

1-1-2003

The Intentional Sunday School: A Pathway to Purpose

John H. Ewart

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, jewart@sbts.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ewart, J. H. (2003). The Intentional Sunday School: A Pathway to Purpose. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 14(1), 11-34. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol14/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by APU Digital Archives. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* by an authorized editor of APU Digital Archives. For more information, please contact sharrell@apu.edu.

**The Intentional Sunday School:
A Pathway to Purpose**

John H. Ewart

Years ago, while serving in the Philippines as a journeyman missionary, my supervisor and I were scheduled to attend a planning meeting for a new church start on a nearby island. We drove to the coast but unfortunately missed the last automobile ferry for the day. A man at the dock overheard our discussion and realized our need. He told us of another boat that could accommodate us. He led us to another portion of the dock area and introduced us to the captain and crew of a smaller ferry designed to carry people only. The craft had no ramp for vehicles. We assumed they had misunderstood our dilemma and explained that we would need our car once on the island to drive to our meeting. The captain just smiled and said, "No problem, we can put your car onboard." With an equal balance of fear and curiosity we agreed to let them make the attempt.

The ferry was tied alongside the dock in deep, port water. A gangway was in place for people to board. The gangway was removed and the crew proceeded to lay two large boards between the edge of the dock and the edge of the boat. When the boards were in place the captain returned to us and calmly said, "Drive on." My supervisor, who had been driving and to whom the car was assigned, quickly handed me the keys. Realizing we had no other option, I sat down behind the wheel of our mission board's vehicle and started the engine. I released the clutch slowly and drove toward the end of the dock. When I reached the edge, I realized I had a major problem. The dock was higher than the boat and the boards slanted downward. I could not see

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2003

the boards! I had no idea which way to move.

Recognizing my problem and the sincere look of panic on my face, a crew member hopped out on the boards and began to direct me with hand signals. I was totally dependent upon him. I focused intensely upon his every direction. He motioned me to the right and to the left and at one point frantically motioned for me to stop. Needless to say, I stopped! One wrong move and I would plunge into the ocean. I crept forward, clutch and all, moving up and down with the tide, and inched my way toward the boat.

Life is like that. It is full of deep water and unseen challenges. Each day holds uncertainty and the unknown. We cannot see what the next minute contains. We must move forward through life yet we cannot see the "boards" ahead of us. We need a guide. We need someone who can see the "boards", the one who has put them into place, to direct us. We must focus intentionally upon his every direction in order to succeed. We must adjust our movement or stop our movement according to his command.

Graciously, God has created and set into place certain "boards" upon which His people are to intentionally move forward. These "boards" are the biblical purposes of the church. They lead to the fulfillment of His Great Commission to reach the world with His Gospel.

Scripture reveals these purposes to us. In Acts 2:42-47 for example, we see the early church intentionally moving forward in her worship (both public and private), her witness (evangelism/missions), her walk (discipleship/education), her work (ministry), and her welcome (fellowship).

The contemporary church has been challenged as never before to be aware of and to be driven by these purposes. This truth however, leads to the ever-pressing question of how can the church continue to effectively move forward in these purposes areas? To do so will require both educating members biblically and theologically while balancing doctrine with the provision of opportunities for practical experience and expression in each purpose area. Moving forward will require a systematic approach incorporating every member of the Body from each age group. It will also require a method of assimilating new members into the purpose driven process as they join the church as well as reaching out to prospective members. How will the busy church of the twenty-first century manage such a task?

There is an historic answer. It is called the Sunday school. In some churches it may not carry the historic title any longer. It may be called Bible study or small group. But if it is an organized, weekly, small group ministry with the study of God's word as a primary purpose, the result can be the same regardless of nomenclature. For the sake of this discussion, I will use the historic title with respectful recognition of the many other headings utilized by the church today. The crux of the matter is when organized and carried out with intentionality; the Sunday school can become a pathway through which the biblical purposes of the church are accomplished.

Why the Sunday school? Some pundits would argue that the Sunday school is archaic and no longer a relevant ministry. Recent research, however, by church growth experts such as Thom Rainer would indicate just the opposite. For many of the most effective evangelical churches today the Sunday school is a leading, vital component of their growth strategy and success.

Why? In many churches the Sunday school is already the largest ministry with the largest leadership team. It can be organized with leadership responsible for every age group. It can be structured to lead in outreach, prayer, ministry, assimilation and fellowship. And, it can be a primary vehicle for teaching and training in worship.

Historically, the Sunday school was the evangelistic arm of the church. However, due to an unfortunate paradigm shift in some churches and denominations it became nothing more than a series of inwardly focused study groups or was relegated to children's ministry. As Donald McGavran, Charles Arn and Win Arn write, "The focus of the Sunday school changed from those 'outside' to those 'inside'. The result was a decreasing interest in outreach and increasing interest in nurture. The Sunday school fell prey to the tendency of many institutions to change from the founding goals to goals of organizational survival."¹

It is time to reclaim the heritage of the Sunday school and intentionally develop it into a coordinated strategy of outwardly focused ministry teams for all ages with the fulfillment of the church's biblical purposes as its primary reason for existence. Once again, the Sunday school can become the evangelistic and assimilation arm of the church.

Be warned! An intentional Sunday school requires high expectation from its leadership and membership. Restructuring and the rethinking may be necessary to achieve this level of ex-

pectation and accountability. The transformation that can result however is well worth the energy and focus required.

The purpose of this article is to provide both a theological foundation and practical strategy by which the Sunday school can be revitalized and intentionally used as a pathway to the fulfillment of God's purpose for His church. This presentation is not set forth from the context of an experiential vacuum. Rather, it is a retelling of that which has been seen and used over decades of real ministry in the local church.

To begin this building process, it is significant to ask a piercing question: Do you actually know of a church that is growing? If you can honestly answer yes, please praise the Lord! Celebrate Him and His blessing. Please recognize, however, that growing churches are in the minority. Many churches have become lethargic and inwardly focused. They are experiencing decline or plateau while the world continues to drift and remain spiritually separated from God.

As a result many Sunday schools operate on a substandard level. Unfortunately, this reality feeds the fire of Sunday school critics. I argue that we must be very careful not to dismiss a powerful tool God has used and will continue to use due to our improper training and operation.

Instead, we must pray that the Lord will transform our congregations and our small groups into outwardly focused families seeking to impact the world with the good news of His gospel. We need Him to guide us in His strategy to fulfill the Great Commission and to reveal to us how the Sunday school might still be used in that endeavor.

There are a myriad of wonderful books, manuals, videos, conferences and programs available to assist the local church leader in this discovery process. Many are well worth the investment of time and money. Please make certain that the ones selected are biblical and also practical.

As we lay a theological foundation for a practical strategy we must revisit well known passages. According to Matthew 28, our commission is to make disciples. If the church is not producing disciples, she is not fulfilling God's ultimate purpose for her. The church must have a practical strategy to lead her in a natural discipleship process involving every age group. A strategy is required that leads believers to shift their focus from an inward to an outward perspective. A new burden and passion for the lost and the inactive among our congregations is needed.

To be credible, an effective strategy needs the strength and foundational support of researched fact. Leading studies by church growth expert, Thom Rainer, involving thousands of churches across the United States, reveal that biblical preaching, intentional prayer ministries and evangelistically oriented Sunday schools are the three leading evangelistic methodologies utilized by the most effective evangelistic churches across the nation.² These churches represent the top one percent of all churches of all denominations in evangelistic effectiveness. Obviously, the impact of Sunday school is still very evident. Begin building a practical church growth strategy by combining these three evangelistic methodologies into a comprehensive Sunday school based plan.

The contemporary church does not need another canned program lasting for a few short weeks and involving only a small percentage of the membership. She does not need any ivory tower church growth theories. She cries out for a working model that will lead to transformed lives. A synergistic marriage of proven growth components, both new and old, into a practical, manageable strategy is being called for by our congregations.

An effective pathway to purpose must involve every active member of the church regardless of age. It must engage the believer at whatever stage of spiritual development they may currently be and allow them to participate accordingly. It must not, however, allow them to remain stagnate in their discipleship. It must produce a purpose-centered attitude expanding the church's worldview and passion for ministry. It must create a church growth mindset that becomes a natural part of the church's ongoing life. It must become a vital part of a congregation's weekly experience and transform the day to day lives of the people.

By combining the teaching of God's word, intentional prayer for the lost and for the church, and a church-wide outreach process, an effective Sunday school based growth strategy can produce discipleship and evangelistic opportunities leading to the transformation of church and community. This transformation occurs within the church as members grow spiritually and are disciplined. Transformation occurs in the community as the unchurched are reached and ministry takes place. As Sunday school proponent, Tom Lee, writes, "Sunday school outreach and evangelism possess its maximum potential when weekly

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2003

Sunday school visitation and ministry are coupled with Sunday morning evangelistic Bible teaching."³

How could such a strategy be specifically structured and function? I propose a practical church growth structure that delegates church-wide prayer and outreach responsibilities to the Sunday school fifty two weeks of the year.

The outreach component of this intentional Sunday school based strategy features a system of contact assignments and reports distributed in class during the normal meeting time. Each active member is asked to participate on an outreach team responsible for making contacts one week out of the month. Contacts do not have to be made on a specific night or day. Members make contacts according to a flexible schedule; they have an entire week to do so and they can use a variety of methods.

This Sunday school based plan allows for the coordination of outreach to entire families with teams from various age groups working together. It encourages family discipleship experiences as parents and children serve with one another to reach other families. The plan also includes all-church outreach events that can be easily scheduled far in advance to impact the entire community.

The comprehensive Sunday school based prayer strategy works in coordination with the outreach component. This synergy provides a multi-layered approach to reaching prospects and ministering to members. It features intensive and consistent intercession for unchurched prospects, inactive members, and active members on a weekly basis. This practical plan disciples children, young people, and adults in the ministry of prayer. In addition, an exciting by-product of the plan is the enhancement of the corporate church prayer life as real needs from the community and church are discovered for which intentional intercession is required. It provides prayer room ministries, mid-week prayer services and other prayer ministries additional direction and meaning.

As you read the following pages, I pray one pathway through which Christ can build His church becomes evident. For the structure of an intentional Sunday school based growth strategy to emerge, certain truths must be recognized and specific components included. I will seek to define ten components needed in the building process.

Component 1: The Principles of Purpose

Before implementing any strategy, an understanding of why the church should grow must be understood. As stated in the introduction, the reason is a matter of purpose.

Much has been written and discussed concerning being a purpose centered, driven, guided and developed church. It cannot be overstated however, how significant it is for the church to understand her true biblical purposes. This understanding must be acquired by both church leaders and members. A church will not fulfill the Great Commission unless the basic biblical purposes to which Christ called her are being fulfilled. As noted earlier, an exegesis of the early chapters of Acts will reveal at least five biblical purpose areas. A local congregation can evaluate her growth, methodology and programming by examining how effectively she is fulfilling each of these purpose areas. Once again, for this discussion, the five purpose areas are:

Worship

Our worship consists of both the public, corporate experience in and through the local church and the private expression of individual believers in prayer and personal communion with God.

Witness

Our witness consists of our involvement in personal and mass evangelism both through verbal testimony as well as relational lifestyle.

Work

Our work consists of the ministry in which we are involved both through the local church and as individual believers. Ministry can be manifested in a myriad of expressions ranging from meeting basic human need to reaching out to specific groups within the community and around the world.

Walk

Our walk consists of our discipleship and spiritual education as we grow in the knowledge of and the living out of our Christian walk with God.

Welcome

Our welcome consists of our fellowship with one another as we join together in love and support as a body of believers. Purposeful fellowship also includes the assimilation of new members and the way we relate to prospective members.

Effective work by the church in all five purpose areas joins to fulfill our Great Commission to make disciples. The church cannot separate and isolate one area from the rest. They overlap and intertwine with one another. If a church's effectiveness in one purpose area is weak, the overall health of the church will suffer. A Great Commission church is a balanced church. Any healthy church growth strategy will aid a congregation in emphasizing each of these purpose areas.

In addition, not only can a church's corporate effectiveness be evaluated by examining each purpose area, so too can the effectiveness of an individual believer. Therefore, it is logically concluded that these five areas are also the purposes for a strong Sunday school. Each Bible study class must be effectively involved in each purpose area in order to be healthy and growing. An intentional Sunday school based growth strategy connects biblical purpose to the weekly Sunday school program.

Why? In an age-graded or similarly organized Bible study program, there is a class responsible for every church member and prospect. There is no better organization to serve as the church's primary method of teaching purpose. Members are taught both through Bible study as well as through practical opportunities for service. With a labor force represented by every age group, led by prayer, and committed to reach out, a supernatural dynamic can take place that will permeate the entire church fellowship. As Sunday school leaders, Bill Taylor and Louis Hanks write, "The church that recognizes and chooses Sunday school as its foundational strategy for accomplishing the Great Commission will come to see Sunday school as a seven-day-a-week plan for involving people in seeking the Kingdom of God and fulfilling the Great Commission, not a one-day-a-week study period."⁴

Component 2: The Power of Prayer

"They're growing!" exclaimed our two youngest children, Rachel and Josiah, as they examined their crops. They picked the

seed, prepared the soil and watered the vegetables and flowers in the “pot garden” on our back deck. They created a healthy environment, maintained it on a regular basis, and then trusted God to produce growth. They are now watching the results. Soon we will enjoy the fruit of their co-labor with God.

We need to be reminded of the lessons from the garden. We must cultivate a healthy environment of growth in our churches. We must work intentionally to maintain that environment. And, we must trust God to produce growth. How do we begin to co-labor in the harvest?

James 4:2 reminds us, “You do not have because you do not ask.” One pastor shared, “I think it’s unbelievable that we do not ask Him to give us the souls of men and women.”⁵ Are we asking God for a harvest? Thom Rainer reveals an important point from his extensive research, “I could not find one declining church that I had visited over the past few years that had an ongoing prayer ministry specifically for the lost. Perhaps these dying churches have not because they ask not.”⁶

Church leaders can implement every new program, attend every conference and read every church growth book, but if they attempt to generate growth apart from the power of God they will not be effective. Remember John 15:5 when Jesus proclaimed, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.” Either we believe this or we do not.

The need for a proper biblical foundation and for Spirit-filled preparation leading to church growth cannot be overemphasized. We must acknowledge our complete dependence upon God for growth. We must abide in Him constantly for the wisdom and practical direction needed to pursue growth.

This connection must first be maintained by our church leadership. How much time do you spend in prayer specifically for church growth, evangelism, and outreach? How long have you prayed for your church leadership and workers this week? Today? Remember the challenge of Matthew 9:38, “Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.”

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus reminds us that **He** will build **His** church. We must humbly acknowledge that He is the Master Builder. We must seek to follow His building plan. None of our church growth methodologies or principles will carry sufficient spiritual power to be effective on their own merit. Tom Lee

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2003

points out, "Since outreach-evangelism is spiritual work it must be spiritually empowered."⁷ Alvin J. Vander Griend writes, "When we pray before doing the work of evangelism, we put the focus on God as the main evangelizer."⁸

If we search for ways to abide in Christ most certainly prayer and Bible study will occupy significant positions on the list. Again, the important role of Sunday school becomes visible. Imagine each class engaged in the serious study of God's word and in prayer, growing in their John 15 abiding connection.

One of the most exciting possibilities of a Sunday school based growth strategy is the incorporation of intentional intercessory and evangelistic prayer into both the small group Bible study structure and the larger corporate church life. This church-wide prayer foundation will create a vehicle for God to use to produce a spiritual environment that transforms the mindset of the church from an inward to an outward focus. An intentional prayer strategy through the Sunday school will create a healthy spiritual climate in the church and lead to a burden for the unreached. Remember the research by Thom Rainer. He states very clearly, "Our survey results ranked prayer ministries second only to preaching as the most important methodology in evangelistic effectiveness."⁹

Prayer will make the effectiveness of an outreach process much greater. Rainer goes on to say, "Across our nation a powerful movement of God's Spirit is transforming many churches from near-death to new life with evangelistic zeal...a new emphasis on prayer and prayer ministries touches the church."¹⁰ Participation in personal evangelism training and outreach will be much higher when the membership is first passionate and concerned about the spiritually lost in their community.

This climate of burden must be developed through spiritual transformation. It cannot be manmade. As people learn to intercede for one another and the unchurched, their hearts become more sensitive to God's desire to see people saved. Imagine the excitement when someone for whom a large portion of your congregation has been interceding accepts Christ and joins the church family!

Implementing an intentional prayer strategy through the Sunday school will also create significant discipleship opportunities. Training will not only occur from Bible study about prayer but also through practical prayer experience. Imagine parents and workers participating with preschoolers, children

and youth in prayer for their unchurched friends every Sunday. Imagine a class interceding for specific needs in the lives of prospects and members discovered by class prayer leaders making a few simple phone calls. Imagine families praying together in their homes for their neighbors and friends!

In addition, as stated earlier, implementing an intentional prayer strategy through your Sunday school will impact the church's corporate prayer life and ministry. Mid-week prayer services and prayer room ministries will be transformed. Intentional, purposeful prayer will attract more participants. Prayer will center on more than health concerns and general needs. Specific, felt need from throughout your community will be lifted before God's throne. Specific answers to prayer will be recognized and celebrated.

Rachel and Josiah cannot wait to smell their flowers and taste their vegetables. They are excited and anticipate wonderful results. How about you? Are you excited about the wonderful results of intentional prayer? Implement a strategy of intentional intercession through your Sunday school. Trust in God for the results and witness the church developing the reputation of being a house of prayer and a church that truly cares about people!

To attempt to go into "all the world" without a sound spiritual foundation will result in a weakened power source. Growth will be sought by human strength and wisdom. Integrate an intentional prayer strategy through the Sunday school or small groups ministry of your church and see the transformation begin!

Component 3: The Preaching of Pastors

In order for any growth strategy to be properly supported and effective, the senior church leadership must be involved. God's people follow God's leader. If the senior leadership places priority, intentionality, and focus upon a strategy, the possibility is much greater that the people will follow with enthusiasm. In contrast, if the senior leadership shows no excitement for the strategy and simply allows it to exist, the potential for impact and effectiveness is drastically reduced. In Scripture, God's vision to His people was usually delivered through the prophet, the priest, the king or the apostle. It is imperative that God's anointed leader be at the forefront of the implementation of any church growth strategy.

The pastor should show support for the strategy and the

Sunday school organization through participation as well as from the pulpit. Biblical church growth requires effort and time. Growth is a journey not an event. People will follow an example farther than they will follow an exposition. Pastoral support, vision and leadership are crucial to the effectiveness of any growth strategy.

Component 4: The Preparation of People

No growth strategy will be effective unless the congregation participates wholeheartedly alongside its leadership. God's people need example, equipping and excitement! Leadership recruitment, development and ongoing training must be built into a church's regular planning calendar.

High standards for leadership can only be expected when a realistic and practical training schedule has been offered. How can we expect leadership to lead properly if they have never been properly shown and taught how to lead?

Ministerial staff members must serve as cheerleaders, motivators and partners for the wonderful volunteer servants making up the lay leadership team and carrying out the growth strategy. Remember, an excited leadership leads to an excited laity.

Do not settle for anything less than excellence for the leadership of your strategy but temper your expectation with the level of excellence in training provided. Nothing is more frustrating to a volunteer than unclear objectives and responsibilities. Leaders must be disciplined.

Component 5: The Perspective of Process

Part of my responsibilities at Southern Seminary includes leading the online distance education program. E-mail is a crucial line of communication for those involved in theological education via the internet. It is also a great way to personally maintain relationships with family and friends. In fact, I have a dear friend, an elderly woman, who is a member of one of the churches for which I served as pastor. She loves to e-mail me all of those little tidbits of humor, poetry, and illustration that circulate in cyber land. Some mornings I will have ten e-mails from her. Although I love to hear from her, she struggles with the technology at times and often forgets to attach the story or joke she meant to send me. My computer may indicate I have received ten messages from her but often only about four of them

will contain any actual content.

Sadly, I have read books, articles, and attended conferences like that. Too many are long on promise but short on any real content. Unfortunately, those we are seeking to reach through our churches may characterize our ministry this way as well if we are not intentional in our purpose.

I have already discussed the intentionality of purpose needed in the lives of our churches and specifically in our Sunday school ministries. The process of building growth does not stop there however. We must also structure these foundational principles into a practical framework that leads to ministry implementation in the local church. It is wonderful to hear of vision and to dream but we also need growth structures that lead to action. James reminds us that, "Faith without works is dead." In the same way, vision without application produces few results.

To structure an effective Sunday school, we need an intentional process led by purpose, guided by prayer, and including the participation of people. This process will lead to the practicing of programs and the planning of projects. The result is the promise of products manifested in both public and private growth. Our goal of making disciples can be reached.

Remember, church growth is a journey not an event. Unfortunately, many church leaders attempt to grow their congregations beginning at the project level. Too often I am afraid events are scheduled on church calendars according to tradition or fad rather than purpose. The spring revival meeting is scheduled because that is the way it has always been. Healthy church growth cannot simply be planned by a calendar. It must be experienced according to God's Word and prayer! Do not forget, He is the One who will build His church!

Therefore, growth must begin on the biblical purpose level. A strategic process of planning can then be entered based upon the purpose or purposes being sought. This process must be supported spiritually by prayer and practically by the participation of people. Then this supported process can eventually lead to the development and scheduling of various purposeful programs and projects.

Programs are defined as ongoing ministries and organizations in which the congregation participates on a regular basis. In contrast, projects are short-term or one-time events.

In order to maintain the integrity of the planning process at every stage, leaders must constantly ask, "Why are we doing

this?" and, "Which of the biblical purposes does this fulfill?" If these questions cannot be readily answered, the church should evaluate whether or not to spend time, money and effort to continue with whatever program or project is being considered. Effective, long term church growth should include this continuous process to produce the desired spiritual products in a healthy manner.

One desired product is public growth. This includes statistical and numerical growth. It also includes an increase in the number of church ministries. A church seeking to fulfill her biblical purposes with integrity and passion should never apologize for reaching more and more people with the gospel. Increasing the number of opportunities for ministry and service should be celebrated as the church's impact on the community and world is increased.

The tired criticism of caring only about numbers dissipates as the other desired product, private growth, takes place with the same level of energy and enthusiasm. Effective, individual discipleship leading to spiritual maturity and life decisions for the Kingdom is the ultimate goal of any Great Commission congregation. The growth process leads the church to see the lost saved and disciplined into fruit bearing followers of Christ.

This healthy growth strategy helps a congregation fill her calendar with programs and projects that coordinate together into a comprehensive church growth effort. It provides the skeleton upon which other church programming can be coordinated as well.

I once saw a poster with three huge hippos standing in the water. Their cavernous mouths were wide open. The caption read, "When all is said and done, more is usually said than done." It is time for some real content.

Component 6: The Practice of Programs

Remember, a program is an ongoing ministry or organization within the church. No program should begin without a complete understanding of the biblical purpose sought to be fulfilled. Programs are the road, not the result. They should lead to something other than themselves.

Warning! Keep your cookie cutters in the drawers! Each church culture and context will mean a slightly different methodological approach. This is another reason why it is absolutely crucial to keep the biblical purpose as the foundation and the

beginning of all programming.

There are hundreds of church programs from which to choose. Make sure the ones you seek to implement have the proper foundation and flexibility to relate to your specific context.

Thom Rainer states clearly from his research, "If any program-based methodology proved to be a dynamic tool for these evangelistic churches, it was the Sunday school program...the problem with non-evangelistic Sunday schools is not the program itself; the problem is failure to use the program as an intentional evangelistic tool."¹¹ In another work he goes on to say, "Many pundits have assumed that the role of Sunday school in evangelism has all but disappeared. Our data indicates that the Sunday school had a role in over one out of three of those who accepted Christ."¹²

As mentioned earlier, on a programmatic level, I propose a Sunday school based growth strategy that asks each active member of a Bible study class to join an outreach team representing their class. Each team is responsible for outreach one week out of the month. Age appropriate contacts consisting of both inactive church members and prospective members are assigned to each team at the beginning of their class time. The team members have seven days to make the contact whenever and however they desire. The Sunday following their week of responsibility, a simple report is returned in class describing their effort and the result of their contact.

A strength of this specific strategy is its ability to allow an active member to make contacts as they are going about their normal life routine. This principle is exactly what is commanded in the Great Commission when we are instructed, "As you are going, disciple." It is not tied to a specific day or evening.

To ask an active member to participate in church outreach once a month, to supply them during their regular class meeting time with everything they need to be successful in contacting a person from their age group or from a similar family, and to give them seven days to do it any way they can, is surely not too much to expect! In addition, this frees the strategy from being tied to a specific, cultural context.

In addition, if the intentional prayer component is in place, specific intercession is lifted up before and after each outreach effort. The whole process is led in a John 15 connection with the Master Builder.

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2003

Component 7: The Planning of Projects

As mentioned earlier, projects are short term or one-time events. Projects must also always be connected to the fulfillment of a biblical purpose. Church calendars will fill with projects that consume huge amounts of time and energy. They must be there for a reason.

Use caution in matching projects to your specific context. Simply because an event worked for Bro. Joe's church does not mean God wants to use it in yours.

One vital project needed in every congregation is the conducting of personal evangelism training. With an intentional Sunday school based growth strategy in place, virtually any sound evangelism training process can be implemented and plugged into the process. For fifty two weeks out of the year the congregation will be engaged in outreach and prayer for the unchurched through their classes. They will have a much greater interest and willingness to attend and be trained in a deeper experience of personal evangelism because of this ongoing opportunity and expectation in their small group. In addition, there will be outreach and evangelistic prayer constantly taking place even when the church is between evangelism curriculums.

Other projects to be incorporated into the annual calendar are all church outreach events. These can be easily coordinated with a Sunday school based outreach structure. During the week beginning with a fifth Sunday, all of the Sunday school class outreach teams can combine to work together in outreach. This allows for the planning and promotion of four all-church outreach weeks or events each year. High attendance days, the beginning of crusade meetings, concerts, or other special events can be planned far in advance to take place the Sunday following a fifth Sunday because of these "built in" intensive outreach efforts. The congregation will be prepared to participate far in advance as well because the projects become a normal part of the church's life.

Component 8: The Pursuit of Prospects

We are responsible for the unchurched in our area. This is part of our mandated mission. The first step in reaching the unchurched is to define who a prospect is for a specific church and Sunday school. Anyone not actively attending another church is in need of a spiritual family.

Next, make participation in Sunday school a high expectation for all church members. Open enrollment policies allow for all church members to be enrolled in a Bible study class automatically. They also allow for non-members to be enrolled in Bible study anytime, anywhere. The Sunday school membership roll becomes a wide open door for the unchurched.

It is vital to note the important difference between Sunday school membership and church membership. They are not the same. Church membership has high biblical standards and expectations. Sunday school membership should be open to anyone.

An open enrollment policy requires a mindset of intentionality to aggressively pursue prospects and to enroll new members. It is very important for a church to actively seek to enroll everyone in Sunday school. Make Sunday school enrollment an understood expectation for new members. Then a specific class is responsible for the outreach and ministry to that person or persons.

The church must be very intentional when looking for methods by which to obtain information, and therefore access, to new prospects. I call this the intentionality of availability principle. Entire projects should be planned for the purpose of gathering prospect information. As Sunday school leaders, Richard Dodge and Rick Edwards point out, "Reaching people must be intentional...Sunday school leaders cannot wait for people to come looking for a Bible study group to join because most unchurched people today have little or no interest in Bible study. That means that effective prospect management is essential."¹³ Do not allow anyone to cross the church's path without attempting to gather personal information that would enable an outreach team to contact them later.

It is crucial to provide a variety of avenues for prospect discovery. Use "Welcome Cards" in worship services. Distribute "I Know A Prospect" forms among the people. Engage in door to door surveys. There are a myriad of opportunities to find new people. Do not miss a single opportunity during special projects to register all guests. Family night of Vacation Bible School is a great example. Use a multi-layered approach.

Remember, the resident church membership roll may be full of Sunday school prospects. Keep in mind that Sunday school enrollment should always be larger than the resident church membership. If it is not, there are not enough non-church mem-

bers enrolled in Bible study and/or people already on your church rolls have been missed.

Component 9: The Picture of Participation

They are called the "Red Hat Society." I met them in a restaurant late one evening following a Sunday school conference. As my hosts and I ate, eight ladies dressed in a variety of purple walked in and sat next to us. Though the purple gowns were certainly attention getters, the real eye catchers were the hats. They wore pink and red hats of all sizes and shapes featuring feathers and other enthusiastic accessories. One of my hosts inquired about their group and we learned there are many society chapters nation-wide.

Though I am still unclear for what cause the society stands or the purpose it fulfills, I did learn some of their rules of participation. If you are under fifty years of age, you wear a pink hat. When you turn fifty, you graduate to the coveted red hat. It was clear that most of that evening's exciting entourage had been donning red for some time! They were carrying on like a group of teenagers. They were proud of their purple, pink and red. Not only did they not care if they drew attention, they relished it!

I wonder, as members of the Body of Christ, if we participate as enthusiastically and wear our banners as proudly? How excited are we in our participation?

I have discussed the need for intentionality of purpose in our Sunday school ministries. I have also attempted to speak to the practical need for intentionality in our process of structuring programs and ministries. To structure an effective Sunday school, we must also be intentional in our understanding of the participation of people.

Leadership positions within the Sunday school must be based upon purpose and not simply upon tradition. To achieve this organizational dynamic, there must be unified direction and cohesive mission communicated from the executive leadership. The senior pastor must be the leading shepherd and motivator.

Effective growth structures in the Sunday school are characterized by the provision of purposeful ministry tasks for each participant to accomplish. This provision produces a sense of responsibility and teamwork leading to discipleship. Discipleship breeds accountability.

An intentional Sunday school class must see itself as a minis-

try team participating together in opportunities of ministry. A class will not be an effective growth structure if it is a closed unit existing solely for its own membership. The class must organize intentionally to involve as many as possible in the participation of ministry.

For example, each class needs a qualified teacher to share God's word, an outreach leader to lead the class in reaching members and non-members, a prayer leader to lead the class in intercession, a secretary to maintain records and communication, and active members ready to minister to one another and to the unchurched. Other leaders can be added but must not diminish the responsibilities of this core team.

With key leadership in position, the class is ready to participate together in the pursuit of prospects. Prospect and inactive member contact assignments can be distributed by the outreach leader each Sunday morning. The active members can serve on the outreach teams, each responsible for outreach one week out of the month. Prayer leaders can make phone calls to active, inactive and prospective members to determine prayer needs. These needs can be compiled into a prayer list for the class as well as the corporate church prayer ministries. This marriage of participating together in prayer, outreach and the teaching of God's word will result in both private and public growth.

The term "contact" is used because, although it may be believed that a personal visit is always the best, a phone call or card may be more possible. To have representatives from every class making contacts every week is the goal. This complete representation allows for the coordination of outreach to entire families with classes from the various age groups working together to reach parents and children.

As stated previously to the point of redundancy, this is a discipleship process. A process requires patience. The ultimate objective is to lead the congregation to a mindset and heartset passionate about personal evangelism. To reach that objective, leadership must realistically begin where the congregation currently is spiritually. Begin by teaching the people to pray for the lost and to invite the unchurched to join them in the study of God's word and in worship on Sunday. Continue the building process by training them in personal evangelism. More will attend the training because they have experienced the spiritual dynamic of the first step. You will see those in your congregation who have never, and would never, share their faith, begin to

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2003

open up and grow.

This methodology can be strategically adapted for the various age groups within the Sunday school organization as well. Unfortunately, many outreach programs ignore the involvement and discipleship needs of children and youth. They miss a great opportunity for the spiritual growth of entire families.

Youth and older children's classes can function almost identically as the adult classes in their prayer and outreach ministries. They will simply use the help of adults serving as their class outreach and prayer leaders.

Younger children's and preschool classes can utilize a combination of methods encouraging the children to reach out and pray and recruiting adults to serve as prayer and outreach leaders with the children and the class leadership. These adults, often the parents of the children in the classes, can serve on a rotating basis. They can participate in the weekly outreach with the children and class leaders or serve as the prayer and outreach leaders. They will still attend their regular adult classes without missing teaching time because their own classes are also spending time at the beginning of their Sunday school hour focusing upon prayer and outreach.

Do not miss the possibilities of discipleship and family enrichment in this process! See families working together in outreach and learning to pray together for the lost!

I am not sure about purple, pink and red, but I am sure we can learn a lesson from the Red Hat Society about enthusiastic participation. Motivate your people to participate in ministry with passion and purpose. The intentional Sunday school requires it. The lost world demands it.

Component 10: The Priority of Passion

It was one of those things you never forget. I was driving down a state highway through one small town after the next when I saw it. It was a portable sign; the kind you can rent with a flashing arrow and lights, a plastic face, and removable letters with which you create your own message. It had obviously not been portable for some time. The metal frame was rusted and bent, the paint was peeling off, the arrow on the top of the sign was busted out, the lights did not work, and one leg was broken. It sat, slanting upward to the sky. The message was still there however and clearly visible. It read, "Your search for quality ends here!"

As the church of the living God, we should present everything we do with the highest level of quality and excellence. We represent the most powerful Person and the most important work in the universe. Our every effort should reflect that truth.

In his book, *When God Builds A Church*, Bob Russell, Senior Minister of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky writes an incredible chapter on "Excellence." My favorite quote from that chapter is, "Mediocrity breeds indifference, but quality attracts."¹⁴

I belong to a church growth consultation team. One aspect of our ministry is to analyze facilities and programming. I am amazed at the indifference I see in many churches. Apathy toward excellence and a lack of passion permeate too many congregations. Do we really fool ourselves into believing the unchurched world does not notice? Our society is inundated with advertising and competitive business. Our culture is conditioned from an early age to evaluate and compare. People choose activities or products that are important to them and, in their minds, provide the highest quality. As secular as this may sound to some, our society's view of the church is not immune to this scrutiny. People are looking for high quality programs and ministries.

This fact applies clearly to Sunday school ministries. Some criticize Sunday school as being outdated and no longer effective. But I exhort you to consider that the problem is not with Sunday school. Leading research confirms time and time again that the Sunday school is a leading effective church growth methodology in high expectation churches. In a recent survey of 414 churches, the Sunday school ranked as the fourth most successful evangelistic approach in local churches in the United States.¹⁵ There is nothing wrong with Sunday school work, many simply do not remember or have never known how to work Sunday school!

If we half-heartedly allow untrained workers to get by with ill prepared lessons beginning twenty minutes late, we are to blame. If our nurseries are cluttered, our greeters unfriendly, our facilities unmarked, our classrooms dreary and our parking poorly planned, it is our fault. As Russell writes, "There is a big difference between doing a 'pretty good job' on something and doing it with excellence. Excellence takes a lot more time."¹⁶

We may never receive the opportunity to share God's truth with a seeking family because of our indifference. If our attitude

is to be content to just minister to whoever happens to show up each week, we miss the boat. If we do not see the Sunday school as an awesome sleeping giant of discipleship, outreach, prayer and ministry, we are blind.

It is time to quit blaming and to fix the problem. It is time to develop an intentional Sunday school. As McGavran and the Arns write, "The focus of the entire organization, events, classes, curriculum, and activities of growth-centered outward-focused Sunday schools is toward one goal: making disciples. And the result is growth...God gives the increase!"¹⁷

We must develop a ministry of growth based on biblical purpose, structured by an intentional process, including the participation of the greatest number of people, saturated in prayer, and passionate about excellence. We must believe that our churches will grow because God desires and produces that growth. This is His strategy, His purpose, and His church. Recognize that the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has the ability to reshape the character of this world. Unless we take up this challenge with passion, countless opportunities will be missed.

Develop an intentional growth mindset. Every organization, program, and project must be aligned accordingly. The church has the greatest program for growth already in place. It is called the Sunday school. Celebrate the fact that God is working, preparing the fields and calling the workers for the harvest. Join Him in His work.

I saw another sign one day. It was wooden and was intended to hang from hooks underneath a permanent church sign. One hook was broken so the sign, with the paint faded and peeling, hung precariously at an angle. The almost invisible lettering spelled out, "Revival nightly!"

Perhaps God will bring it. I am certain He is seeking a people of intentional passion and commitment. Do you want to grow? Are you willing to pay the price for growth?

A strategy such as the one described will help your church to adopt the mindset of going to the world, through Bible study, through prayer and through ministry. Please open your heart to the vision that God has for the church. The lives of churches have been transformed by this process. Lost people have been brought into the Kingdom. Catch His vision to build His church through you!

By the way, I made it across those boards, on to the boat, to

the island and to our meeting. In the end, a new church was born. God has put into place the boards on which the church may move forward. He is ready to see churches reborn. Will you focus intentionally upon His every direction? I challenge you to begin with your Sunday school.

Writer

Ewart, John Henry. Address: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, Kentucky 40280. Phone 502-897-4701. E-mail: jewart@sbts.edu. Title: Associate Vice President of Distance Education and Innovative Learning. John received a B.A. in Religion from Baylor University, a M.Div. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and is currently completing a D.Miss. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. John served for almost twenty years in local churches as associate and senior pastor. He is a senior church growth consultant for The Rainer Group as well as an experienced conference, retreat, revival and crusade preacher. John is married to Tresa and they have three children: Joshua, Rachel, and Josiah.

NOTES

1. Charles Arn, Win Arn, and Donald McGavran, *Growth: A New Vision for the Sunday School* (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1980), 25-26.
2. Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Churches Reveal What Works and What Doesn't* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 15.
3. Tom Lee, *Sunday School Outreach: Evangelism Handbook* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1992), 9.
4. Bill L. Taylor and Louis B. Hanks, *Sunday School for a New Century* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1999), 11.
5. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 76.
6. *Ibid.*, 77.
7. Tom Lee, *Sunday School Outreach*, 20.
8. Alvin J. Vander Griend, *The Praying Church Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997), 210.
9. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 15.
10. *Ibid*
11. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 16.
12. Thom Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping*

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2003

People in Your Church (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 219.

13. Richard E. Dodge and Rick Edwards, *Adult Sunday School for a New Century* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1999), 56.

14. Bob Russell, *When God Builds a Church: Ten Principles for Growing a Dynamic Church*, (West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), 112.

15. Thom Rainer, "The Eight Most Successful Evangelistic Approaches in Local Churches in the United States," *Rainer Report*, September, 2002, 2.

16. Russell, *When God Builds a Church*, 114.

17. Arn, *Growth*, 45.