

Sunday School
That Really
Excels

Other Books on Sunday school by Steve R. Parr

Sunday School That Really Works

Sunday School That Really Responds

Sunday School That Really Excels

Real Life
Examples of
Churches with Healthy
Sunday Schools



Steve R. Parr
EDITOR



Kregel
Ministry

Sunday School That Really Excels: Real Life Examples of Churches with Healthy Sunday Schools

© 2013 Steve R. Parr

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked HCSB are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4318-3

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 / 5 4 3 2 1

*To Dr. Billy Britt for his faithfulness
in leading Sunday Schools to excel
and for his personal devotion
and friendship*

CONTENTS

- Foreword by Allan Taylor 9
Meet the Authors 13
Acknowledgments 15
Introduction by David Francis 17
1. The State of Sunday School Today 23
Steve R. Parr
 2. Excels in the Middle of Nowhere 37
Josh Hunt
 3. Excels in a Rural Area 49
Tim S. Smith
 4. Excels in Revitalizing an Established Ministry 59
Ben Pritchett
 5. Excels with a Small Congregation 69
J. D. "Sonny" Tucker
 6. Excels in Hands-on Missions 77
Bob Mayfield
 7. Excels on the Heels of a Crisis 87
David Francis and Sam Galloway
 8. Excels in Equipping Leaders 97
David Francis and Gary Jennings
 9. Excels with a Volunteer Sunday School Director 107
J. D. "Sonny" Tucker
 10. Excels with an Attendance Campaign 115
Elmer Towns
 11. Excels Out of Decline 129
Bob Mayfield
 12. Excels in Multicultural Community 139
Leroy Gainey

13. Excels in Transitioning to Small Groups 151
Elmer Towns
14. Excels at Combining Traditional Sunday School and Innovative Small Groups 169
Tim S. Smith
15. Excels in Teaching God's Word 179
Ken Coley
16. A Tour of Some Sunday Schools That Excel 189
Steve R. Parr
17. A Plan to Excel-erate Your Sunday School 193
Steve R. Parr

FOREWORD

ANY UNDERTAKING BY THE BODY of Christ for the cause of Christ should be done with *excellence*. Our Lord and Savior deserves the very best from his redeemed people. Therefore, the church of Jesus Christ ought to *excel*. This is especially true for Sunday school and for small groups. You see, small Bible study groups like Sunday school are the body of Christ on mission. Sunday school activates and mobilizes the army of God like nothing else. Think of it. Nothing engages God's people in the work of God on Earth like Sunday school. Sunday school is the layperson's ministry that can employ the spiritual giftedness of a larger part of a congregation more than any other ministry in the church.

Within each believer, God has placed seeds of *excellence*. This is so because the Holy Spirit dwells in every true child of God. Because God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, resides in us, we have *excellence* from within. Therefore, God himself has empowered us to *excel*. Sunday school is the greatest venue the church possesses which allows her members to express the *excellence* of God. The great apostle Paul taught this principle in Ephesians 3:9–11: “to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Because God has endowed us to *excel*—because Sunday school is one of the greatest venues for disciples to *excel*—*Sunday School That Really Excels*, then, becomes such a valuable

resource in helping us accomplish “the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Steve Parr is a great champion and leader for Sunday school. This man knows his stuff, but he has also gathered some of the greatest Sunday school minds in North America, those who themselves have *excelled* in this work to provide wisdom and insights from their storied careers to aid church leaders. In addition, case studies have been provided for our edification. This book represents expertise from great Christian leaders and experiences from other churches, which form a powerful storehouse of usefulness for anyone wanting to use and grow their Sunday school.

Too many Sunday schools have wallowed in mediocrity for years. We have been satisfied to have “lukewarm” Sunday school ministries. We have been satisfied to allow this “Most Valuable Ministry” in the church to run on auto pilot. I am afraid we have fallen in love with our rhetoric about Sunday school more than *excelling* at Sunday school.

Jesus isn’t the poster boy for status quo. He turned the religious system of his day on its proverbial head. Jesus was willing to turn Judaism upside down, so don’t think for even a skinny minute that our religious institutions are safe. Are we raising believers in the cocoon of a domesticated Sunday school class and then wonder why they never get on mission with God? Being a soldier for Christ does not afford us the option of living a normal civilian life. When we get saved, we are placed smack-dab in the middle of a battleground, not a playground. Therefore, Sunday school should be a boot camp preparing soldiers for the spiritual battle, not a place for religious games. Our goal is not to provide a cozy cocoon for civilized faith to exist. Soldiers are trained to advance and take territory.

Two words that always go together—greatness and *excellence*. Great leadership is the pursuit of excellence. Without *excellence*, mission will not be accomplished. Sunday school

Foreword

leader, nothing tells your people what is important as that which you pursue with *excellence*. It's time to make a shift from just existing and move to *excelling*. Sunday school leader, if not you, who? If not now, when? If not this resource, what?

Come on now, Commanding Officer, let's rally the troops and charge enemy lines as we *excel* in the work and mission of Sunday school!

—Allan Taylor
Minister of Education
First Baptist Church
Woodstock, GA

MEET THE AUTHORS

STEVE R. PARR is the author and compiler. He is the author of *Sunday School That Really Works* and *Sunday School That Really Responds*. He currently serves the Georgia Baptist Convention as the Vice-President of Staff Coordination and Development.

KEN COLEY is a professor and Director of Ed.D. Studies at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

DAVID FRANCIS serves as Director of Sunday School for Lifeway Christian Resources.

LEROY GAINNEY is a professor of Educational Leadership at the Golden Gate Seminary in Mill Valley, California, and has served twenty-two years as pastor of Vacaville Baptist Church.

SAM GALLOWAY is a consultant to churches and state conventions in the North Central States for Lifeway Christian Resources.

JOSH HUNT is a pastor, author of numerous books including *You Can Double Your Class in Two Years or Less* and *Make Your Group Grow*. Josh is a national speaker and currently lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

GARY JENNINGS serves as the Network Specialist for Lifeway Christian Resources.

Meet the Authors

BOB MAYFIELD is the Sunday School/Small Group Specialist for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

BEN PRITCHETT is the Minister of Education for the First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas.

TIM S. SMITH is the Specialist for Sunday School and Small Groups of the Georgia Baptist Convention.

ELMER TOWNS is the cofounder of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and serves as Dean of the School of Religion.

ALLAN TAYLOR is the Minister of Education at the First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Georgia.

J.D. “SONNY” TUCKER is the Executive Director of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REALLY WORKS was released in 2010. It caught fire and continues to be regarded as the leading “101” book to energize and revitalize a Sunday school ministry. *Sunday School That Really Responds* followed within two years and quickly became a high-demand resource that serves as the 911 for assisting church leaders in confronting common Sunday school challenges. I am so pleased that the series has now extended to include *Sunday School That Really Excels*. You will be encouraged as you take a journey across North America, going behind the scenes in real life churches that have thriving Sunday school ministries.

My life and ministry are the result of many influences throughout my lifetime. I served many years alongside a dear friend named Dr. Billy Britt. I have known him since I was a child and was privileged to serve with him on two different staffs for over fourteen years. We have done countless conferences together, strategized for ministry together, and coordinated training opportunities on many occasions. In recent years, we have served in different areas of our state and have been hindered from the frequent interactions to which I had become so accustomed. He is like a big brother to me and a valued partner in ministry. He is at a different stage of life now, and God continues to use him greatly. I am honored to be his friend and to dedicate this book to someone who has made such a difference in so many lives.

I can hardly believe the lineup of contributors that I was able to pull together to produce this book. It is a literal Who’s Who in contemporary Sunday school leadership. I commend any book or any conference that you ever come across with their

Acknowledgments

names: Allan Taylor, Josh Hunt, Elmer Towns, David Francis, Tim Smith, Leroy Gainey, Ken Coley, J.D. “Sonny” Tucker, Bob Mayfield, Ben Pritchett, Sam Galloway, and Gary Jennings.

I am thankful for the excellent staff at Kregel Publications. They have been a blessing to me, and God is using the staff to touch many lives through publishing excellent Christian books and resources. You are a blessing to leaders like me that desire to maximize their influence for the cause of Christ. I also want to say a special thanks to my good friend, Lori Swofford Palmer, for assisting with the editing and formatting of this project in preparation for the publishers.

Most of all, I am thankful to God for his blessings and provision. It is only by his grace and power that I can accomplish anything at all. It is ultimately to his glory that I present this book and myself.

—Steve R. Parr

INTRODUCTION

David Francis

CAN YOUR SUNDAY SCHOOL STILL excel today? Really? I think by the time you finish reading the accounts in this book, you will join me in responding, “Absolutely! They really can—and do!”

One of the grand privileges I have as Director of Sunday school among Southern Baptists is to witness excellent Bible study ministries all across the country. I just enjoyed a little “slide show” in my mind of excellent Sunday school leaders and ministries I have witnessed firsthand. They are everywhere. They can be found in military communities like Lakewood, Washington, and Warner Robbins, Georgia. They are found in downtown areas like Tulsa, Oklahoma. You can find them in suburbs like Trussville, Alabama and Wheat Ridge, Colorado. You can find churches that actually have three separate Sunday school hours to accommodate all of the participants in places like Jackson, Tennessee.

They are found in college towns like Murray, Kentucky and Newark, Delaware, as well as in border towns like Athens, Alabama and McAllen, Texas. Midsized towns like Camden, Ohio and Madison, Mississippi. They are near the water in Lakeside, Texas as well as arid places like San Angelo, Texas and Casa Grande, Arizona. You will even find them amid the hectic pace of the District in Fredericksburg, Virginia and Upper Marlboro, Maryland or the rural pace of Princeton, Kentucky, growing where the population is booming in places like San Antonio, Texas and Fayetteville, Georgia, and in places where the population is stagnant like Roscommon, Michigan and Cross Lanes, West Virginia.

Introduction

I didn't name the churches in these places. You can try to guess if you like. Central, Southside, Spotswood, Morningside, Glen Meadows, Faith, Deerfoot, Englewood, Parkhills, New Hope, Lindsay Lane, and a lot of Firsts. I absolutely fell in love with one church I visited this past year: First Baptist Winnsboro (Texas). If I had written a chapter about it, it might have been titled "Excelling in a small town where most of the staff is named David." Pastor David Rose, Minister of Education David Booth, student minister David Henry, and the other staff members, Scott and Jennifer Bowman, are all clearly committed to Sunday school. I led an all-adult Sunday school—about Sunday school, preached a message about the priority of reaching kids, and enjoyed lunch among some of the most enthusiastic folks I have ever been around. They got it! This is not an exceptional town. It is certainly not an exceptional building. It is a very typical and traditional church architecturally. The church has worked hard, however, to enhance its space for kids, doing much of the work with their own hands. It is seeing young families attend as a result. It works diligently at outreach. Some of its adult classes have moved to businesses off-campus to make room for growth. What I loved about this church is their commitment to have an excellent Sunday school whether all of the resources were present or not. After all, they did provide excellent training.

Seriously, what's the point of the example of FBC Winnsboro? They are not waiting. They are not waiting for the town to get bigger, the church to get prettier, the staff to get smarter, or the people to get more committed. They are excelling with what God has given them in the location He has placed them for the time He has granted them. They are committed to training their leaders, enlisting more of them, and motivating the members to embrace Sunday school as a missionary movement to reach their town for Jesus. Their attitude excels. Their hope excels. Their vision excels. Their Sunday school excels.

Introduction

Maybe your church is more like FBC Winnsboro than it is one of the suburban megachurches you know of. Most are! In my denomination, more than ten thousand churches average less than fifty in Sunday school. Another ten thousand average less than one hundred. Only about three thousand average more than 250! The rest are in between. In the churches I serve, a church is above average at seventy-five to eighty in weekly attendance. What if? What if a lot of smaller churches decided to break out of double digits and exceed one hundred in attendance? What if a lot of midsize churches decided to break into the top ten percent by exceeding 250? You need not set your sights on megachurch status to excel in Sunday school. You just need to set them a little bit higher. If you will, the book you are about to read will help on your quest to excel.

What makes this book different is that it is not just a book of principles. It is a book of stories. Stories are powerful. These are real stories about real churches in real places with real leaders who face real circumstances and overcome real challenges. For what? To gather people—people with stories—together to learn, discuss, and apply God’s story to their stories. If you’ve read any of my little books, you know I often repeat this principle: “No one’s story is complete until it has intersected with God’s story, which happens best in a community being enriched by the stories of others.” I know of no better environment for that to happen than in a Sunday school that excels.

Another thing that sets this book apart is the storytellers—the men who have contributed the various chapters. They know Sunday schools. All are well traveled. Their experience is not limited to a few churches they have personally served—although each has served churches and led their Sunday schools to excel. They have been in lots of churches. They have seen all kinds of situations. Each could tell many more stories.

Leroy Gainey is a seminary professor, but he has also pastored and planted churches in the Northeast as well as the West,

and he is the perfect person to tell the story of Sunday school in a multicultural environment. Ben Pritchett has grown Sunday schools everywhere he has served, and the story at his current church, Houston's First Baptist, is remarkable. Ken Coley is a master teacher, not just in the seminary classroom but in the Sunday school classroom too. Ken not only knows how to teach about teaching creatively but actually knows how to do it. I've experienced it myself.

The stories of hundreds of churches have been redirected by the ministry of "double your Sunday School" guru Josh Hunt, who is also living a personal story of leading a normal Sunday school to excel in the "middle of nowhere." Perhaps no one has exhorted Sunday schools to excellence through his speaking and writing than Elmer Towns. Of the many people who are known as "Mr. Sunday School" in the movement, he is perhaps most deserving. He is a lifelong student of, and champion for, the Sunday school movement.

Sam Galloway and Gary Jennings, who were the primary contributors to the stories in the chapters I coauthored with them, travel extensively across the Midwestern and Northeastern states as field representatives for LifeWay Christian Resources. Sam and Gary interact with dozens of church and denominational leaders every week. Either could tell a lot of other stories of Sunday schools that excel.

Perhaps no group spends more of each day thinking about, writing about, speaking about, and consulting about Sunday school than the folks who lead that work in Baptist state conventions. There are many great stories of excellent Sunday school work in Georgia. Steve Parr and Tim Smith are terrific partners in leading the movement in that state. They closely connect the work of evangelism with the mission of Sunday school, just as Sonny Tucker does so well in Arkansas. Sonny is also a great friend to the smaller church staffed with volunteers and is the perfect person to convey their stories. My buddy Bob

Introduction

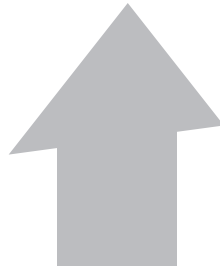
Mayfield, who leads the work of Sunday school in Oklahoma, shares my belief that the best days for the Sunday school movement—whatever it is called in local churches—are ahead of us, if churches will rediscover the basics.

Encouraging stories. Experienced storytellers. That's why this book is unique—and important. Like the previous two books in the series, you can read this book straight through, or you can skip to the stories that seem most applicable to your situation. One way a church leader might use this book is to read it privately and teach its concepts to others he or she leads. That's not how I would do it. I would recommend it be used the same way I suggest my little books be used. Provide your leaders a copy. Ask them to read a chapter. Then get together and talk about it. Everyone might not agree with everything in that chapter. You might not, either. That's okay. The main thing is to have a conversation. A conversation about what we do like. What we might do. To see our Sunday school excel!

So get started! Wherever you want to start. Just start somewhere. Thanks goes to Steve Parr for pulling these great stories together. Steve, myself, and the other contributors think you'll be blessed. And we'd love to hear your story! Maybe there could be another volume. What would you title your story? Our Sunday School excels.... It's your story to write. We all hope this book gives you the jump-start you need to "write" it.

CHAPTER 1

The State of Sunday School Today



Steve R. Parr

THE DRIVE FROM ATLANTA TO Nashville is pleasant and scenic. The drive is due north beginning on I-75, and expressway travel allows for uninterrupted progress except for the preferable breaks that the traveler chooses along the way. You will see the Georgia pines, get a panoramic view of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and climb Monteagle before pulling into the city of Nashville in less than four hours of travel. I'm on my way to interview one of the leading voices on the growth and health of churches from across North America.

Dr. Thom Rainer served for many years as the dean of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He currently serves as the president of Lifeway Christian Resources located in Nashville. LifeWay is well known as a book publisher and curriculum developer for groups of all kinds, as well as for its Christian resources and its 165 Christian bookstores across America. However, Rainer's expertise for the issues at hand comes from years spent as a researcher and an author.

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REALLY EXCELS

With nearly thirty books to his credit, Rainer has established himself as one of the most knowledgeable voices of this generation on what it is that makes churches effective. I enthusiastically recommend any of his books and am honored to be a personal friend. In the spirit of full disclosure, I will point out that Dr. Rainer was the project supervisor who had responsibility for guiding my doctoral project while serving in Louisville, Kentucky. I entered the program because I wanted to learn from the best, and I was not disappointed. I want you to begin this journey as we learn about Sunday schools that really excel by sitting down with us as I interview Dr. Thom Rainer about the state of Sunday school today.

I want to point out before the interview begins that we both use the word “Sunday school” descriptively with appreciation that many congregations utilize other designations. We both agree that a Sunday school consists of Bible study groups for all ages that ordinarily meet on Sunday mornings in conjunction with a worship experience either before or afterwards. With that being said, let’s step into his office and get an expert’s perspective on the state of Sunday school.

Parr: Dr. Rainer, you have written almost thirty books largely related to the health and growth of churches, and I know that your work is largely research based. Is there any particular theme that runs through your books as you look back on them as a whole?

Rainer: As I think back over all that I have written then, I would have to say the common theme is best summed up in a book I wrote called “High Expectations.” The theme or idea of high expectations runs through a lot of my books.

Parr: What are you referring to when you say “high expectations?”

Rainer: It comes down to this: When we believe in what God can do through us, the result is that we expect more of ourselves. In turn, we tend to expect more of our congregation

because we want to do all that we can to please God. As a result of expecting more of ourselves and of those we lead, we begin to see good things happen within the church itself. It is God working in us and through us that inspires us to go above and beyond seeking to do our best. I have written books addressing the programmatic elements of church life as well as the dynamics of the influences that help us to connect and reach the unchurched. I was not cognizant as I was writing, but it has become clear as I reflect back. My first book was published in 1989. From that point up until the present, I can now see that in most of my books that there is a theme that God expects much of us. The expectation is not that we would earn our salvation but a response to his grace. Out of gratitude we should expect much of ourselves, and we should understand that we have the resources we need through him.

Parr: Share with me about your leadership journey specifically as it relates to Sunday school through the years.

Rainer: For me the journey goes back to when I was a deacon and a layman at Golden Springs Baptist Church in Alabama and became very active in the Sunday school as an adult. The reason I am going that far back is because I grew up in another denomination, and Sunday school was not important in my earliest experiences. Although I attended church services, I was not involved in Sunday school from my childhood years all of the way through my young adult life.

Parr: I assume that must have changed at some point.

Rainer: Yes, it did. What happened is that once I got married, my wife and I made the decision to join Golden Springs Baptist Church, in Anniston, Alabama. It was my wife who encouraged us to find a Sunday school class. That was a new concept to me. Being the dutiful husband that I was, I got involved with a Sunday school class and my experience evolved from that point. If you fast-forward to the present,

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REALLY EXCELS

I find it amazing that some of the relationships I developed in that group are still dear to my wife and me today. That's going back to 1979. As one example, I still have a relationship with a young man named Jim that I led to the Lord after which I was able to get him involved in our Sunday school class. I have to credit the ministry of the Sunday school in helping me engage with the total life of the church.

Parr: So you went from uninvolved to very involved, and it obviously became important in your spiritual walk. I believe I recall that you were called to pastor as a young adult. How did that experience affect your Sunday school journey?

Rainer: Ironically, I shifted back the other way at one point. Keep in mind that when I was called to vocational ministry, the ministry of Sunday school was very much a part of my experience and my vocabulary. I brought that passion to seminary with me and then went on to pastor four churches. But somewhere along the journey during my ministry as a pastor, two things were taking place. First of all, I became enamored with what I viewed as cutting-edge strategies that I perceived to be innovative. That caused me to begin to ignore and devalue Sunday school for a season during my early pastoral ministry. That is a fatal mistake for any church that desires to have a strong Sunday school ministry. I was in good company because many who became fascinated with the church growth movement made the same mistake.

Parr: I know you are an advocate of Sunday school today. What was it that caused you to go back to being a huge supporter of Sunday school as a strategy for churches?

Rainer: It happened as I began to do research as the backdrop of my writing endeavors. I went into my research experiences believing Sunday school had good things to offer, but as part of the church growth movement my focus was more on whatever was newest, latest, or greatest. Sunday school

does not fit the template when you are busy chasing fads, and that is what I was doing. The Sunday school movement goes back to the late 1780s with Robert Raikes, and its age leads many to interpret it as irrelevant. In one sense, the Sunday school goes even further back because small groups have existed in one form or another throughout the centuries. Unfortunately, I abandoned Sunday school like so many others because I was always enamored with the latest and greatest. As I began to write about some of the cutting-edge strategies, I didn't necessarily bash Sunday school—although in my earliest books I wasn't very positive about it. But I have always been committed to do objective research.

Parr: What did your research reveal?

Rainer: In the course of honest research, I found over and over there is a high correlation between the health of a church and the implementation of a strong Sunday school type of ministry. I was surprised because of my preceding bias at how often it was specifically Sunday school that was the core strategy at work in the healthiest churches. The research consistently affirmed the relationship between an open group ministry like Sunday school and the ability of a church to assimilate new members.

Parr: Explain for those who will be reading what you mean when you say an “open group.”

Rainer: An open group is a Bible study group that meets weekly and can be joined at any time throughout the year without any prerequisites. In addition, the research that I conducted consistently revealed that when nonbelievers connected to open groups such as Sunday school, it dramatically increased the likelihood of that person coming to faith in Jesus as Savior. My research caused me to go through a paradigm shift back to strong support of Sunday school as a strategy that, when done correctly, can strengthen a church.

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REALLY EXCELS

Parr: So you were actually a Sunday school doubter early in your pastoral ministry.

Rainer: I actually admitted following my research for my book *High Expectations* that I had made been making a mistake. I called it “Confessions of the Sunday School Skeptic,” if I remember correctly. I admitted in writing that I was absolutely wrong. I believe the reason some church leaders struggle with the concept of the Sunday school is because they forget the purpose behind it. Sunday school, done correctly, enables your congregation to fulfill the Great Commission by integrating and balancing evangelism, discipleship, and ministry to members as well as the community. That has been my journey. I believe in Sunday school, and I think it is still relevant for churches today.

Parr: I know the name “Sunday school” emerged early on because it was established in its earliest form as a “school that met on Sunday” to battle illiteracy. Of course, Robert Raikes soon discovered that when you expose people to the Word of God, and the Bible served as the reading text, that God moves in hearts and lives. But when you consider that it is not school on Sunday and the fact that in some regions it is associated with ministry to children, there is a lot of discussion about the relevance of the name. Obviously, you support the strategy. What about the name itself? Should we change it?

Rainer: I actually fought for the name at one season of my ministry, but I don’t do that anymore. Churches call it by all kinds of names. I realized it was a silly fight given the different names churches use such as Sunday morning bible study, Bible study group, open groups, fellowship groups, Bible Study Fellowship, connect groups, and on and on it goes. Many churches have already made that decision. The key is not what you call it so much as what you do with it. I believe in the strategy or the concept, but I am not

married to the name as being critical to its success. There is no single answer. I know that's a cop-out answer. Let me give you an example. My son Sam served in his previous church in Sarasota, and I believe they called theirs "Life Groups." They ran into a problem. The Hispanic community that they were engaged with did not understand what Life Groups were, but they understood the name Sunday school, so they had to explain to the Hispanic community in southwest Florida that this is Sunday school. In addition, there are some regions where Sunday school is understood to be a ministry for children. I don't think the name "Sunday school" is intrinsically evil or intrinsically good. I think it has to be contextualized. It is more important to focus on the strategy than the name. The bottom line is that churches will be healthier if they involve their members in small groups like Sunday school as well as the larger gathering of a worship experience.

Parr: How would you characterize the state of Sunday school as a movement today?

Rainer: In many ways it is fledgling right now. But please do not misunderstand me on this point. I am not saying that it does not or cannot work or be effective. I am just acknowledging that fewer churches are focusing upon the concept of an open-group strategy than they did in years past. I believe that we are in a period of transition where worship has been the primary emphasis in an increasing number of churches. Another shift is underway now where the emphasis is shifting more toward missions and ministry as well as preaching. I'm not complaining because those are all good things. The challenge is that the emphasis on these is often at the expense of elevating the importance of connections to small groups such as Sunday school. My fear is, and I believe research will bear it out, that the devaluing the Sunday school or open groups may hasten the decline

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REALLY EXCELS

of involvement and attendance in Christian churches. You cannot build something while simultaneously minimizing or de-emphasizing it. I see it happening in individual congregations as well as on the national stage.

Parr: I was with a group of seminary students recently who were in master's level studies. I was disappointed when I asked what they had learned about leadership of the Sunday school ministry and the mechanics of leading it to be healthy and growing. Of the sixty students in the audience, I discovered that only one or two could recall anything tangible they had learned on the subject. Are you seeing any trends in higher Christian education that may be affecting the state of Sunday school?

Rainer: Steve, I am seeing the same thing. I know we both love our seminaries and Christian colleges, but I fear that fewer of them are talking about groups or Sunday school in the context of training future pastors on the skills needed to make it work effectively. Obviously, we are not talking about every seminary or every professor because so many do such a great job. We are talking about the trends of the day. Pastors are so critical to the health of Sunday school in a local church. If all of the emphasis is relegated to the Christian education track, then you are working around a key leader that needs the foundation himself. If the Christian-education wing of a school does not provide the tools for Sunday school leadership, then the erosion becomes even more challenging to address.

Parr: More and more churches are moving to small groups that meet during the week. I have not found it wise to dismantle the Sunday school in order to move to small groups in the churches where I serve, but that doesn't mean that I oppose small groups. It certainly makes sense for a church plant or a church lacking facilities to have weekday groups, and even churches that have Sunday schools can reach

more by starting some groups during weekdays. Let me ask you. How has the small group movement affected Sunday school, in your opinion?

Rainer: Like you, I am a fan of all groups. I think that only good can happen when believers and unbelievers come together to study and talk about God's Word. It is certainly healthy for Christians to fellowship with one another and to work together to witness to nonbelievers. Therefore, whenever groups get together, I am a fan. I think the mistake that is being made is that leaders are creating a false dichotomy by asking which is better, Sunday school or small groups? It is not a competition. Suggesting that a church must choose one or the other, or that one is inherently superior is not beneficial to the body of Christ. But I do think that as a movement, the Sunday school has been hurt by the small group movement. Here is why. The elevation of weekday small groups as a strategy either through silence or overt disdain has diminished the value of Sunday school on some levels. I look back to where our denomination (Southern Baptists) were at a certain time, and a lot of people knocked Sunday school as a programmatic method. I would have to agree if a Sunday school ministry were an end instead of a means. Admittedly, some leaders have made it an end. However, when correctly applied, Sunday school is a means to engage your congregation in fulfillment of the Great Commission, and many congregations are still doing that successfully. We must be careful not to glorify the organization but to focus on and apply the intended purpose. The emerging anti-programmatic sentiment has dragged along with it Sunday school and closed groups as well, which is what many churches refer to as "Discipleship Training." I fear that we may have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, and the result is that there are fewer ongoing open groups in our churches today.

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REALLY EXCELS

Parr: What are the key factors that you find commonly at work in churches that have strong Sunday schools?

Rainer: The first thing is that the pastor must be the primary advocate. I have always noticed that when the pastor fails to elevate the Sunday school as an integral part of the church life, it wanes. It is critical for the pastor to invest energy and time whether he is bivocational, single staff, or in a multi-staff situation. The pastor's influence is absolutely critical to the health of the Sunday school. It will crash if he fails to give support. Secondly, a strong core of lay leaders must be enlisted and equipped. Untrained leaders rarely, if ever, lead a Sunday school to be healthy and growing. The training takes on many forms in strong Sunday schools but is always there. Thirdly, the Sunday school must be elevated, or made a hero of the church. You accomplish that by giving examples through sermon illustrations, newsletters, and whatever means of communication a church has at its disposal to show how Sunday school is working within the church. Those are the starting points. You certainly have to follow that up by attending to organizational issues, facilities, creating new units, outreach, and so forth. Planning and participating in equipping opportunities is the source through which you address the other factors.

Parr: I know from reading your research that similarly to churches, some denominations have stronger Sunday school ministries than others. You do not limit your research to Southern Baptist churches. What makes the difference on that macro level, do you suppose?

Rainer: It may sound redundant but once again it comes down to leadership. Leadership is the key no matter the denomination and no matter the region. It is stronger where the denominational leaders support it and weaker when the denominational leaders devalue it whether inadvertently or by intent. I have noted that the theology of the

denomination also bears great influence. I have found that the less conservative-leaning denominations value Sunday school less because they value the Bible less. God's word is the anchor of a healthy Sunday school. It is not enough to come together, but the body must be connected through the study of God's word as well as fellowship. Denominations certainly differ, and where the Bible is not valued, the need for groups like Sunday school lack value. I am glad to report, however, that some denominations are beginning to embrace Sunday school, and I have no doubt they will be strengthened in the long run.

Parr: What would you say are the key changes that have taken place in the Sunday school movement over the last generation?

Rainer: We have already addressed a couple of those. The name "Sunday school" is obviously being used less frequently. Secondly, there has been a shift towards more of an emphasis on the worship experience, and as I said earlier an emerging shift towards missions and ministries. A third trend that we have not discussed would be what is occurring in relationship to Bible study curriculum. We are seeing unevenness and inconsistency in curriculum. In the past, a pastor would not only have confidence that his sermon or sermon series was being approached strategically but also that the education ministries were using curriculum strategically. An inconsistency has emerged where one class may be studying a book, another class may have LifeWay or a denominationally driven curriculum, while yet another group has material from a completely different publisher. Still another group may just say "we are going to study the Bible" and not have any curriculum at all. I cannot imagine a pastor not having a plan for his preaching, but I find it amazing how many are so unorganized or non-strategic about the content being utilized in the Bible study groups. I

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REALLY EXCELS

certainly have affection for what my organization provides. But, at this point, I share this trend which is a growing concern without regard to the excellent materials we provide and fear that the “teach whatever you want” approach is detrimental to a healthy strategy in a local church.

Parr: What adjustments or adaptations do you think need to be made for Sunday schools in the current culture?

Rainer: We do not need to be afraid to call it something else. I think I have beat that horse till it’s dead—not to be hung up on the name. Churches need to be innovative with the space that is available. I find when the Sunday school meets on the campus of the church that there is a greater likelihood of involvement of the members, and I can see many reasons why that would be the case. However, in many of our churches today, space is not available. Most church plants face this problem, and so you have to look to alternatives other than the campus itself. A willingness to be flexible about location and time is important. I have yet to find a better time than connecting the small group experience to the worship service primarily because of convenience. That does not mean that other alternatives should not be considered or will not work. I also want to emphasize again that you cannot take for granted what is being taught in your groups. You need to develop a strategic plan for content delivery in your Sunday School ministry to ensure the content is biblical, consistent with your church’s theological convictions, and leads the group to action or application.

Parr: Let me ask you one more question, Dr. Rainer. How do you see evangelism and Sunday school connected?

Rainer: Well, of course, there are so many ways, where do I begin? It all begins with relationships. It is amazing how you bond with people that you meet with to study God’s word on a regular basis. Those relationships enable you to serve together in reaching out to your friends and neighbors. I

want to share something else. The older I get, Steve, the more I realize how powerful the word of God is. I wish I had realized it more when I was young. Robert Raikes tapped into it when he began Sunday school as a way to teach children to read. They used the Bible as their textbooks, and as a result of their reading scripture, the Holy Spirit worked through them with hundreds coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Is there a better way to introduce someone to Jesus than studying God's Word with them? That is the nature of an open group and ultimately the aim of Sunday school when correctly implemented. Relationships are built between believers and then between believers and members of the community. They can be brought in to visit or join at any point, and the group should be working together to bring unbelieving friends. Sunday school is intended to be evangelistic, and leaders who desire to have a healthy Sunday school will emphasize this aspect. Sunday schools can flourish if we are purposeful in leading them to be evangelistic.

Parr: Dr. Rainer, I could not agree more. I want to tell you how much I appreciate your friendship and your leadership among evangelical churches. I appreciate your helping our readers to think through some of the challenges we are facing in our Sunday schools. You are definitely to be commended for your work in encouraging and equipping leaders to develop Sunday schools that really excel!

