

Today's Sunday School: Dead or Alive?

Margaret F. Williamson
Assistant Professor of Evangelism and Church Health
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
Georgia Extension Center
862 Columbia Drive
Decatur, GA 30030

As a program organization within the Southern Baptist Convention, the Sunday School has a long, even illustrious, history. Throughout its history, the Sunday School program has maintained a position as the premier teaching program and the primary evangelistic model within Southern Baptist churches. However, Sunday School attendance throughout the Southern Baptist Convention is declining. In 1995, Tommy Teague addressed this concern: "Today in Southern Baptist life we have approximately 8.3 million people enrolled in Sunday School with an average weekly attendance of 3.9 million. This statistic does not even address the millions on membership roles who never attend."¹ Bill Day surfaces several concerns in his article, "The State of Membership Growth, Sunday School, and Evangelism in the Southern Baptist Convention 1900-2002."² Day found that the Sunday School had experienced a positive and "strong correlation between enrollment and baptisms."³ Currently, however, the Sunday School has lost this correlation. Does this mean that the Sunday School has lost its ability to serve as

¹Tommy Teague, "Issue: Develop a 5-Star Church in a 3-Hour Week," in *Facing Critical Issues in Christian Education*, comp. Ronald M. Pratt (Nashville: Convention Press, 1995), 44.

²Dr. Day's article is offered as a companion to this article.

³Ibid.

the evangelistic arm of the church? Could it mean that the Sunday School no longer receives the priority support within the church to maintain this positive correlation?

William Easum underscores the importance of using the small-group experience evangelistically: “Instead of evangelism as a mostly ‘one-to-one’ experience, it seems to be moving more toward a group process. The process of conversion seems to be accomplished more effectively today with groups than with the old model of one person’s leading another person to Christ.”⁴ The effectiveness of the Sunday School program depends upon the quality of the experience. Ken Hemphill, in tracing the significance of Sunday School to church growth, documented a direct relationship between the quality of the Sunday School program and church growth. He referenced the finds of Kirk Hadaway about church growth principles: “[Hadaway] discovered that 78 percent of plateaued churches that managed to break out of their plateaued situation reported an increase emphasis on the Sunday School.”⁵ Within this article, the researcher will present trends and issues which should be considered when contemplating the future role of the Sunday School in evangelism.

Trends Facing America

Consideration of current trends and issues facing America and the church has specific implications for the future direction of the Sunday School program and its impact as the teaching and evangelistic arm of the church. Research in contemporary trends is often descriptive rather than prescriptive. The importance of such research is not in finding documented answers, but rather in surfacing appropriate questions. Faith Popcorn, one notable forecaster, explains the impact of her research: “What we’re trying to do by detailing the Trends is to force you to think

⁴William M. Easum, “21st Century Evangelism,” *The Easum Report* [service on-line]; available at <http://www.easum.com/netresul.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 October 2003.

⁵Kirk Hadaway, *Church Growth Principles: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 40; quoted in Ken Hemphill, *Revitalizing the Sunday Morning Dinosaur* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 26.

differently. Find new patterns in things. Question the obvious. . . . breaking clichés, ripping apart refrigerator philosophy—comforting ‘words to live by’ that don’t necessarily hold true anymore.”⁶ Bill Taylor, a Sunday School prophet for the Southern Baptist Convention, underscored the importance of surfacing appropriate questions: “You will never receive the right answers as long as you are restricted to what the possibilities might be, especially if the right questions were poised as they dealt with the possibility of expanded ministries.”⁷ For the purposes of this discussion, several trends and current issues facing the church will be considered.

Recognizing Consumer Desires

Faith Popcorn concentrates her research in the area of consumerism. She has coined the term “socioquake” to describe radical, germinating change which is “inspired, not by one particular happening, but rather by radically shifting assumptions about our past, present, and future.”⁸ Through her research of societal trends, Popcorn has identified sixteen consumer trends which she believes will continue to impact the future of American society. According to Popcorn, recognizing current and future trends becomes necessary since one must “see the future to deal with the present.”⁹ Of these sixteen consumer trends, four are significant to the future of the Sunday School program.

Cocooning. Popcorn describes *cocooning* as “the stay-at-home trend, reflecting our strong desire to build soft and cozy nests in order to protect ourselves from the harsh, unpredictable realities of the outside world.”¹⁰ The trend is based on a desire for safety and a

⁶Faith Popcorn and Lys Marigold, *Clicking: Sixteen Trends to Future Fit Your Life, Your Work, and Your Business* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 11.

⁷Bill L. Taylor, *21 Truths, Traditions, & Trends: Propelling the Sunday School Into the 21st Century* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1996), 168.

⁸Faith Popcorn, *The Popcorn Report* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 4.

⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰Popcorn and Marigold, 29.

growing sense of fear within individuals. Further, the trend suggests a desire for Americans to have control over their personal lives. Examples of ways Americans cocoon include customized automobiles which become a safe haven; personal safety concerns; changes in shopping habits by using home shopping networks, catalogs, and the Internet to avoid safety threats in public; and even the growing use of computers within the home. The home has become the place of refuge for Americans. In order to coax individuals outside this safe haven, organizations will have to find ways of duplicating the sense of safety and belonging that individuals feel at home.¹¹

Clanning. The trend *clanning* can be described as “the inclination to join up, belong to, hang out with groups of like kinds, providing a secure feeling that our own belief systems will somehow be validated by consensus.”¹² Clanning identifies the desire to be with people who have the same interests, dreams, hobbies, and even dependencies, and emphasizes the need to belong. Clanning off-sets the trend of cocooning by providing a feeling of safety by participating with people who are so similar in interests that they become safe. Clans can be found through developing communities who reside together, through organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous which can provide emotional healing, and through bonding within the work place. Critical concerns in the area of clanning include: support, connection, intimacy, healing, conscious choice, and compatibility.¹³

Anchoring. The trend of *anchoring* can be described as “the recent phenomenon of reaching back to our spiritual roots, taking what was comforting from the past in order to be securely anchored in the future.”¹⁴ Anchoring reflects the desire to look for the meaning of life by developing the inner spirit and is evidenced in the rising interest of spirituality and church attendance. Emphases on spirituality in television programming, books and articles, and music

¹¹Ibid., 51-63.

¹²Ibid., 29.

¹³Ibid., 65-77.

¹⁴Ibid., 30.

lyrics provide further evidence. The interest in spirituality is not limited to Christianity, however, and involves all religious belief systems. Anchoring also reflects an increased interest in family ties and familial roots, a desire to reclaim the simpler days, and even a revival in vintage clothing.¹⁵

99 Lives. The trend of *99 Lives* is described as “a new look at the modern motto of ‘Too Fast a Pace, Too Little Time,’ which forces us all to assume multiple roles in order to cope with busy, high-tech lives.”¹⁶ Evidence of the time crunch felt by most Americans is found in the abundance of pagers, cellular telephones, and computerized pocket organizers. Stores have been reinvented to provide multiple serves at once, allowing consumers one-stop shopping. Time for relaxation has become a premium desire, although seldom a reality. Organizations which find ways of providing services within these time restrictions will be guaranteed success in the future.¹⁷

Achieving Organizational Success

Another well-known research and futurist, Joel Arthur Barker, focuses less on consumer desires and more on ways to achieve success. Barker's research identified three keys which will control the future of any organization during the twenty-first century: anticipation, innovation, and excellence.¹⁸ For Barker, these three keys identify a shift in paradigms from what was accepted in the past to what will be required in the future to achieve success.

Barker describes the key of *anticipation* in terms of looking toward the future and questions why intelligent people spend so little time anticipating the future. “It is in the future where our greatest leverage is. We can't change the past, although if we are smart, we learn from

¹⁵Ibid., 125-43.

¹⁶Ibid., 30.

¹⁷Ibid., 208-21.

¹⁸Joel Arthur Barker, *Future Edge: Discovering the New Paradigms of Success* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992), 11.

it. Things happen only in one place—the present. And usually we react to those events. . . . It is in the yet-to-be, the future, and only there, where we have the time to prepare for the present.”¹⁹

According to Barker, success in the twenty-first century will be achieved through providing *excellence* in the areas of customer service and product development. Excellence will be the main requirement to succeed in the future, and will be developed through *innovation*. Innovation provides the competitive edge to an organization by providing the way to achieve excellence. Both excellence and innovation, however, become dependent upon correctly anticipating future needs and concerns. For Barker, these keys work as a triad, each dependent upon the other.²⁰

Escaping Past Traditions

Management professors Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad believe that “the future belongs not to those who possess a crystal ball, but to those willing to challenge the biases and prejudices of the ‘establishment.’ The future belongs more to the unorthodox than it does to the prognosticators, more to the movement than to the starry-eyed.”²¹ In short, the future has become intertwined with the present. Every organization is “in the process of becoming—of becoming an anachronism irrelevant to the future, or of becoming the harbinger of the future.”²²

Hamel and Prahalad document two strategies necessary for organizations to succeed. The first strategy involves the need to escape the past. Failure is certain when the following characteristics are present within an organization: “An inability to escape the past”; “an unparalleled track record of success [or] being blinded by the future by . . . past or present success”; “no gap between expectations and performance”; “a contentment with current

¹⁹Ibid., 18.

²⁰Ibid., 12.

²¹Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad, *Competing for the Future* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994), xi.

²²Ibid.

performance”; “an accumulation of abundant resources”; and “a view that resources win out.”²³

The second strategy for success involves reinventing the future. Failure is experienced when the following characteristics are present: “an inability to invent the future”; “deeply etched recipes . . . relying on the same methods and programs that brought . . . [the organization] to today to work in the future”; “a vulnerability to new rules”; and the belief that current success should determine strategies and processes for the future.²⁴ The goal, then, becomes to find a way to move from past success and process system, “To not occupy the middle ground, it is to find the higher ground.”²⁵ The process is described in *The Easum Report* as “strategic mapping” or “learning to anticipate the random, changing needs of the next generation and developing ministries to meet those needs before the needs arise.”²⁶

Summary

Current societal trends within America will impact how organizations take action to insure future success. An emphasis on the needs and desires of the consumer will demand both quality products and service excellence for success. Success will be achieved by organizations who are able to anticipate the future while escaping the past and reinventing the future.

Issues Facing the Church

While researchers and futurists have attempted to focus attention on societal needs during the new millennium, religious researchers have attempted to evaluate issues facing the religious community as well. Russell Chandler, a religion specialist for *The Los Angeles Times*,

²³“Escaping the Past and Inventing the Future,” NetFAX 19, 15 May 1995, available from <http://www.leadnet.org/d1netfax19.htm>; Internet; accessed 24 April 1998; A complete discussion can be found in Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad, *Competing for the Future* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994).

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Hamel and Prahalad, 323.

²⁶“Strategic Mapping and Futuring,” *The Easum Report* [service on-line]; available at <http://www.easum.com/mapping.htm>; Internet; accessed 24 April 1998.

emphasized this need before the millennium began: "It's also important to examine how the impending turn of the century and America's vision for the future are molding our spiritual perceptions and faith communities."²⁷

George Barna, a nationally-known religious researcher, has identified three societal realities which will impact the future of the church. First, change in this society is taking place at a faster rate than ever before. These sweeping changes are actually leading to a reinvention of society every three to five years. Second, the future will happen because of the reality created today by visionary leadership. Third, within the next decade, America faces one of two futures: either a future of moral anarchy or of spiritual revival.²⁸ To ensure spiritual revival as the outcome, the church will have to address several critical issues.

Changing Demographics

America has experienced sweeping changes within its population. Researchers have used demographics to document the changing dynamics within the population including wide-spread immigration and increased growth in various language groups. Further, diversity within family structures is becoming more pronounced. Each area of change will impact the church's future.

The population makeup within America is changing. Ethnic groups, especially through immigration, continue to experience the largest percentage increases nationally while Caucasian Americans experience a zero-growth rate.²⁹ Tim Sine, a religious forecaster, describes America

²⁷Russell Chandler, *Racing Toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 14.

²⁸George Barna, *Trends That Are Changing Your Ministry World: Current Trends in Culture and Religion* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light VHS, 1996), videocassette.

²⁹*Ibid.*

as “being transformed from a ‘melting pot’ to a very rich ethnic stew in which the accent is on diversity, not homogeneity.”³⁰ Yet, the makeup of the church has not reflected these demographic changes. “Eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in American life.”³¹

Family structures are changing. According to George Barna’s research, the concept of family has been redefined to include “all those people I care deeply about and all those people that care deeply about me.”³² In fact, less than 10 percent of Americans now fit the pattern of the nuclear family, or “the model of an intact marriage with the husband as breadwinner and the wife at home caring for two or more children. . . . In the typical family today both husband and wife work. Another 6 million households are headed by single parents (one in four families); and some 8 million seniors live alone.”³³ In fact, the U. S. Census Bureau projects that the fastest growing area in families between 1995 and 2010 will be non-family households or “people living alone or with a nonrelative—and single parent families. Married-couple households and two-parent families are projected to continue to decline as a percent of total households.”³⁴

According to *Single Adult Ministries Journal*, three trends will impact the future of ministry with single adults through the year 2010: (1) single fathers who receive custody of children will grow

³⁰Tom Sine, *Wild Hope: Crises Facing the Human Community on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), 137.

³¹Ibid., 142.

³²Barna, *Trends*, videocassette.

³³Chandler, 91.

³⁴“An Eye Towards the Year 2010,” *Single Adult Ministries Journal* 14, no. 5 (September/October 1997): 5.

by 325 percent; (2) as a group, middle-aged single adults will experience exploding growth; and (3) over 50 percent of all single adults will cohabit before marriage.³⁵

Today's families are characterized by diversity: two-career families, single-parent families, unmarried couples, solo singles, childless couples, and those which have faced divorce, remarriage, and blending.³⁶ Even with such a list, "It's impossible to capture the diversity or complexity of families."³⁷ Each area of diversity will create specialized needs which the church of the future will be required to address to be successful.

Changing Values

George Barna describes what he calls a "shift in value systems."³⁸ Values have shifted from money to time as the primary commodity, from a belief in others to skepticism, from loyalty to flexibility, and from the discernment to know right from wrong to a pluralism which recognizes no absolutes.³⁹ This shift in values provides unique issues for the church to address.

Time is society's primary commodity. Within society, individuals feel they have too little time and too many responsibilities. Feelings of "being overscheduled, overcommitted, and always-on-the-run" have become synonymous with "time-compressed lifestyles."⁴⁰ In a 1991 survey, 74 percent of all adults interviewed indicated that they time was very important and 63 percent indicated that they free time was very important as well.⁴¹

³⁵"Three Trends That Will Affect Your SAM," *Single Adult Ministries Journal* 14, no. 5 (September/October 1997): 4-5.

³⁶Charles M. Sell, *Family Ministry*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 26.

³⁷Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 4.

³⁸Barna, *Trends*, videocassette.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Popcorn and Marigold, 208.

⁴¹George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 152-53.

Teague describes this emphasis on time in relation to external time demands: As “time shrinks, the demands on our time often expand beyond our ability to respond effectively.”⁴² This perceived lack of available time has a direct impact on church programming. “Today . . . many individuals who make a deep commitment to Christ give church activity only one tick on their clock. . . . This doesn’t mean these individuals don’t love God and His church. It does mean that they challenge the traditional model of ministry because it does not meet their expressed felt needs.”⁴³ According to George Barna’s research, “The average church attendee is geared to participate approximately three hours each week.”⁴⁴

Spiritual values are not always discovered through the church. Lee Strobel documented the success of Willow Creek Community Church in reaching the unchurched. He discovered that many unchurched have not rejected God although they may have rejected the church. Yet, in spite of living a life of situational ethics and moral relativism, many unchurched “are looking for truth, identity, and something to believe in that will give their lives a real center.”⁴⁵ For many unchurched, however, the church is not recognized as having answers to their questions. Barna discovered that only 28 percent of people in a national survey believed strongly that Christian churches are relevant.⁴⁶

⁴²Teague, 31.

⁴³Ibid., 32.

⁴⁴George Barna, *User Friendly Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 34; quoted in Teague, 36.

⁴⁵Gary L. Collins and Timothy E. Clinton, *Baby Boomer Blues* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 39; quoted in Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 49.

⁴⁶Barna, *What Americans Believe*, 185.

Changing Needs

Carl F. George, director of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, has determined eight needs which individuals share. Each provides a challenge to the church. First is the need for personal touch. As technology advances, individuals seek “compensatory human touch” which can be met through small group experiences.⁴⁷ Second is the need for continual options. Americans expect scheduling options and variable programs from which to choose.⁴⁸ Third is the need to know how to interpret the information received through the Information Age in light of the Bible. Fourth is the need for help in coping which change. Specifically, Americans need help in developing “a positive attitude toward inevitable rapid change.”⁴⁹ Fifth is the need to recognize the role of women. “The doing of ministry now receives more importance than the title of the doer. . . . Women today are transforming churches as they minister wherever they find spiritual sickness and no one else to help.”⁵⁰ Sixth is the need to be recognized for what motivates them. “Thriving churches are ones that have discovered creative ways to address a multiplicity of human interests.”⁵¹ Seventh is the need for an organization in which people matter. George questions if the church is “geared more toward processing people or to the somewhat people-indifferent tasks of protecting our status quo.”⁵² Eighth is the need to have people care for them. Successful models are based upon providing on-going, personalized care systems.⁵³

Summary

⁴⁷Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1991), 15.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., 16.

⁵⁰Ibid., 17.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 18.

⁵³Ibid.

Contemporary issues facing the church will impact how churches in the future provide programming. Changing demographics nationally will affect participants and programming needs. Changing values will impact the possible selection of programs. Changing needs will determine the type of delivery system used in which to provide programming options.

Implications for the Church

Although Sunday School has prospered as a program organization, some now question its effectiveness as the Bible-teaching and evangelism arm of the church. For example, Maria Martinez, vice-president of the American Bible Society, voiced her concern:

There is a rising level of biblical illiteracy in the Christian community. A recent research study revealed that although 8 out of 10 persons in this country call themselves Christians, half of those don't know that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. Americans say that they believe the Ten Commandments, but they can't name them. And some Christians who are in church on Easter Sunday don't know what they are commemorating.⁵⁴

She believes that the deterioration of biblical knowledge removes the ability of Christians to witness: "We [Christians] are responsible for sharing the Christian message with others. Yet a solid, biblical foundation is too often absent from our minds and hearts. And, regrettably, too often the difference between our words and actions is great."⁵⁵

Historically recognized as one of the founders of the Sunday School in 1780, Robert Raikes created his organization to meet his perceived needs of society at that time: "Battling vice and moral degeneration."⁵⁶ The Sunday School movement within the United States followed his example. As the church moves through the new millennium, a determination of the perceived needs of society again becomes a decisive influence in the direction of the Sunday School program of the future. These perceived needs provide direct implications for future programming.

⁵⁴Taylor, 161-62.

⁵⁵Ibid., 162.

⁵⁶James E. Reed and Ronnie Prevost, *A History of Christian Education* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 257.

The Need for Small-Group Experiences

The desire for belonging to an established community can be met through small-group experiences within the church. Carl George describes these small groups as “a well-developed system of quality, care-centered nurture groups.”⁵⁷ Yet, he also voices his concern about the role of the Sunday School program in providing nurture to members: “The advent of a public-education system, of publishing houses for religious curriculum, of church buildings with wraparound, cubicle-shaped classrooms, and of professional Christian-education directors, have shaped a Sunday school mind-set that tends to focus more on instruction than on care.”⁵⁸

Small groups provide an opportunity for members to respond to the Bible and to other learners personally, and to relate the Bible to their lives personally. Relationships built within the class depend upon the type of opportunities given and can include evangelism.

Some Sunday Schools have begun already to experiment in designing and emphasizing small-group experiences. George documents “care directors and hospitality coordinators for adult classes, breakout cell groups for teenagers, Christian ‘Sesame Street’ style programs for extended children’s church times, interest-center approaches for preschoolers, and intergenerational Sunday school for parents to gain skills in relating to their children” as some of these experiments.⁵⁹

Barna underscores the importance of small groups in his research on evangelism. Barna found that “non-Christians who are seeking a church home are less interested in the content of the sermon that they are in the heart of the congregation. . . . The nonchurched have to feel welcome, to feel that this is a group of people with whom they will connect, to feel as if they would be proud to be associated with this Body of people.”⁶⁰ At a time when many churches are

⁵⁷George, 97.

⁵⁸Ibid., 117.

⁵⁹Ibid., 118.

⁶⁰George Barna, *Evangelism That Works* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1995), 67.

choosing a master-teacher approach for Bible study or are emphasizing worship in place of Bible study, the importance of developing nurturing small groups must be recognized.

The Need for Relevancy

For the Sunday School of the future, the challenge will be to provide culturally relevant curriculum. "A balanced curriculum recognizes the unchurched culture of our day. . . . about two thirds of our population have little or no religious training today. About one third of the American population have no religious training in their background. Another one third have had religious training that did not take—thus the two thirds. . . . The majority of our population is part of the unchurched culture. With this in mind, the church is forced to adjust curriculum to communicate with this unchurched nation."⁶¹

Relevancy is demonstrated through lives. Dr. Howard Hendricks, a noted writer within the area of Christian education, observed, "What you are is far more important than what you say or do. God's method is always incarnational. He loves to take His truth and wrap it in a person. He takes a clean individual and drops him or her in the midst of a corrupt society, and that person—because of what he knows, feels, and does—convincingly demonstrates the power of God's grace."⁶² Sunday School participants need relevancy in what is taught in order to experience the possibilities of incarnation through Christ.

In his examination of the needs of the unchurched, Lee Strobel surfaced several areas of creating relevancy for the unchurched which can be addressed through the Sunday School. These include intriguing session titles which draw attention; lessons which are instantly usable in the lives of the learners; lessons which address the why as well as the what of the Scripture passage being studied; lessons which use the language of the learners; and lessons which answer the

⁶¹Edward H. Hammett, "Issue: Create a Mission-Driven Curriculum," in *Facing Critical Issues in Christian Education*, comp. Ronald M. Pratt (Nashville: Convention Press, 1995), 84.

⁶²Howard Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987), 104.

learners' questions.⁶³ Effective curriculum design for the future can be created around meeting the specific needs of the learners through developing relationships within the class and by targeting the Scripture lessons directly at these specific needs.

The Need for Schedule Options

Market-driven changes outside the church have created desire for multiple options in programming and scheduling within the church. Lyle Schaller, a prolific writer in the area of church dynamics, documents the progress which some churches have already made in this area: "One of the most significant pieces of good news has been the changes in scheduling Christian education. Once confined to an hour on Sunday morning, the teaching ministry is now spread throughout the week. One result is that in the early 1990s more adults were engaged, on a weekly basis, in the serious and continuing study of the Scriptures than every before in American history."⁶⁴

The Need to See the Future

The future has not yet been written. Yet, the church stands on the threshold of the future facing certain change and uncertain consequences of that change. Religious futurist Loren Mead describes this prospect: "We are . . . midwives for a new church, working to help our present forms and structures give birth to forms appropriate for the new mission of the church."⁶⁵

Church growth historian Thom Ranier has written, "Contrary to the views of some of its critics, effective Sunday Schools are not archaic in their methodology. No traditional

⁶³Strobel, 219.

⁶⁴Lyle E. Schaller, *Innovations in Ministry: Models for the Twenty-first Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 29.

⁶⁵Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1991), 5.

organization can survive for two centuries without methodological adaptation.”⁶⁶ As a program organization, the Sunday School faces the challenge of adapting its format, methodology, and curriculum, in an attempt to meet the needs of its present participants and future prospects. The Sunday School, however, still remains an effective evangelistic tool when used to meet spiritual needs through small-group experiences and scriptural relevancy.

⁶⁶Thom Ranier, *Giant Awakenings* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Press, 1995): quoted in Bill L. Taylor, *Twenty-one Truths, Traditions, and Trends Propelling the Sunday School in to the Twenty-first Century* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1996), 163.