and Worship) is their strength and which area they need to grow in. Then, table members can help each other to build an individual planner to help class members grow in their spiritual formation.

6. Build spiritual accountability. Once people have identified areas in their life that need growth, have them pair up with someone who will help them by asking the question, “Did you accomplish what you set out to do?” This check up should be done as a natural part of the relationship. No set time, but the question should happen at least monthly. The Sunday school teacher and the table leader don’t need to know “what” everyone is working on, just that everyone has a “who” that is checking in with them.

7. Develop ownership. Have those who are strong in a purpose, help your class in that area. If someone is strong in the area of Fellowship, they can help keep track of birthdays and anniversaries around your table or help your class plan social events. If someone is strong in Discipleship, give them the responsibility of making sure everyone at the table (or the entire class) has created a Spiritual Health Plan and has someone in their life asking the question in number 6. Or people who are strong in the area of Discipleship may even want to help with the teaching time. See these recourses to help you build the purposes in your class (See 250 Big Ideas for Purpose Driven Small Groups and Don’t Lead Alone). Also when your class works on each area, they help individuals grow in the area they were weak. If you are weak in the area of evangelism and your class as a whole does an evangelism project, then that will help you grow.

8. Know your limits. Realize what you can do in the class time and what needs to be done outside of class hour. Generally in a Sunday school hour you can only do discipleship. You can do some fellowship and maybe you can take a class hour to only do worship. Here is the key, though. You can’t and shouldn’t do all the purposes in your Sunday school hour. Instead, determine what you can do during class time and have tables or a group of tables work together to do a purpose outside of class time. Release your people to develop themselves. If you keep everything in the classroom, you will suppress creativity and the Holy Spirit!

9. Think transformation, not just information. Sunday school originally started in England to teach literacy to children on Sunday because they worked in the factory Monday through Friday, sometimes through Saturday. Thus, Sunday School. Over time, biblical teaching was added and, eventually, the secular teachings were dropped as Labor laws were created and enforced and public school education became a part of life. Once you understand the roots of a movement, you can see why so much emphasis is placed on “teaching”. Teaching is not a bad thing, but just as time brought biblical education and secular education fell away, another phase needs to be added to round out the missing piece of discipleship or spiritual formation—application.

10. Don’t under-estimate the power of discussion. When you give people time for discussion, you are helping them work through the biblical teaching. Once you have set the truth, let them chew on it. Discussion gives class members the opportunity to talk through issues and create their own plan with input from others. Accountability starts to form between class members (whether they realize it or not). Your greatest challenge as a teacher is to give your class time to discuss and own the principles you have taught. I would work on a 60/40 format – 60% teaching and 40% time to apply it.

Join me next month as I discuss how you can add small group to your Sunday School church.