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Small Groups versus Sunday School?

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by Steve Gladen

If the goal is to teach the Word of God and apply the Great Commission and Great Commandment, does it matter if your people meet in a church classroom or living room?

The debate over Sunday School versus Small Groups continues. Each side debates the merits of their system, while pointing out the “flaws” in the other system. I often overhear the question, “Does your church have Sunday School or Small Groups?” The question is often a veiled way of asking, “Is your church a traditional one that is stuck in the rut of Sunday Schools?” The common notion is that Sunday School is a system that traditional churches cling to, while more modern and progressive churches move toward small groups. The truth, however, is not that simple or clear cut. Both systems have their advantages and disadvantages. More important than the “system” used, is the desired result – spiritual growth and health.

Before you decide on using Sunday school and/or small groups as a delivery system for health, make sure you understand what health is. Once you know what type of attributes you want to see in a follower of Christ, then you can develop a delivery system to align with your purpose and your church’s culture. At Saddleback, we believe a healthy follower is someone who is balancing the Great Commission and the Great Commandment in their heart and life. We believe the best way to do that is through small groups. That doesn’t mean, however, that you cannot use Sunday School to produce healthy followers of Christ.

The first two churches I worked at (one as an intern and one as a staff member) were Sunday school only churches. The next two churches I worked at combined Sunday school and small groups. My last church and Saddleback Church are totally driven by small groups. At each church there were pros and cons to their delivery systems. Looking back, regardless of the delivery system, I realize the most important thing is to know why you have small groups or Sunday School. Many churches have Sunday School or small groups simply because that is what they have always done. They have given little thought to their desired result, and whether the particular system they are using is the most productive for achieving that desired result.

It’s the same reason churches have a mid week services or Sunday night service. It’s not about strategy, but it is how we have always done it. It is important that you understand me clearly on this; small

groups, Sunday school, midweek service, and Sunday night service in and of themselves are not bad. However, absent of a strategic purpose, they could be consuming resources, time, and energy. Worse yet, they may be working against your stated purpose, and as such, they may be confusing your people.

Everyone in your church has 168 hours a week to give. The world is competing with you for those hours. The church is only going to get so many of those hours. With this full realization, ask yourself, what is the best use of your peoples' time? What would be most effective in making them a follower of Christ?

As a small group proponent (which, by the way, does not mean I am against Sunday School), I receive all kinds of questions about Sunday School and Small Groups. During a recent email exchange with Rick Howerton and Mike May they also shared some of the questions they often hear. Rick Howerton is Small Group-ologist/Specialist for LifeWay Christian Resources. He is also a member of the Purpose Driven Small Group Network. His church, The Bridge, is located in Spring Hill, Tennessee. Mike May is our PDSGN State Point Person for the state of Mississippi. He is also the Education Pastor for First Baptist Church in Brandon, Mississippi, a Sunday School church. Below is a list of some of those questions the three of us commonly hear.

Are small groups replacing Sunday School? Small groups and Sunday school don't have to be enemies of each other. They can work together if they are aligned to what you want in producing a follower of Christ. It is true, however, that there is a general trend away from Sunday School and toward small groups. Here are a few reasons churches are making the switch.

First – churches need their parking lot emptied for the next service that is starting. Churches that have multiple services and also hold Sunday School during those services are usually struggling with finding places for their people to park. Attending one service, and then attending Sunday School afterward (or before) can tie up a parking space for two service times. If parking spaces are limited, this is a real problem. Without a place to park, new people can't come to church.

Second – for sheer economics. Sunday School requires classrooms. Your Sunday School attendance will always be limited to the number of seats you can provide. It often comes to a point where the money that is being spent on classrooms might be better spent elsewhere in the community or the church. Small groups meet in homes, so space is never an issue for the church.

Third – people often cannot give you two to three hours in one shot. Time is often our most precious commodity. With more demands on your peoples' time, giving you a Sunday school and church service at the same time often just won't work. It is easier for them to attend a small group later in the week on another day than to "tie up" their entire Sunday morning.

Lastly – By providing Sunday school as your only means of developing people to be a follower of Christ, you are giving people two options—take it or leave it. In a culture full of options and diverse schedules, people are looking for more options from their church too.

What about Sunday night service or the Wednesday night service becoming times for small groups? This may be a good starting point because your culture may have developed these times for people to set aside for church, but the power of small groups is ability to pick the day and time that serves group members best. When you pick the times and days, you limit one of the strengths of using small groups as a means to deliver health.

Should you replace the name “Sunday School” with an alternative name? If you are going to do a facelift on your current structure and format, then a new name communicates something has changed. However, if you put a new name on similar structure and format, you will only damage your relationship and credibility with the people attending your church. Your people aren’t dumb. You need to do more than change a name for them to believe real change has taken place.

Isn’t Sunday School lecture-based while small groups focus on discussion and application? Although most people see the two delivery systems in this context, it doesn’t have to be that way. Without the right strategy, a small group or Sunday School can be nothing but a lecture from the leader. You need both Biblical truths and application. People need a chance to learn and interact with each other as they apply these truths to their lives. If you are just providing lecture-based content, you are in danger of merely repeating what happens on the weekend. With the internet, lectured-based content is easy to come by. Most Christians know far more than they put into application. Make sure you have a good balance in your strategy.

What do we do with the kids if we go to small groups? This is one of the greatest challenges of the small group movement. Not impossible to overcome, but a plan is needed. Where Sunday school has this issue very well taken care of, small groups with children need a POA, plan of attack! Here are a few suggestions:

Exchange childcare with another small group. For example, their group meets on Mondays and yours meets on Wednesdays. While some of your group members provide childcare on Mondays, some of their group members provide childcare on Wednesdays.

Work with the Youth Ministry to make childcare for small groups a serving opportunity.

Bring a babysitter to the group meeting and split the cost of childcare among members.

Have group members take turns “stepping out” of the group to watch the kids in another part of the house. Don’t have a couple ever go out together, but use two same sex spouses so at least one of the spouses is getting group time and getting to know another spouses during childcare.

If two group members live relatively close to one another, ask a babysitter to watch the kids at one house while the group meets at another.

Can Sunday School and small groups co-exist in the same church? You bet! Sunday School and small groups can co-exist as long as they are aligned and not competing with each other. This same potential for “competing” can happen with affinities such as Men’s, Women’s, Couples, and Singles ministries in your church. If it is not aligned with your delivery systems to create healthy followers of Christ, then any program can deter the effectiveness of your church. So, make sure your Sunday school and small group vision, mission and strategy are working on the same process and not building walls between the two. I would suggest that the two ministries report to the same person.

Can I our church members attend Sunday School class and a small group? Sure...as long as they have the margin. Some people fill their schedules with lots of church activities, but are not growing spiritually healthy. Make sure they are not just being busy, but developing their spiritual health.

If doing both Sunday School and small groups, should church members be expected to attend both? Absolutely not! You want to take them deep not wide. The reason they are attending either is to develop community which serves as the foundation for holistic discipleship. I would be more concerned that they are living out the Great Commission and Great Commandment in their lives than whether they are attending every event the church offers.

What differentiates a Sunday School class from a small group? Location and title. Other than that, both delivery systems should be aligned to the same principles. The methodologies will be different, but the “end in mind” should be the same. Of course, this may vary from church to church.

What characteristics do small group leaders need to exhibit that Sunday School teachers do not (and visa versa)? Depending on how you define what you want to see in a follower of Christ, the primary function of both the Sunday School leader and the small group leader is to understand where each student/member is in their spiritual walk, and then encourage that person to take their next spiritual step. Whether that is happening in a small group or a Sunday School class, the leader needs to always be thinking about how to move their people along their spiritual journey. Once the leader understands that, then their particular gift set can be used in either a Sunday School class or a small group. The secondary function should be to teach and apply the five biblical purposes found in the Great

Commission and Great Commandment. By doing this you sharpen the strengths of students/members and develop their weak areas.

Will starting a small group ministry weaken a pre-existing Sunday School? If so, why? If not, why not? When people were debating whether baseball should be televised on this new invention called Television, the naysayers were worried if people watched baseball on TV, then they wouldn't come to the ballpark. As history proved, this thinking was faulty. The same applies to this question. Having both gives you more opportunities to develop people and reduce the excuses for not doing one or the other. There is strength in alignment and not fearing the other delivery system. If they are both producing the same "end" it should not matter which they choose. Think about it, a new person doesn't come to church bent on doing a small group or Sunday school, they just want their needs met and grow spiritually. Only you are hung up on Sunday School or small groups.

We have a good Sunday School at our church, why should we start a small group ministry? If it is in the culture and leadership to do it, yes. This will give more people more options to grow as Christ followers and develop leadership skills. If you are thinking about starting a small group ministry, read my recent article entitled, Things to Think About Before Starting a Small Group Ministry. [LINK](#) We are all on the same team, we all have the same game plan – to bring as many people to Christ as possible and develop them into the likeness of Christ. Why not do it in whatever way works best for your church and your culture?

If you are a Sunday school proponent reading this article, congratulations on having an open mind! The chances are, if you have an adult Sunday school, your delivery system for that church is settled; at least for now. No matter the delivery system, the key is to understand what you want to see in the life of a follower of Christ, and guiding your leaders toward achieving that desired result.

I recently received an email from Terry Hadaway who led one of our Community U Conference workshops. Terry is the Small Groups Pastor at Long Hollow Church which has three locations just north of Nashville, Tennessee. He has developed a resource that may be of interest to those of you who are looking at improving your Sunday School or transitioning from Sunday School to Small Groups.

OK, so leading the session on moving from Sunday School to Small Groups at the recent Community U Conference has resulted in me being bombarded with questions from people who are in traditional Sunday School churches. Most of them are "how to" questions that I love answering. I just wish I knew the answers. So, because offering solutions is part of my DNA, I developed a place for people to go where they can interact with others who are in the same boat.

Go to www.sundayschooltosmallgroups.com and check out what I've done. I basically have created a community in which we can interact with one another by posting questions, blog entries, helpful links, etc. Once registered, you can customize your home page so that the info that interests you is there.

I hope Terry's website can be of use to you as you continue to explore options for your church.

Join me next month as I continue the discussion on Sunday School and Small Groups.