

Sunday School in a Simple Church

By Eric Geiger and David Francis

The Simple Church revolution is here. Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger discovered the revolution through an extensive research project that is challenging church leaders to simplify. Their findings are reported in the book *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*. In general, the vibrant churches in the study are much more simple than the churches that are struggling and anemic. Based on the research, church leaders are encouraged to design a clear process, move people through it, align all ministries around it, and eliminate everything that gets in the way.

So what does Sunday School look like in a Simple Church? Where does it fit?

First, let's look at the research. Rainer and Geiger conducted the *Simple Church* project in two stages. In the first stage, only Southern Baptist Churches were studied. 400 churches were identified as "vibrant" based on growth of 5% or more for three consecutive years, along with a similar number of churches that did not meet this criterion. In phase one, 319 SBC churches completed the survey; 166 growing churches and 153 non-growing churches. The majority of these churches offer Sunday School or a similar small group structure by another name. The research instrument and subsequent data reporting used the word "small groups" so that churches that use a different name for Sunday School would respond accurately.

David Francis conducted a secondary project around the 400 Southern Baptist churches identified as "vibrant" to determine what kind of small group structure the churches operated. Gathering information from church websites and phone calls, he was able to gather information on 376 (94%) of the "vibrant" churches. Eighty-seven and a half percent (87.5%) of those churches operated Sunday School—or a functionally comparable on-campus program scheduled adjacent to the primary worship service. Twelve and a half percent (12.5%) operated small groups, with the groups meeting primarily off-campus at times other than Sunday morning. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the vibrant churches used only the words "Sunday School" to describe the program, while 26% used terms like Bible Study, Bible Fellowships, LIFE Groups or other terms, and 8% used Sunday School together with another term.

So almost 9 in 10 of the simple churches in phase one of the research have a Sunday School. But so do the complex and struggling churches! While both groups tend to offer Sunday School with similar content, their similarities end there. The program is essentially the same, but simple and complex churches differ greatly in how they utilize Sunday School. These differences are significant and set apart simple churches from complex churches.

1) Clarity: The simple churches know exactly where Sunday School fits in their process.

Simple churches have a clearly defined process for making disciples, and simple churches that offer Sunday School have placed it at a strategic place in that process. This is the essence of clarity. The complex churches do not know where Sunday School fits. They offer the program but do not see it as part of the overall process.

2) Movement: The simple churches intentionally move people to Sunday School.

Simple church leaders recognize the reality that people must be moved to points of relational attachment for true life-change to occur. In fact if people are not moved into relational networks, they will not stay in the church. They will leave and leaders may not even know. The complex and struggling churches scored much lower on their intention and passion to move people to Sunday School. They merely run programs.

3) Alignment and Focus: The simple churches that offer Sunday School focus more on Sunday School than the complex churches who offer Sunday School.

Sunday School plays a more vital role in the simple churches than it does in the complex and struggling churches. This is a big statement, but it makes perfect sense. In the simple churches, Sunday School is aligned as an essential program in their process. These churches have made the difficult decision to cut other programs that fall outside of their process. Sunday School has more prominence as one of few key programs. In the complex and struggling churches, Sunday School is just one of many programs. It does not get adequate focus because attention and energy are divided among so many things.

Here is the bottom line, the elevator conversation: According to the research, you should know where Sunday School fits in your process, move people to Sunday School, and give it focused attention as an essential program in your process.

Second, let's get practical. The research demands a response. Truth always does. What exactly should church leaders do with Sunday School in light of the *Simple Church* revolution?

1) Clearly define the simple process God has for your church.

You must begin here. You have to wrestle with this. Church leaders admit this is the most difficult part of their job, but it is so essential. The key word in Simple Church is process, not program. The process is the *how*. Most church leaders know the *why* and the *what*, but few have the *how* nailed down. How is your church designed to make disciples?

2) Place Sunday School as the essential program for one aspect of your process.

The simple churches that have Sunday School use it very strategically. Sunday School is placed along their process. Most simple churches that have Sunday School are using it as the second step in their process. In these churches, Sunday School is the group that people are moved to after visiting a worship service. Sunday School is the group that attaches people to others relationally. And attachment leads to retention.

No one can argue the assimilation effectiveness of Sunday School. Churches that use it effectively are able to move a high percentage of worship service attendees to Sunday School groups. Since Sunday School is so effective at assimilation, it is wise to place it as the second step in your simple ministry process.

And what could be more simple than being able to accomplish step one (worship) and step two (assimilation and interactive Bible study) with every member of the family on one trip to the church? Because of facility or parking constraints, not all churches can do this. Those that can, however, can see a very high percentage of worship attenders moving to the next step of discipleship.

3) Move people from your worship services to Sunday School groups.

We admit this is much easier said than done. Designing a process is one thing; moving people through it is another. While announcing Sunday School is important, and listing the Sunday School groups is helpful, these actions alone will not move people to Sunday School groups. To move people to Sunday School, you must have leaders and classes that take responsibility for helping people move into their groups. Churches with vibrant Sunday School ministries communicate this to newcomers: “Sunday School is important. It is your next step after worship attendance. We would like you to find a group. We will provide information and assistance to help you. But it’s so important; we’re going to take responsibility for it. So if you don’t find a group on your own, get ready, because we’re coming after you!”

4) Funnel special emphases through your Sunday School.

Becoming a simple church is not easy. And the most difficult simple church element to implement is *focus*. Focus is saying no to everything that falls outside of your ministry process. The research indicates that one practical way to increase focus is to funnel other ministry opportunities through your existing essential programs.

For example, many churches funnel their missions emphasis through the Sunday School, encouraging each group to participate in a missions project. Stewardship campaigns are promoted through Sunday School. By assigning men and women to separate care groups, all communication about men’s and women’s programs can be funneled through the existing system. A growing number of churches encourage Sunday School classes to subdivide into small discipleship groups that meet during the week. These groups also include associate members of the class who serve in preschool, children, and student

classes on Sunday. These are just some of the ways a Sunday School class can serve as a connecting point for moving people to the next steps of discipleship, while avoiding the creation of additional complex and redundant organizational structures. It's just more simple to align as many essential programs as possible with the Sunday School structure. But remember that not all programs are essential to align!

5) Prayerfully and carefully begin to eliminate non-essential programs.

After you have designed a simple process with essential programs placed along the process, you will want to eliminate non-essential programs and special events. It is a stewardship issue. Non-essential programs and special events distract time, resources, publicity, and energy away from your essential programs. People will not hear about the new Sunday School opportunities if you are promoting everything else. People will not realize how vital your Sunday School groups are to your process if it is covered up by non-essential programs and events.

Do this prayerfully and carefully. As mentioned in the book, "Become simple as fast as you can, but not faster." This is the body of Christ, not just an organization. These are real people in your church, not just pawns in a strategy.

Simple churches that have Sunday School use it strategically. Complex churches that have Sunday School are just putting on a program. How are you using your Sunday School? How's your *how*?