

# Advanced Sunday School Strategy

In recent years, several studies have been published summarizing the impact of some general characteristics related to church growth and health. Books such as *Transformational Church* (Rainer), *Total Church Life* (Robinson), *Natural Church Development* (Schwarz), *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Macchia), *Comeback Churches* (Stetzer), and *Transforming Church* (Ford) all include the influence of small groups as a major influence on church health.

The information gained from these studies leaves little doubt that the role of ministry to adults through groups cannot be ignored if a church desires to grow. In fact, in his own extensive study of church health characteristics, Christian Schwarz wrote:

*If we were to identify any one principle as the “most important,” then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups* (Natural Church Development, 32).

For most churches, Sunday School is still the term used to describe the effort made to get adults in groups other than the primary worship service. Research suggests that though many churches use other names to describe these groups, the term “Sunday School” is still used with effectiveness. In the book, *Simple Church*, four hundred churches were studied and classified as “vibrant” because they had grown for three consecutive years. Of these 400 churches, 87.5 percent of them still used on-campus, Sunday morning groups as their primary strategy, and half of the groups referred to them as Sunday School (Great Expectations, 11).

In this resource, we will use the word “groups” to refer to any gathering of people, outside of the primary worship service, that meets together as part of the ministry of the church and spends time that includes studying, discussing, and seeking to apply the Bible. In addition, this resource will discuss the potential that groups can have on a church’s efforts in outreach, ministry care, and service.

# Level 1: Connect the People You Are Already Reaching

In basketball, players who are fouled by an opposing player are given the opportunity to take a free shot at making a basket. They do not have to be concerned with the time running out, being guarded by another player, or having anyone try to block the shot. The player simply has to walk up to the free throw line and take his shot at the goal.

Though it sounds so simple, shooting free throws can be a source of tremendous frustration for players and teams. Many times, the outcome of a basketball game is determined by whether or not a team can simply make the free throws that are given to them by the opposition.

Every church has people who have already been “reached” on some level – they have attended a worship service as a guest, registered their kids at attend a church event, or even landed on the roll of a Sunday School class. These are “free throws” . . . some obstacles to reaching these people have already been removed. They have already demonstrated some interest in your church and just need a clear path toward connecting to your ministry. Tremendous growth in many churches could be possible simply by connecting with the people who are already coming to you. Groups must make their “free throws” count! With that in mind, consider these ideas for connecting people who take the step of coming to you.

## 1. Create an Environment that Expects Guests.

Anyone who has ever had someone “drop in” on them for an unexpected visit has felt the embarrassment of the unprepared host. You frantically tidy up the living room and try to remember if you have anything to offer your guests to eat or drink. Your guests can also sense the awkwardness of the situation and may wonder if it would have been better if they hadn’t decided to stop by.

When guests arrive for your group’s meeting, they should get the impression that they have been expected. Supplies are ready and easily located. Seating is easy to find. Group members arrive early and are waiting to receive them, and an easy way for the guest to meet other group members has been chosen in advance. Guests should know that they are not simply welcome . . . they have been expected!

## **2. Identify and Get Contact Information from Guests.**

One church shared about an incredible outreach event that had taken place in their church. Three or four times more people actually showed up than they had anticipated. Those who attended had a great time and the pastor was excited to have had so many people on the campus. When asked about a follow up plan, the pastor admitted that this would be very difficult – they had not registered or obtained any contact information from any of the guests!

Here are some ideas for gathering information from guests:

- Use enrollment cards in Sunday School to gather simple contact information.
- Gather simple contact information and then use an electronic form sent via email to gain further family information.
- Use a welcome center to handle all guest information (paper cards, iPad kiosks, etc.).
- Use a tear-off bulletin or worship guide piece that guests can use to volunteer their information. This can also be used by the entire church to communicate prayer requests, register for events, or other purposes.
- Use a registration sheet or folder to pass down the aisles and have everyone sign in
- Communicate to guests the purpose of the information form and what will happen as a result of its submission.
- On your information card, allow guests to give you their preference for how they would like to be contacted (email, visit, phone call, etc).
- Make Social Media connections (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) available to guests. These connections/profiles may be from the church or from individual staff leaders.

## **3. Make Initial Contact through Groups.**

When guests are identified, use groups to make the initial contact. While the pastor is often expected to make contact, some guests may feel that this is done simply out of obligation. Often, a much more meaningful contact can be made by the people with whom the guest can potentially find friendships with in the church – the members of their group.

When seeking to help groups make contact with guests, a common issue emerges. What groups should make the contact with which guests? If groups in your church have both men and women and are made up of all kinds of ages, life stages, and family situations, this can be a difficult task.

One solution is to move toward a group organization that is based on age groups (Adults 30-39) life stages (Empty Nesters), family make-up (Married Couples with Teenagers), or other definable characteristics that will allow a church to identify easily which group a guest is

most likely to find others with which they will connect relationally. Contacts from these groups to the guests will be more effective.

#### **4. Connect People through Relationships.**

The type of contact made to a guest is just as important as the effort made to contact them. Few people want to be contacted and asked if they “enjoyed the service”, “want more information”, “have any questions”, or know of “anything that the church can do” for them. When asked these types of questions from someone that the guest does not know, the answers are likely to be shallow and vague.

A more effective type of contact utilizes the power of *with*. When making contact with guests, group members can ask the guest to return *with them* to the group meeting, to meet *with them* at the entrance to the church for the first visit to the group meeting, to go *with them* and share a meal, to sit *with them* in worship, to go *with them* to an event, etc. The power of *with* is a difference-maker when it comes to connecting people to your church.

Most churches believe that they are “friendly churches.” However, others have rightly noted that new people are not looking for friendly churches. They are looking for friends. Understanding and acting upon this key difference will be essential to connecting with and keeping new people.

#### **5. Create a Plan for Ongoing Relationship Building and Ministry Care.**

An often-reported research study cited in the book *High Expectation Churches* by Thom Rainer notes that people who attend a small group are four times more likely to remain in a church for five years or more than people who attend only a morning worship service. People stay connected when they build friendships with others in the church.

Two primary actions will build friendships in your church. The first is to seek opportunities for people to spend time together outside of the group time. An advantage of organizing your Sunday School groups by life stage or family make-up is that fellowship opportunities may develop more organically due to common interests, children’s activities, and other common life experiences. Although organized, scheduled “fellowships” may still be effective, deeper friendships will often be formed through smaller, more casual, and more spontaneous interaction such as sharing a meal with two or three families in someone’s home or meeting up somewhere after church. For larger groups, trying to plan a monthly or even quarterly fellowship with the whole group will likely be far less effective than actively encouraging and training people to seek out opportunities for more frequent interaction of smaller groups on their own. The risk of this is that long-time group members must avoid the easy habit of including only their current friends and failing to extend an invitation to new group members to join them.

The second way that relationships are formed through group ministry is by caring for one another during times of need. The opposite of this is also true – the fastest way to make sure and lose someone from your fellowship is to ignore, neglect, or be completely unaware of a present ministry need. The best way to ensure that this doesn't happen is to develop a care group system within each group.

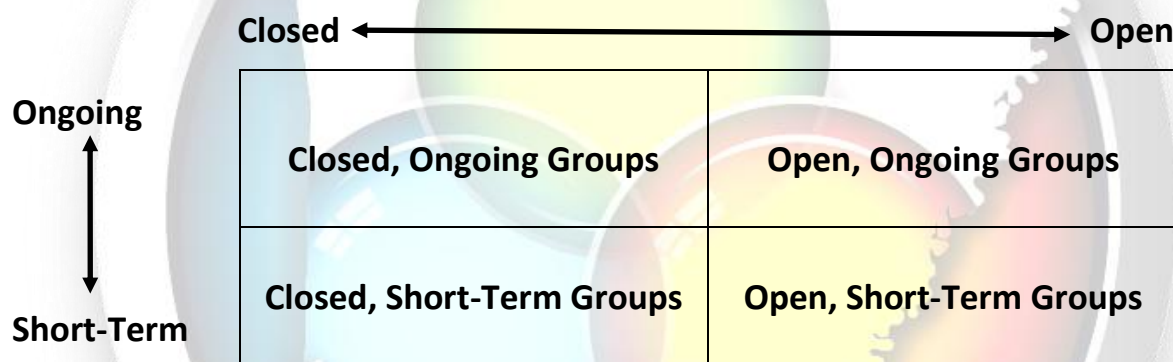
A care group system helps large groups provide personal care to every person. Without these “groups within the group”, caring for or even noticing individual needs would be impossible. For example, every summer over 2400 junior and senior high school students attend our student ministry camp called Super Summer. Trying to keep up with the individual whereabouts of each of those students sounds like an impossible task, but the camp does this consistently every year. First, the camp is divided into six “schools” of roughly 200 students each (1200 during Junior High Week and 1200 during Senior High Week). Because 200 students is still too many for one person to keep up with individually, small group staffers are assigned 8-10 students each. At school meetings, whole camp worship services, or even on the recreation field, each staffer can quickly see whether their 8-10 students are present. In addition, the small group interaction allows every student to be heard, share requests, make needs known, and receive personal attention. Lasting friendships are formed, and lives are changed.

Take this same approach to caring for adults in your church. Ministry care cannot happen on the individual level from within the congregation gathered in the worship service. Adults need to be connected to smaller groups. Since many adult groups have at least twenty or more people listed on the class roll, even smaller care groups are needed in order for everyone to receive attention when they are present or absent, have the opportunity to build friendships, and know someone who can be aware of ministry needs that may arise. Notice that care groups should be assigned based on class roll and not on class attendance. Every person who is assigned to a group deserves to be a part of a smaller care group of friends.

## Level 2: Know the Function of Your Existing Groups

One of the critical elements of experiencing church revitalization through groups is to determine whether or not your existing groups are really contributing to the desired end result. Though there may not be stated purpose for each group, a simple evaluation tool can help churches discover the type of groups that are currently meeting in the church and which ones are still needed in order for growth to occur.

Bruce Raley of Lifeway Christian Resources designed the chart below as an evaluation tool for groups in your church. The chart evaluates two primary components of every group: the length of time a group exists (short-term or ongoing) and the ability of new people to join a group (is the group open or closed). By placing those components on a two by two grid, four possibilities for groups emerge.



### Four Types of Groups

#### 1. Closed, Ongoing

The closed, ongoing groups meet regularly in your church with no intention of ever stopping. These groups began at some point in the past, but have no scheduled end. They typically use some type of rotating curriculum that is never completed but simply moves from one study, series, or unit to the next.

These groups have likely been in existence for some time with largely the same core group of people. They may do some good work, enjoy fellowship with one another, and are often led by a central figure – the teacher – who is the primary person responsible for what happens in and through the group.

These groups may *believe* that they are open groups and may even have guests (“visitors”) from time to time. However, the group members are relationally full, having known each other for years. They are cordial to new people who happen to attend but are rarely intentionally evangelistic. Typically, they do not actively seek to identify, invite, and enroll new members in the group. In some cases, the group may adopt a defensive posture to protect the interests of class members when the group feels that the church or pastor is seeking a direction that may jeopardize the routine that they have grown to enjoy.

This description fits many Sunday School classes in churches today. Even if these groups are *theoretically* supposed to be the church’s plan for offering open groups, in practice the groups are *functioning* as closed, ongoing groups. Most studies indicate that a group that has existed for 12-18 months without a significant number of new people joining has essentially become a closed, ongoing group.

## **2. Closed, Short-Term**

A second type of group is the closed, short-term group. This group is short-term because it usually only exists for a pre-determined and relatively brief amount of time. The group may start out open in anticipation of its beginning. But, the group quickly becomes closed by design, because after the launch and initial week of the group meeting, adding new members would cause them to be too far behind in the short-term study. These types of groups are often designed to help people study the Scripture at a deeper level, to explore topics/interests, or to provide specific training.

In many churches, these types of groups meet at a time other than Sunday morning (commonly as Wednesday night discipleship groups) and are attended by people who are usually (but not always) already members of other groups such as Sunday School classes. Closed, ongoing groups may play a strategic part of a church’s discipleship strategy but are unlikely on their own to be catalysts for large numeric growth.

Some churches may adopt a longer-term strategic plan for the use of closed, short-term groups. For example, a short-term group established to go through an 8-week Biblical parenting principles class may stay together and becoming an open-ongoing Sunday School or Small Group that exists to reach other Parents with Children. Or, an affinity based group – a group of golfers that agree to go through a 6-week men’s study in the clubhouse before their weekly round – might be a tool that the churches uses to form a core for an ongoing men’s Bible study.

### **3. Open, Short-Term**

The open, short-term group is likely the least common group in most churches. This group would accept new people at any time; however, the group itself is not designed or intended to stay together for a long length of time. The group is designed for new people to come at any time, complete the desired objective within a brief period of time, and move on to something else.

One application of this idea could be a revolving class for new members. For example, a church might come up with a series of four sessions designed for people who want to understand more about becoming a member of the church. The four sessions are non-sequential and independent, meaning that they may be attended in any order and do not build upon one another in content.

When the sessions are taught in a continuous loop, attendees may take the four sessions in any order and begin at any time. When they have attended all four sessions (in any order), guests may then move to the next designed stage or group.

This design maintains the open-ness of the group as well as the short-term content design. The new member class is one potential application. Others may also exist that help guests make a decision to follow Christ, become a member of a church, discover their spiritual gift, find an ongoing group, and connect to ministry service within that church. Open, short-term groups are likely the least common type of group in churches and in many churches will not exist at all.

### **4. Open, Ongoing**

The final type of group in your church is the open, ongoing group. This type of group is the catalyst for growth in your church. The group meets perpetually and likely uses some form of ongoing curriculum for study. The most significant factor is that the group is designed and determined to be intentionally open. The group is focused on identifying, inviting, and expecting guests to be in their group each and every week. Group members routinely include guests in both planned and spontaneous fellowship gatherings. In addition, the group plans for and works toward beginning a new group out of the existing group as soon as possible, ideally within 12-18 months of the first group meeting.

Internally, the group's leadership reflects a plan for expansion. Rather than being driven by one central leader, the ministry of the group is led by a variety of individuals. Different people may take the lead in teaching the lesson, planning a fellowship, reporting on ministry needs, recruiting volunteers for ministry, and leading in outreach. Using multiple leaders is necessary in order to have plenty of people prepared to begin a new group.

Historically, Sunday School classes were designed to be open, ongoing opportunities for outreach to and Bible study with those who were not believers or connected to anyone's church. Since the morning worship service has replaced the adult Bible study as the most likely first visit for guests to a church, the existence of truly open, ongoing adult groups has diminished in many churches.

### What About Your Church?

Think about every group that meets in your church, regardless of when, where, or how often they meet. As you reflect on the groups chart above, identify which quadrant each group fits into the best. If you have Wednesday or Sunday night groups for discipleship, they are likely closed and short-term. In most cases, Sunday School, Sunday morning adult groups, and weeknight home groups drift toward the closed-ongoing category in practice if not in statement. For church revitalization to happen through adult group ministry, there must be the presence of truly open and ongoing groups. If there are no groups in the church that are intentionally open and ongoing, the likelihood for new energy to be infused into the church through groups is very low. For churches in this situation, starting new groups is essential.

#### Questions to Consider:

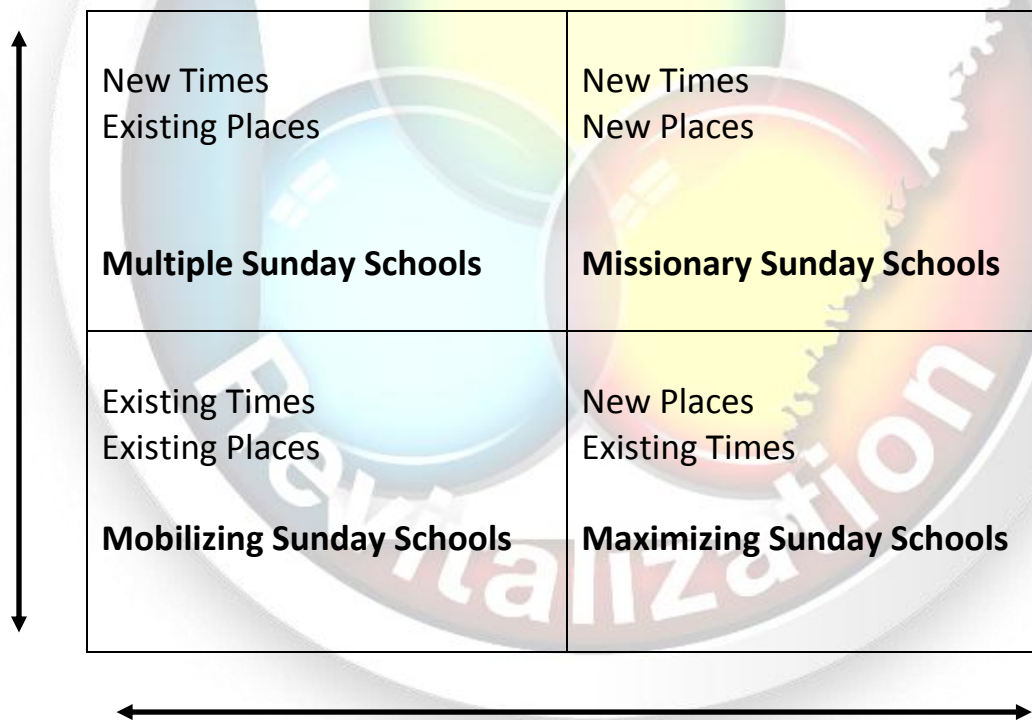
- What type of groups do we currently have in our church?
- What type of groups would help our church move closer toward our ministry goals and purpose?
- What groups think they are one type but are actually another?
- How can we help all of our groups gain clarity on their purpose?
- What type of new groups should our church consider starting in the near future?

## Level 3: Emphasize Starting New Groups.

Starting new groups is essential to maintaining consistent growth in group ministry. In addition, a new groups strategy is the best way to inject new life and enthusiasm for group ministry into your church. Church revitalization will not happen through a group ministry without the addition of new groups.

Here is why having a plan for starting new groups is important. Consider that there are three “irreducible elements” of a group: People, Place, and Time. Every group has to have all three of these three elements, or they cannot exist as a group. Assuming that a church wants to attract NEW People (and not just shuffle existing group members around), there are only four possibilities for adding new people to groups in any church.

Consider where and when all of your existing groups currently meet, and think about the four possibilities for adding new people:



### Groups Meeting at the Same Time and in the Same Place

The first possibility is simply to add people to your existing groups. To use what you already have in place means to begin to **Mobilize** your groups. In one sense, this should be the easiest way to add new people. However, this has often proven to be the most difficult way, because it requires a group that has likely begun to function as a closed group to make the adjustments necessary to become an intentionally open group. Adding new people by only utilizing existing

times and places (existing groups) is often difficult for the guest, the long time group members, and the leader.

### **Groups Meeting at the Same Time, But in a Different Place**

The second possibility is to start new groups during your existing time slot but utilize different space. To expand your current Sunday School hour into every available space is to **Maximize** your groups. This option is the primary method most churches will use to start new groups because it is the least disruptive to the existing group structure. All of your existing groups can remain in the same time and place that they currently occupy.

The key challenge in this method is the availability of new spaces in which new groups can meet. Churches using this method to create new groups will need to have empty classrooms, utilize space that is used for other purposes (a choir room, library, sanctuary, meeting room, fellowship hall, etc.), or have available space that is close enough to the church to allow for meetings to take place during the existing Bible study hour (such as a home next door).

### **Groups Meeting at a Different Time, But in the Same Place**

The third possibility is the opposite of the second. In this scenario, no new class space is required. Instead, each existing class space is utilized for a second time during an additional Sunday School/Bible study hour, thus creating a structure of **Multiple** Sunday Schools. New groups can utilize existing space and meet before or after the worship service, on Sunday evening, on Wednesday night, or at any other time when the room is not in use.

The obvious advantage of this method is that churches will not need to identify new meeting places. However, the creation of a new Sunday School hour may affect other existing ministries and require some adjustment to the regular starting or ending time of morning worship services.

### **Groups Meeting at a Different Time and in a Different Place**

The most radical possibility for starting new groups is to create them in an entirely new time and a new place. These **Missionary** groups will meet off campus and at a time other than the existing Sunday School hour. In most cases, this model will likely utilize personal homes, public places such as coffee shops, or buildings not utilized on the weekends (schools or office buildings). This method is a completely new and parallel groups ministry for the church.

The advantages to this model are the opportunity to connect with and disciple those who will not come to the church campus or be reached through a traditional Sunday School structure. The model also encourages a missionary mentality that drives people away from the “on-

campus” view of ministry and into their communities. As a brand new method, this approach also offers the ability to start something completely fresh and new with no ties to traditional approaches.

Disadvantages include the need to create an entirely new structure for the administration and leadership of these groups. Also, a great deal of work is required to identify new spaces, times, and leaders not to mention the extensive preparation necessary to launch the groups successfully.

### **To Summarize:**

There are only four ways to add new people to groups in your church and three out of four of them mean to start new groups. And, the only one that doesn’t require starting new groups (Mobilizing) is the often the hardest to carry out! Churches that intend on using groups as a catalyst for church growth simply must commit to starting new groups.

### **Identifying a Target Audience for a New Group**

One foundational missionary strategy is the identification and adoption of a “people group”. When missionaries arrive onto a field of service, their individual goal is not to reach the entire country . . . that is the goal of the organization (the mission board). Missionaries embrace their part of the big picture by focusing their attention on the people group that they are called, equipped, and resourced to reach. By having multiple missionaries on the field, each assigned to different people groups, the country can be reached.

This principle translates well to the group strategy of a local church. If every class is trying to reach every person in a city, the focus and effectiveness of the group becomes diluted. How realistic is it for one group to be able to teach, reach, fellowship with, and find common life application of Scripture within a group of all age ranges, family structures, life stages, affinities, or interests? When prospective individuals or families are identified through outreach ministries of the church, to which class can they be assigned for follow up? When someone arrives at your church on Sunday morning and asks which group they should attend for Bible study, how do you know where to send them?

The answer to dealing with these questions is to organize around a strategy of “people groups.” In this model, the church (organization) has the vision to reach the entire city, but the individual classes (missionaries) will be more effective when they know with clarity to which segment of the city they can devote their energy, resources, and attention.

When identifying a potential “people group” that can serve as a target audience for your new groups, consider the following sources:

## **Gaps in your current SS organization**

Examine the list of current groups you offer in your church. Is there an age range, family structure, or life stage that is glaringly absent? For example, some churches identify that the number of families with small children in their church is very low. This “gap” can reveal to you the need for a new group designed and focused on reaching this segment of the community.

Note: consult the guide “Evaluating Numbers and Records” at the end of this document for an extended discussion on the information available from good class rolls and records.

## **Sub-groups in current classes**

Churches that have several adult classes with all ages combined may discover within one large class a core of couples or individuals that share a similar life stage or family structure (single adult, parent of preschoolers, empty nesters, etc). This sub-group can provide the foundational core for a new group that seeks to reach others who share their life stage, experiences, and needs.

## **Worship Attenders who are not connected**

Discover the number of people who attend worship services but are not involved in any group. How many people would this be in your church? Is there a common characteristic that describes them? Because these people are already connected to the worship service in your church, an intentional effort might easily connect them to also a new group.

## **Community Needs/Demographics**

How has the community around your church changed in the past ten years? A demographic study can reveal a people group that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, one church discovered a much larger number of single mothers in a rapidly growing apartment complex nearby. This discovery revealed the need for groups to be formed with these families in mind.

## **Personal Burden/Concern**

Finally, God may simply place a burden on someone in your church to start a group to reach a certain demographic, neighborhood, or affinity. Do not neglect the role of the Holy Spirit in leading someone to start a new group based not on an age or family make-up, but

focused on a geographic area, a neighborhood, a work group, a recreational pursuit, or some other affinity that brings people together who are disconnected from Christ and His church.

Identifying a target audience or “people group” will help your groups think and work more like missionaries in their communities.

## Methods of Starting New Groups

Once the decision has been made and a target group identified, leaders can consider several ways to start a new group. Allan Taylor created the following list of possibilities for starting new groups.

### 1. Birth a Group.

In this method, individuals from an existing class set out to start a new work. The individuals form a leadership team for the new group. Rather than mourn “losing our best and most faithful” people, the “mother” group should view this as a positive development and celebrate the sending of these missionaries out of their group and into a new field of service.

### 2. Trailblazing

In this scenario, the opposite of birthing a group occurs. The *existing leader* leaves his or her group and starts a new group. Though some of the existing group may choose to follow the leader, most should remain and focus the existing group on being mobilized to rebuild, raise up new leaders, and seek to launch another new group in the future.

### 3. Relationally

As mentioned before, sub-groups often exist within an established group, especially when that class is very large. Rather than viewing this method as “splitting the group,” classes can instead view this as a strategic opportunity to help both the existing and the new group to become intentionally focused on reaching a more clearly defined segment of the community.

### 4. Topically

A topical study can be a great way to launch a new group around a common interest or felt need. For example, a study on marriage, parenting, or financial management can be effective in bringing people together for a period of 8-12 weeks. During this time, relationships can be established and leaders identified. The goal of the topical method should be to encourage the group to remain together after the study concludes and

continue as a regular Sunday School class or Bible study group. The use of video teaching for this type of group may also be helpful in launching a new group before a teacher or complete leadership team can be solidified.

## **5. New Members**

In fast growing communities and environments, new groups may be able to begin from those who are new to the church. Consider beginning with a brief study on church membership and then allow the groups to remain together for ongoing Bible study.

## **6. Geography or Affinity**

Neighborhood Bible studies, lunch break groups in a work place, sports teams, and other recreational connecting points can all be ways of uniting people in a group for the purpose of starting an ongoing Bible study.



## Level 4: Recruit and Equip New Leaders.

Even seasoned small group pastors say that identifying, recruiting, and training can be a challenge to leading a growing groups ministry. However, pastors are also quick to point out that leadership is essential to the success of groups in any church.

Numerous sources agree on the following basic outline for recruiting leaders:

1. **Begin with prayer.** Matthew 9:38 tells us to call out to the Lord, and He will send workers into the harvest fields. Ask God to place a name on your mind of one whom He is preparing to fill that leadership need.
2. **Recruit personally.** Recruiting leadership is not something that should be done over the phone, through electronic communication, social media or 30 minutes before the nominating committee meeting is to begin. Meet with the person face to face to discuss this important ministry opportunity.
3. **Recruit individually.** Once God has placed the name of a person on your mind, deal only with that person until they are no longer in consideration. Present the opportunity to them in clear language and with a realistic picture of the demands. Insist that they take time to seek God's direction and hear His call to the task.
4. **Assure them of your ongoing support and resourcing.** New leaders need to know that they will not be abandoned to drift alone with only a quarterly leader's guide to cling to.
5. **Provide them with a basic "start-up plan"** and timeline for the preparation and launch of the group.

In addition to the basic outline above, other ideas may be helpful in recruiting leaders. First, consider recruiting co-leaders for a group rather than expecting on one person to do the job alone. A co-leader, or even a leadership team, can divide the responsibilities, allow for more strategic and deeper training, assist in defining the function of the group, give more people an investment in the group, and create a support structure during the initial launch days.

Even in existing groups, future new group leaders can be equipped by allowing them to serve as "apprentice" leaders. Every group should have at least one person who leads the group on a monthly basis, even in the presence of the regular group leader. Practice and experience is the best trainer.

Formal training is another key element in equipping leaders for group ministry. Seminars and conferences provide live interaction with practitioners and other leaders who can share practical insight into what goes into a groups ministry. Training is also available through video series, website sources, printed articles, and even self-assessment tools. A wide variety of communication systems and delivery tools make training more accessible and inexpensive than

ever before. State convention personnel and associational missionaries are excellent sources of ideas for training leaders.

Finally, do not neglect the power of encouragement. Leaders should know that they are being prayed for on a regular basis. The senior pastor must be the leading supporter and champion for new groups in the church. Existing groups who launch new groups should be constantly encouraged as well. A timely word, a written note, and pointing out small victories can all go a long way in keeping new groups healthy and vibrant.



## Level 5: Create and Communicate a Clear Plan for Groups.

While most agree that groups potentially provide an effective vehicle for carrying out God's purposes for His church, studies reveal that many churches do not have an intentional strategy for doing so. A study conducted by Lifeway Research in March 2008 revealed that only 29 percent of smaller church pastors strongly agreed that they had a clear plan to accomplish what God had called them to do. Below are six steps that will help you identify and implement an intentional strategy which will enable your groups ministry enjoy maximum impact.

### Expectation

For most churches, it has been a long time since anyone considered *why* the current groups ministry exists in the first place. This important question reveals the core shared expectations of this ministry in your church. What part of the outreach and maturity process are you *depending* on your groups to accomplish? What will be done through groups that *cannot be duplicated* at another time? What part of your church's mission will be *deficient* if not fulfilled through the groups? Discovering the answers to questions like these is the starting point for the intentional groups strategy you will implement.

### Explanation

When consensus about the purpose of groups has been reached, you will want to share these ideas throughout the church. The church family should understand the unique role that groups have in the church's mission. You may begin by laying a Scriptural foundation through a sermon series, seminar, or Bible study. You can refer to church records, community demographics, and other research to help communicate the need for an emphasis on groups. You will want to highlight areas that are thriving as well as aspects that need attention. If changes are forthcoming, it is crucial that people understand *why* they are necessary and *how* they relate to the mission of the church.

### Execution

Time after time, a football coach who has just lost a game has been approached by the sideline reporter and asked about what happened on the field. The coach will often shake his head and say, "We had a good game plan . . . but, we just didn't execute." The execution phase is where details emerge concerning *how* the expectations will be pursued. If you expect groups to be the means for contacting prospects and guests to your church, there must be a specific time, place, and method for doing so. If you expect groups to be the primary time for people to learn and apply God's Word, this should be reflected in your plan for curriculum and teacher training. If your church expects groups to be primarily evangelistic, there should be an intentional strategy for inviting lost people, using salvation testimonies, and sharing the gospel in each class session.

## **Equipping**

Groups are dependent on volunteers, many of whom have little experience. Even the most faithful leaders need to be refreshed and resourced for the next season of ministry. An intentional equipping strategy will include opportunities to train leaders in the specific ways that the stated expectations will be accomplished. This may happen at a regular leaders' meeting. You may provide resources through e-mail, your church website, or another internet based location. Arrange for your leaders to attend a training conference or work with your association to host an event at your church. Consistently pass along a recent article, helpful website, or book excerpt. While busy schedules are always a challenge, consistent equipping is your best ally for recruiting and retaining new leaders, curbing fears of inadequacy, building a cohesive groups leadership team, and helping each class stay on mission.

## **Evaluation**

Good leaders constantly evaluate what is happening. For an evaluation to be consistent with your intentional strategy, it must link what defines the success of your groups with the expectations that have been set. Are unchurched people being actively identified, invited, and included? Are leaders participating in equipping opportunities? Is there a more noticeable evangelistic effort being made in classes? Though perhaps not initially, a part of your evaluation will ultimately be how many people are attending, participating, serving, and responding to Christ through the groups. Including the perspective of leaders, class members, and other church staff will also prove valuable in the evaluation process.

## **Evolution**

No strategy can remain exactly the same forever. Along the way, you will find it necessary to make adjustments, particularly in the early months of the process. There will be some incidents that you had not envisioned and weaknesses that you had not anticipated. There may also be parts of the strategy that grow at a faster rate and require additional support. If significant changes to the large structure have been implemented, be sure to allow plenty of time for them to settle into place before making impulsive judgments on their effect. During this time, it will be especially important to stay in close contact with leaders and to keep the expectations affirmed by the church for groups in front of the people. From year to year, the entire process will be revisited as groups grow and reveal new needs and expectations that require attention.

Note: A full process discussion on this process can be found in the design guide "Foundational Sunday School" located on the Church Revitalization website.

# Evaluating Numbers and Records

Numbers are one source of information when determining the growth potential of your Sunday School ministry. Evaluation of these sources involves taking time to determine some specific differences between your current Sunday School and your desired Sunday School. Several sources can be consulted when determining these needs. Although this discussion uses terms like “Sunday School” and “rolls” adaptation can be made for different terminology, location, and record keeping systems.

- Use a 20-Year Annual Church Profile (ACP) report to look at general trends in Sunday School attendance and Baptisms (by age group if possible). If the church has reported the ACP, this information is easily accessible through Southern Baptist Directory Services, your Association office, or the ABSC. If the church has not regularly submitted an ACP, internal records may provide this information.
- Conduct a detailed examination of Sunday School class lists and roll sheets. Collect roll sheets that have individual names of every person on the Sunday School class roll and the Sundays marked as attended or absent. Although this may be tedious work, the information will be helpful in the evaluation process. Consider the following observations:
  - What classes are listed as available in your Sunday School ministry? What are the names of the classes? How do the names of the classes communicate who the class is designed to reach?
  - What age groups (ex. 30-39 year olds, life stage groups (ex. college students, retirees, empty nesters), or family make-up groups (ex. Parents of Teenagers, Single Moms) are noticeably absent in your current list of available Sunday School classes?
  - Examine all class roll sheets (especially for adult classes) for the following information:
    - What age groups, life stage groups, or family make-up groups are currently represented in the regular attendance of each existing class? What is the average attendance (school year) of these groups? (Note: a “regular attender” can be defined as someone who is present at least 2 times per month in SS)
    - In addition to the average attendance, how many different individuals attended Sunday School at least 5 times during the school year (August-May)? This number will give you an idea of the potential reach and immediate growth potential of the Sunday School with a more intentional plan for reaching and ministering to these groups.
    - Which of the above groups are noticeably absent from the regular attendance of each attending class?
    - Of the noticeably absent groups, what are the 1-2 groups that need the most immediate attention (that is, the most glaringly absent group or the group most important to accomplishing the purposes of the Sunday School)?
    - What other observations can you make from patterns in class attendance?

- Discuss the use of the Sunday School hour in most classes. How is the time generally spent in class? How much time is intentionally given to purposeful work/activity in a typical class?
- Examine the leadership structure of each class. What leaders are in place for each class? What is their understanding of their role and purpose of each? What resources have been provided? What training opportunities have been provided? Do the leadership positions, resources, training, and time allotment correspond with the stated purpose and definition of the Sunday School? Where are the discrepancies?
- Consider anecdotal information regarding the Sunday School ministry of your church. What do you hear people say are the strengths and weaknesses? What are the reasons given for attending or not attending Sunday School? What would leaders say are the frustrations faced in leading Sunday School in your church? What would potential leaders say are the main fears or obstacles that they have about considering a leadership role in Sunday School? Have informal conversations or more formal small group discussions on these issues if the team feels that it would be helpful.
- As you discuss these questions, make careful notes of the issues that are identified by the group. As a team, compile a thorough list of the needs noted by the group. The team does not have to make a judgment on the justification of a need or the likelihood that the need can be addressed or completed. This part of the process should seek to bring as many needs as possible to light.
- Examine the list of needs and determine if they can be grouped into categories – age groups needs, new groups needed, training needs, resource needs, space needs, leadership needs, time needs, etc.
- As a team, decide upon a final list and format of needs before moving on to the next step. Gain agreement among the team that these needs best reflect the differences between your current Sunday School and the desired Sunday School.

# Intensity vs Impact

As consideration is given to which changes to make, the Intensity vs. Impact tool can be helpful. Impact vs. Intensity refers to the correlation between the potential *Impact* of a ministry change (people affected, numerical increase, level of participation) and the amount of *Intensity* (effort, expense, potential for discomfort, level of opposition) that may result from the ministry change. Understanding the emphasis on the relationship between impact and intensity in the church revitalization process enables leadership to determine prayerfully which changes need to be introduced.

## Examples of Lower Intensity Actions:

- Obtain a demographic report on the community surrounding the church.
- Examine existing class rolls to identify unreached/unengaged people for future groups.
- Implement Care Group Systems for existing groups.
- Create a Welcome Center for Worship Service Guests.
- Implement a Follow Up System for Worship Service Guests.
- Host or attend a Group Leaders Training Event/Conference.
- Hold a Groups Emphasis Month.
- Start a Pastor's Class.
- Start one Topical/Video Driven Group.
- Start one new group out of an existing larger group.

## Examples of Higher Intensity Actions:

- Establish a Groups Ministry Leadership Team for Developing a Strategy.
- Lead a Group Connect event for your church.
- Begin an Off Campus Group.
- Launch a separate early or late SS hour with multiple groups.
- Develop and Implement a Reclaiming strategy for disengaged people who are on class rolls.
- Plan a new event or retool an existing event with a strategic plan for connecting people to groups.

### Additional Resources

- *Three Roles for Guiding Groups* (Ken Braddy and David Francis)
- *Sunday School Done Right* (Allan Taylor)
- *Sunday School in HD* (Allan Taylor)
- *Becoming a Church of Small Groups* (Bill Donahue)
- *Transformational Groups* (Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger)
- *Transformational Church* (Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer)
- *Transformational Discipleship* (Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, Philip Nation)
- *Be a Catalyst* (State Sunday School Directors)
- *Great Expectations* (David Francis)
- *Extreme Sunday School Challenge* (David Francis and Bruce Raley)

### Internet Articles

- “7 Small Group On-Ramps” – Andrew Mason  
[http://www.churchleaders.com/smallgroups/small-group-articles/168792-7-small-group-on-ramps.html?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=clsmallgroups\\_newletter&utm\\_content=7/24/2013+3:17:32+PM](http://www.churchleaders.com/smallgroups/small-group-articles/168792-7-small-group-on-ramps.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=clsmallgroups_newletter&utm_content=7/24/2013+3:17:32+PM)
- “Top Five Keys to Starting New Groups” – Mark Howell  
<http://www.markhowelllive.com/top-5-keys-to-starting-new-groups-lots-of-new-groups/>
- “How Do Groups Fit Into the Overall Strategy of Your Church” – Eric Geiger  
<http://visionroom.com/how-do-groups-fit-into-the-overall-strategy-of-your-church/>



## Revitalizing Sunday School: Where You Are and Where You Want to Go

	Sunday School that is Missing	Sunday School that is Meeting	Sunday School as Ministry	Sunday School that is Mobilized	Sunday School that is Multiplying
<b>Description</b>	SS is not an active part of the church; no significant presence	SS listed as part of your regular schedule; Little happens as groups outside of the SS hour	Passes as a “Good Class” in most churches; some group activity beyond just fellowship; , usually teacher driven	SS is <u>THE</u> ministry and outreach arm of the church; Ministry and evangelism <u>through</u> groups	Missional SS, but also is expanding into new sites, areas, neighborhoods, etc. Not bound by the campus or schedule
<b>Function</b>	Very little, inconsistent, no definition	Teacher led, no strategic plan, no organizational design	Organized and works well, but almost entirely inward focused; everything is for the members of the class	Organized and working but with predominately an outward focus; team leadership, <u>not</u> centered on the classroom	Missional SS expanding to new groups, areas, spaces, contexts, etc.
<b>Measure</b>	No measure	“Getting through the lesson” Attendance	Happiness and care for the members of the class, even over the growth/strategy of the church	Evangelistic growth, numerical growth Sending and Serving	New Groups “Sending” Evangelism/Baptisms New areas/locations New Leadership
<b>Challenges</b>	No core/foundation No vision Little leadership	Unhealthy SS model Few leaders Discouragement Lacks Energy	Comfort Zones Possessive/Protective Powerful leaders	Pastor “buy in” Church commitment to SS as growth strategy Clearing out space in other areas of the church schedule/calendar	Space Schedule Fatigue Developing New Leaders
<b>Needs</b>	Find a starting point Embrace a vision Find a point leader	Renewed Vision Equipped Leadership New Model/Plan	Heart for Growth Release Control Choose Best over Good	New leaders Administrative skill Strong, Clear Systems Long term commitment Tough Choices	Creativity Equipping New Leaders New Places