Foundational Sunday School Strategy

Very few churches have a full-time Minister of Education or Discipleship Pastor. Even in churches with staff positions dedicated to leading the Sunday School, the roles are often either part-time or combined with other staff responsibilities. In most churches, the pastor works with a part-time, multi-role staff person or a volunteer Sunday School Director to provide leadership to this area of ministry.

For pastors and directors, the following guide can be used to develop a foundational strategy for a Sunday School that moves from holding meetings to fulfilling a mission.

Level 1: Creating a Clear Vision

Whether it is the blueprints of a building, the brochure for a vacation spot, or simply a mental image of a yet unpainted portrait, successful projects begin with a clear picture of the end result in mind. Effective Sunday Schools have a clear vision for what the church needs to accomplish through the ministry of Sunday School.

A vision for what the church desires to accomplish through the Sunday School is a big task. The Sunday School includes people from every age range, life stage, family make-up, and affinity group. The activities that are attempted in many Sunday School groups include teaching, evangelism, communicating service opportunities, meeting ministry needs, making announcements, having fellowship, and more! Greater impact comes from creating a clear and focused vision for what needs to take place in <u>your</u> Sunday School.

- Form a group (5-7 people) that will serve as Sunday School Leadership Team. The group should include the SS Director and key leaders from all age groups in the Sunday School (preschool/children, youth, young adults, median adults, senior adults). The pastor should also plan to meet with the team for at least the initial stages of the process.

- Consult Scripture to determine some of the key ministry priorities of the church (ex. Acts 2:41-47)

- Evaluate current church mission or purpose statements in light of how they might be carried out through Sunday School. What parts of the church's vision are the best fits for your Sunday School?

- Discuss what ministries of the church <u>must</u> be carried out through the Sunday School. What will <u>not</u> happen in the church unless it happens in Sunday School? What are we absolutely <u>counting on</u> Sunday School to do in our church? What aspects of our current Sunday School ministry may currently be duplicated in other ministries?

- As a team, settle on no more than 3-4 primary purposes of what Sunday School should accomplish in your church.

- As a team, use these primary purposes to form a definition for what Sunday School means in your church. Try to be brief enough so that the definition can be communicated and remembered easily.

Although it may seem tedious, taking the time to think through the questions above will pay tremendous dividends for the impact of Sunday School in your church.

"Clarity isn't everything, but it changes everything. Yet, clarity is rare in leadership because the chaos of process is required to achieve it. Clarity is worth it. It creates simplicity, which is beautiful to experience. It creates focus, which is amazing when you sustain it. Clarity enables movement. Movement is waiting for you and is God's plan for His people." (Will Mancini, *Church Unique***)**
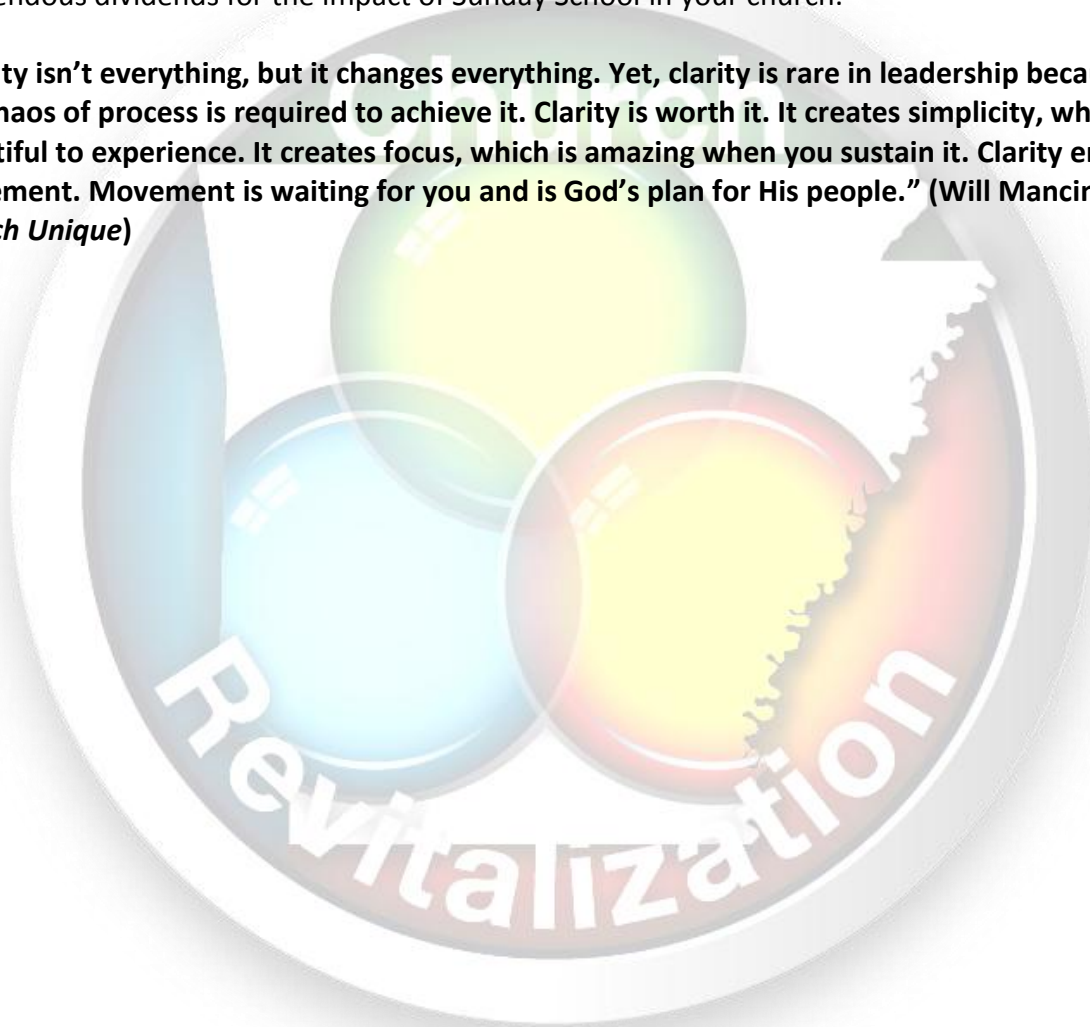
Level 2: Evaluation and Needs

Evaluation involves taking time to determine some specific differences between your current Sunday School and your desired Sunday School. The Sunday School Leadership Team can consult several sources when determining these needs.

- 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, Newly Marrieds, Retirees, Empty Nesters), or family make-up groups (ex. Parents of Teenagers, Single Moms) are noticeably absent from 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 (during 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?

- Gather 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.
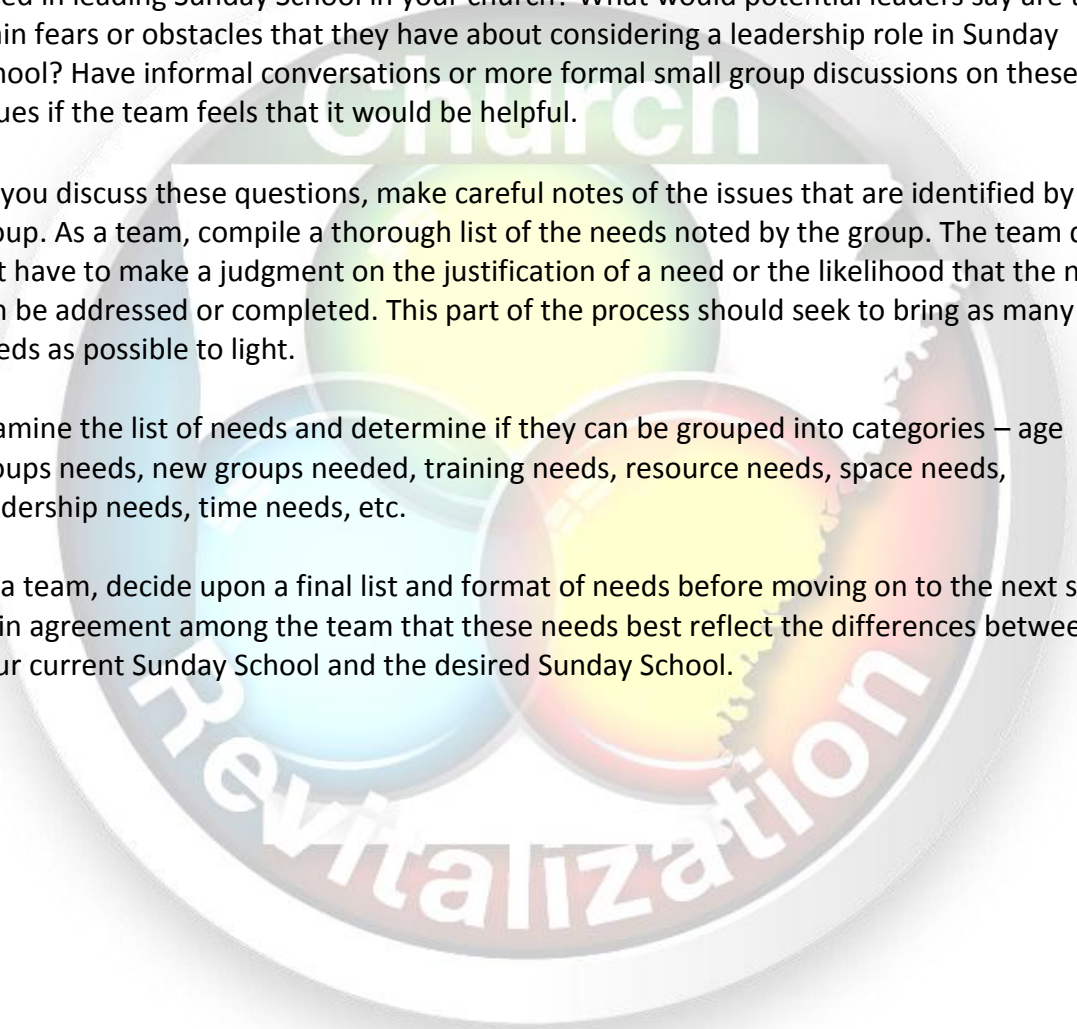
Level 3: Establish Priorities

At this point, the leadership team will have likely developed a list of needs that can look overwhelming! No church can address every need at once. The next step must be to determine a good starting point. In this stage, the leadership team will begin to sort through the list of needs and determine which needs are the most critical. Remember that at this point it is not necessary to list specific action steps. The goal is to determine the needs that are the most urgent. When beginning this stage (as well as later when creating action steps) the leadership team may find it helpful to consult the *Intensity vs Impact Guide* for some ideas on making decisions related to establishing priorities.

As the leadership team looks through the list of needs, consider these criteria for assistance in determining priorities:

- If a churchwide assessment has been conducted, which needs are most closely related to challenges identified by that instrument?
- What needs affect the greatest number of people?
- What needs impact a group of people identified as largely absent in the Sunday School ministry?
- What will create excitement within the church and be viewed as a positive step forward?
- What needs provide the possibility for starting momentum in the Sunday School?
- What needs invest in equipping existing leaders and developing new ones?
- What needs are within the immediate reach and resources of the church? The team may wish to sort the needs into groups of Immediately Accessible, 6-12 Months, 12 Months or more.

The leadership team should work hard to narrow down the list of needs to 2-3 priorities for which immediate action can be taken. For priority needs that may take a longer time to implement fully, the team may consider breaking down the need into a smaller component that can be acted upon immediately. Look for something that can be implemented rather quickly and is a "quick win" in order to start some momentum toward future significant change.

Lacking any short-term wins many church members will give up on your vision or actively join the resistance. – Marty Duren

Level 4: State the Desired Improvement

Before developing specific steps to take toward addressing the prioritized need, the leadership team should determine what a successful result would look like. A goal is a specific result that includes a measurement and a timeline. These elements are necessary in order determine whether or not the goal was actually met and the desired improvement realized.

Depending on the kind of need that is being addressed, goals could be designed in one of three basic categories. Examples for each are below (a timeline/calendar deadline would need to be added to each):

Action Goals – Goals that refer to the completion of a specific event, meeting, or activity

- Hold a training event or series of training session for SS leaders.
- Complete a review of all class rolls to categorize prospects by age group or life stage.
- Compile all worship guests and recent event registrations (ex., Vacation Bible School) into a prospect list by age group or life stage.
- Conduct a survey of worship attenders who do not attend SS to determine the age group or life stage represented.
- Launch a new Sunday School class for a specific age group.
- Conduct a review of all SS curriculum used to determine its compatibility to SS purposes.

People Goals – Goals that refer to investment in, responses by, and changes in targeted people groups

- Identify and receive commitments from 10 adults who agree to be trained as potential age group Sunday School leaders.
- Assist all adult Sunday School teachers in identifying an apprentice teacher.
- Have 90% of all Sunday School teachers complete a selected SS training series.
- Identify a target list of a people group for a new SS class and enroll 80% of them in the new class (enroll = the individual agrees to be enrolled in the class … they are not just placed on a list).
- Hold a Sunday School emphasis month (Activity Goal) and record 75% of the adults with a commitment to increase SS attendance and involvement.

Results Goals – Goals that are related to attendance figures, baptism numbers, event participation, etc.

- Increase the number of "unique attenders per month" by ___ % or _____ (number).
- Average _____ in SS attendance (total or for an age group) for the month of _____.
- Baptize _____ (adults, students, children, total) by the end of the year.

A need may include more than one type of goal. For example, a Sunday School training emphasis may include an action goal (completing a series of Sunday School training sessions), a

people goal (90% of all Sunday School teachers completed the training), and a results goal (average Sunday School attendance increased over the following six months).

The leadership team should take the time to write goals carefully that include a specific desired result, a way to define/measure each goal, and a date by which each goal will be evaluated for progress. If no clear target is present, creating action steps will be much more difficult, and evaluation will be impossible.

Level 5: Determine Action Steps

With goals established, the next step is to assemble a series of action steps that lead incrementally toward the desired result. Consider the following thoughts on creating action steps:

- Steps are sequential . . . each one should build on or add to the previous step.

- Steps should have reasonable increments. Avoid skipping over large amounts of time and work between one step to the next. Smaller, attainable steps will create momentum and help avoid a sense of being overwhelmed.

- Steps should be assigned to an individual or small group for completion. The adage "no one does what is everyone's responsibility" applies here.

- Steps should include the assignment of necessary resources . . . calendar space, facility space, financial support, communication assistance, and people availability.

- Steps should involve all appropriate permission needed from church committees, other ministry leaders, or the congregation as whole.

- Steps should be assigned to a place on a timeline leading up to the completion of the goal or event. Intermediate "touch base" meetings should be held in order to evaluate progress and keep everyone moving forward. These meetings need not be lengthy and could even be accomplished through email, as long as each person is asked to give the team an update on the progress being made.

- The final step of the process should be dedicated to some form of celebration . . . acknowledge the leaders; appreciate the volunteers; celebrate the results; praise God for doing something new!

Level 6: Keep Going!

When changes are implemented successfully, the Sunday School can begin to gain positive momentum. Leaders and group members have experienced healthy change that was used to unite people instead of causing division. A greater sense of clarity concerning what needs to take place in Sunday School is present. Leaders feel more equipped to take care of their responsibilities, and additional workers are in place to carry the load. New groups are formed to go after the people who are least represented in the current Sunday School ministry, and existing groups can be redefined to have a better understanding of their part in the overall ministry of the church to the community.

When churches get a vision for the potential of Sunday School in their church and develop a clear strategy for making it a reality, the impact on people, the church, and the community is limitless.

Additional Resources
- *Ten Best Practices to Make Your Sunday School Work* (Ken Hemphill and Bill Taylor)
- *Teaching to Change Lives* (Howard G. Hendricks)
- *Connecting in Communities* (Eddie Mosley)
- *Transforming Discipleship* (Greg Ogden)
- *Simple Church* (Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger)
- *Simple Small Groups* (Bill Search)
- *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Nelson Searcy)
- *Creating Community* (Andy Stanley and Bill Willits)
- *Sunday School in HD* (Allan Taylor)
- *The Six Core Values of Sunday School* (Allan Taylor)
- *Rethinking the Church* (James E. White)
- Lifeway Resources by David Francis
    - *Connect 3*
    - *The Discover Triad*
    - *Five Step Formula for Growth*
    - *Great Expectations*
    - *I-6: Creating an Inviting Sunday School*
    - *Transformational Class*

IMPROVEMENT DESIRED

VISION

PRIORITY

ACTIONS

EVALUATION & NEEDS