THE DEVELOPMENT OF GROUP COHESION AS IT RELATES TO SATISFACTION WITH ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL

by

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B.A., California Baptist College, 1976
M.S., Kansas State University, 2004

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2009

Abstract

Educators across the religious spectrum claim that the quest for spirituality and issues related to spiritual fulfillment are important to Americans. Nevertheless, only twenty percent of evangelical churches are growing. The rest are either not growing or are declining in attendance numbers (White, 2003). Many in the field of church growth have come to the conclusion that churches that are growing and meeting the needs of people are those that create within their membership a sense of belonging to a group which is achieved primarily through their Sunday School programs.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the effect, if any, that developing close personal relationships in an adult Sunday School class has on increasing a person's desire to attend. The work of Francis (2005), Mims (2001), Taylor (2003), and others indicates this is the case and that there are three basic facets of this development. The first is purposefully organizing adult Sunday School classes as age-graded cohorts. The second is designing lessons that involve student interaction through the use of group projects and group discussion, as is the case with lessons that follow the Experiential Learning Model. The third is to provide social opportunities for class members outside of class time.

Data was gathered through semistructured interviews administered to members of a young adult Sunday School class which was created expressly for this study. The interview protocol was designed to allow the participants as much freedom as possible to express their own views.

Six major themes emerged from the data: 1) young adults value being a part of a stable group; 2) age-grading Sunday School classes enhances relationship building; 3) young adults appreciate the support they get from the class; 4) extracurricular activities help build relationships; 5) relationships are more important to women than to men; and 6) the Experiential Learning Model facilitates relationship building. These results could help shape the way in which evangelical churches approach their Sunday School program design and development in order to facilitate ministering to people more effectively.

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Acknowledgements

The older I get, the more I realize how much I owe to others. There are several people to whom I would like to express my gratitude for their help, encouragement and support in writing this dissertation and the research it documents. First, God could not have given me a more faithful, loving companion than my dear wife Cindy, who has been at my side for over thirty years. It is amazing how far we have come together. Thank you, Sweetheart for being there with me and for me.

I would also like to thank my major professor, Dr. Sarah Jane Fishback, the world's smallest fullback, for running interference for me on so many issues as she guided me through the dissertation process. Without her wisdom and friendship I could not have finished this race. Along with Jane, I need to give a special shout out to two members of the College of Education support staff, Laura Peck and Sandy Evans, without whom nothing would ever get done.

A few months ago a few members of the Fort Leavenworth / Kansas State University doctoral program cohort organized a support group for those of us who were working on our dissertations, which we dubbed "Thundercats." Their support and friendship were invaluable. Thanks especially to Barry Leslie and Jon Moilanen, both ABD, for their help in preparing me for my dissertation defense.

Finally, and most importantly, I thank God, my loving heavenly Father who has been so patient and kind towards me as I have stumbled my way through life. It is amazing what He can do with such weak vessels. To Him, and Him alone, be all glory.

Dedication

I gave my heart to Jesus Christ when I was eighteen years old. Anyone who knew me then wouldn't have given a nickel for my chances at success in life. I had no goals, no ambition, no plans, and no direction. At about that same time, a diminutive, middle aged woman, Mrs. Elaine Dooley, decided to lead a weekly discussion meeting for the young people in the church. That was my first exposure to small group Bible study. The experience changed my life. In those sessions, I learned how to interact more effectively with my peers, developed strong personal friendships, and, most importantly, how to seek God and study His word on my own.

Elaine took a special interest in those few of us who were about to graduate from high school and who were considering a college education. She believed that God had plans for me and determined to help me set a positive direction for my future. Among other things, she and her husband took time out of their lives to drive me to a small private Christian college, where I visited as a prospective student. A few years later, I graduated from California Baptist College with a BA in Religion. She had a tremendous impact on my life. In many ways she laid the foundations for my interest in education in general and in small group Bible study in particular. I would like to dedicate this research to Elaine Dooley because of her kindness and love, which meant so much to a directionless young teenager so long ago.

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Educators across the religious spectrum have claimed that the quest for spirituality and issues related to spiritual fulfillment are important to Americans (Fowler, 1981; Hunt, 1997). For example, approaching the issue from a culturally pluralistic perspective, Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) has written extensively on the value of spiritual education in overcoming many of the injustices prevalent in our society. Meanwhile, from a more conservative and traditional religious point of view, Thom Rainer (1999) has claimed his research indicated that people from all classes and social contexts were very interested in spiritual issues. Despite this contention, approximately eighty percent of evangelical churches were either not growing or were actually declining in attendance numbers (White, 2003). If spirituality was so important to people, why were most churches not growing? Stated positively, why were those twenty percent of all evangelical churches that were growing, finding success?

Many in the field of church growth have come to the conclusion that churches that were growing and meeting the needs of people were those that created within their membership a sense of belonging to a group, a sense of fellowship, which was achieved primarily through their Sunday School programs (Francis, 2005; Francis, 2006; Hemphill & Taylor 2001; Hunt, 1997; Mims, 2001; Rainer, 1999; Taylor, 2003). Proponents of this view claimed that, when operated properly, Sunday School not only enhanced fellowship among members but also created a greater desire in people to attend. This study sought to identify factors that contributed to satisfaction with adult Sunday School.

Background

For the purposes of this research, Sunday School was defined as a system of Bible study classes intended for both children and adults. This particular study was exclusively concerned with adult Sunday School. Sunday School is generally, but not always, held on Sunday mornings prior to the church worship service. It was a widely held view that one of the primary attractions of Sunday School for adults was that it provided opportunities to develop close personal friendships (Francis, 2005; Francis, 2006; Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Hunt, 1997; Mims, 2001; Rainer, 1999; Taylor, 2003). Consider the following examples:

Dr. Gene Mims has over twenty years experience serving in growing churches. Based on his success in this area, he was appointed President of the Church Growth Group, a subsidiary of LifeWay Christian Resources (LifeWay is the literature and education wing of the Southern Baptist Convention). In his book, *Kingdom Principles for Church Growth* (2001), Mims introduced what he considered proven, tried and true methods for facilitating church growth. He claimed there are "5 essential church functions for church growth" (p. 6). One of these five functions was fellowship. The other four were evangelism, discipleship, ministry, and worship. Mims related three of these other four functions (discipleship, ministry, and worship) directly and intimately to fellowship. Promoting intimate friendships among church members was a key piece to almost everything he did in relation to helping churches grow.

Ken Hemphill and Bill Taylor built on the concepts developed by Gene Mims in their own book, *Ten Best Practices to Make Your Sunday School Work* (2001). Dr. Hemphill served as president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1994. Prior to that he had served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Norfolk,

Virginia. While there, the church's membership "grew from 800 to 6,000 in 11 years" (Wingfield, 2003). Dr. Bill Taylor is the director of LifeWay Church Resources' Sunday School Group. As spokesperson for the group, Dr. Taylor has been a chief proponent of the concept of "Sunday School as the foundational strategy in a local church for evangelism and discipleship" (Hemphill & Taylor, 2001, p. 4).

Allan Taylor, Minister of Education at First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Georgia with an average weekly attendance of 4,800 in Sunday School identified Six Core Values of church growth. Four of the six related directly to enhancing fellowship. Over half his book was dedicated to the subject. Dr. Taylor (2003) claims that when asked, people overwhelmingly told him they were attending a particular Sunday School class because it provided them with a sense of family and warm friendship.

Thom Rainer, currently the president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, Tennessee, has accumulated a large amount of data on what factors contribute to a church's success in bringing people to Christ and keeping them involved in their local churches. He has written extensively on these factors in his book *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret of Keeping People in Your Church* (1999). He interviewed the pastors, ministers of education, and other key leaders in 287 successful, growing Southern Baptist churches. According to the interviewees, Sunday School was the number one factor contributing to their growth. That being the case, he asserted it was important that adult Sunday School be organized in such a way as to increase participant satisfaction with the program.

Additionally, all those cited above held that the most effective way of encouraging personal relationships in Sunday School was to organize them in stable, age-

graded cohorts. In accordance with this view, Southern Baptist churches usually organize their adult Sunday Schools by age and social similarities. For example, 18 to 25 year olds are typically grouped together in a college and career class. Depending on the size of the group, this age category could be further sub-divided into singles and young married couples. The next older group (around 26-35) is typically comprised of married couples with young children. Again, depending on the size of the church, this age group might also have separate classes for singles, divorced people, or married couples with no children. This system of age grading continues up through senior adults. The theory behind age-grading classes is that people are more likely to make close bonds of friendship with people in similar stages of life (Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Mims, 2001; Taylor, 2003). In their opinion, church growth and Christian character development are centered on the concept of building close personal relationships.

This study took place within the purview of an independent Bible church located in a small mid-western American town. To protect the identity of this church and its members, in this study, it was referred to as the Calvary Bible Church (CBC). After examining CBC's statement of beliefs, it was determined that doctrinally, this non-denominational, independent church held primarily to the same religious beliefs as Southern Baptist Convention churches. In contrast to the typical Southern Baptist church, however, CBC had very little stable organizational structure to its adult Sunday School department. The children and youth departments up through high school were arranged by age category. Beyond high school, however, there was no stable structure to the Sunday School organization. Classes were completely rearranged every quarter. Teachers serve on a rotating basis, usually switching out every quarter. For example, a

teacher might teach every other quarter or every third quarter, depending on his or her availability. Students/class participants were free to attend whatever class they chose from quarter to quarter. The upshot of this was that the class makeup changed dramatically from quarter to quarter, even the leadership changed. This lack of consistency in class makeup could hinder people from making friends since they would never have a consistent, stable peer group (Francis, 2005; Francis, 2006; Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Hunt, 1997; Mims, 2001; Rainer, 1999; Taylor, 2003).

The pastor of the church was interested in organizing one adult Sunday School class as an age-graded cohort as a pilot program. CBC's pastor and I agreed that the best candidate for such a study would be the young adult group (eighteen-year-old high school graduates up through early thirties), because that age group had previously demonstrated a lack of interest in adult Sunday School though they often attended worship service. The church's pastor and board of elders gave permission to conduct a cohort class consisting of people between the approximate ages of eighteen and mid-thirties (Appendix D). Calvary Bible Church was chosen for this study because its adult Sunday School was not organized by cohort, nor did it focus on using Sunday School as a means of developing personal relationships. This provided me the opportunity to introduce the age-graded cohort concept into an organization that was not using it and, thereby, to examine whether using it improved member satisfaction with the program.

Research also indicated that developing relationships was important to adults participating in secular education. For example, Lawrence (1996) spoke of adults as building communities and bonding together in groups that provided mutual support as individuals struggled through their coursework. This phenomenon has been recorded

often in adult education literature (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Brooks, 1998; Drago-Severson & Berger, 2001; Knowles, 1980; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005).

Additionally, the concept of experiential learning has often been coupled with small group and cohort education. As Barnett and Caffarella (1992) stated:

> For the cohort experience to be effective, faculty must be cognizant of the characteristics of adult learners, especially their need for the acknowledgement and use of their experiences and prior knowledge, the differing ways they go about learning, and their desire to be actively involved in the learning process versus being passive recipients of knowledge (p. 11).

For his part, Kolb (1984) made the critical link between learning and socialization. He understood that people learn in a variety of informal settings and often in conjunction with groups of other learners. In his Experiential Learning Model he acknowledged, and tried to take advantage of, the normal desire of people to make friends. For example, he stated that the first of his four learning modes, Concrete Experience, was characterized partly by personal involvement and sensitivity to other people. He further advocated the use of group discussion and group projects as a means of getting the most out of the other learning modes (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Reynolds & Sitharaman, 2000).

Fort Leavenworth's Command and General Staff College (CGSC) is widely recognized as the Army's premier leadership school. Their nine-month long course is used to prepare mid-level officers, usually majors, for positions of greater responsibility. In the 1990's, a faculty development researcher at CGSC noticed that several aspects of

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model fit well into the idea of group learning. Since CGSC is taught almost entirely in small cohort groups of twelve to eighteen people, they eventually adopted Kolb's model as the basic design for all their courseware and faculty development instruction.

This researcher was originally introduced to the Experiential Learning Model (ELM) as a member of the CGSC staff. As part of the training for the job, he attended the College's faculty development program and, eventually, became a certified instructor at CGSC. The course material and student handouts were all based on Kolb's ELM model. Recognizing the ELM's value in small group learning situations, this researcher applied the model's principles to developing adult Sunday School literature. In the opinion of this researcher, this method of teaching turned out to be very effective when used in that environment, both as a means of enhancing group interaction and of teaching the material. For this reason, the weekly Sunday School lessons used in this present research were designed according to the Experiential Learning Model as much as possible.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study attempted to address was that attendance at evangelical churches is either stagnant or declining in America. However, this is not universally and homogeneously the case. Many traditional, evangelical churches are growing, vibrant organizations. This study accepted the premise that Sunday School is an important factor to the success of a growing church (Francis, 2005; Francis, 2006; Hemphill & Taylor 2001; Hunt, 1997; Mims, 2001; Rainer, 1999; Taylor, 2003). There appeared to be other factors involved, such as quality of the preaching, music, and location (Rainer, 1999).

However, this study was not concerned with those, choosing to focus on the value of Sunday School. It only attempted to identify what elements adults were looking for in Sunday School that might create a greater sense of satisfaction with the program.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the effect, if any, that developing close personal relationships in an adult Sunday School class had on increasing a person's satisfaction with the program. The work of Francis (2005), Mims (2001), Taylor (2003), and others indicated this was the case and that there were three basic facets of this development. The first was purposefully organizing adult Sunday School classes as age-graded cohorts. The second was designing lessons that involve student interaction through the use of group projects and group discussion, as was the case with lessons that follow the Experiential Learning Model. The third was to provide social opportunities for class members outside of class time. Answering the questions used to guide this study could help shape the way in which evangelical churches approach their Sunday School program design and development in such a way as to improve their ability to minister to people more effectively.

Research Questions

This exploratory study sought to answer the following research questions:

First, based on the participants' perceptions, what are the advantages, if any, to developing a sense of belonging in Sunday School groups?

Second, based on the participants' perceptions, does establishing classes as stable, age-graded cohorts enhance satisfaction with the group?

Third, based on the participants' perceptions, does creating an interactive adult Sunday School experience through the use of the Experiential Learning Model enhance learners' sense of belonging to the group?

Fourth, based on the participants' perceptions, does providing opportunities for group interaction outside class time enhance learners' sense of belonging to the group?

Methodology

This was a qualitative case study. A qualitative paradigm was used in that it was essentially explorative in nature (Creswell, 1998). As such, it may serve as a catalyst for more in depth study on how to meet people's spiritual and social needs through Sunday School. It was a case study in that it was "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case…over time through detailed, in depth data collection" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). This study examined how a group of adult learners (the members of the Sunday School class) experienced membership in a purposefully selected cohort that used Bible lessons designed according to the Experiential Learning Model, and provided opportunities for group interaction outside class.

This study placed adult Sunday School learners in a stable class environment, similar to that recommended by the Southern Baptist Convention, for four months with the option to stay together longer if they so desire. In addition, this researcher developed and taught lessons according to the Experiential Learning Model (ELM) to encourage interaction during class time. Also, he provided opportunities for group interaction outside class.

Population and Sample

As stated above, Calvary Bible Church did not follow the age-graded cohort concept for adult Sunday School. This study used part of CBC's adult Sunday School program as a case study by applying the cohort concept to just one class. Specifically, this researcher took one age-similar group of adults and kept them together as a cohort for four months to see if the concept encouraged consistent attendance.

The class itself was open to anyone meeting the very basic criteria of age (approximately 18 to mid-30's) whether they were members of the church or not. That was the study's population. Because of the small population available for the research and because of the social dynamics already existing within the church, this researcher was not able to define the members of the class any more specifically than by age, i.e., some were single, some married, and some married with children.

However, not everyone in the class was interviewed for the project. The researcher purposefully selected a sample from the total class that represented a range of demographics from within the proscribed age category, i.e., gender, marital status, and age within the overall range of ages represented in the group. In addition, he chose those that attended at least ten class sessions prior to the interview. Finally, he wanted to interview those that had some prior experience with Sunday School so they could compare those experiences with the class designed for this research.

Procedures

The study was limited to a four-month period of time during which the class participated in an age-graded cohort style Sunday School. The lessons were, as stated previously, designed according to the Experiential Learning Model. At least once a

month they were given the opportunity to take part in some extracurricular activity outside of class time. These activities normally ran three to four hours on a weekend night and included such activities as potluck meals, game nights, barbecues, bowling, and hay rides. Some activities were designed for the whole family (children included) and some were for the adults only. On the adults only nights, the group arranged for centralized childcare at the church building. The class itself was open to anyone meeting the very basic criteria of age (approximately eighteen years to mid-thirties). This was the case whether they normally attended Calvary Bible Church or not. Non-members were welcome.

Data was gathered through semistructured interviews. The interview protocol (Appendix C) was designed to allow the participants as much freedom as possible to express their own views and, thereby, to help minimize researcher bias. The interviews took place beginning at about the four-month mark. This was to allow the class dynamics to have time to develop. The interviews were taped and transcribed. After transcription, each interviewee was given the opportunity to review his or her responses and verify their accuracy.

Definitions

Cohort. For the purposes of this study, "cohort" meant an open group bounded by the basic criteria of age (in this case eighteen years old to mid-thirties) who participate routinely in a common experience.

Evangelical. For this study "evangelical" will be defined as "a major portion of the conservative 'wing' of Protestant Christianity" (Robinson, 2007).

Independent Bible Church. An evangelical church without affiliation to any hierarchical structure or organization outside itself. It may align itself with some other mainstream evangelical or independent churches as a matter of convenience and fellowship but is not answerable to them in any way.

Sunday School. A system of Bible study classes intended for both children and adults. Sunday School is generally, but not always, held on Sunday mornings prior to the church worship service.

Southern Baptist. An evangelical Christian denomination. Southern Baptist churches are independent from one another and from any hierarchical organization. Usually they are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention for purposes of providing a unified and consistent doctrinal statement of beliefs, support for missionaries, etc, but the Convention has no say in local church administrative or policy decisions.

Spirituality. In the context of Calvary Bible Church, spirituality is generally related to the Christian concept of God. However, this study recognized that those outside of organized religion often have a much broader definition of spirituality. The two concepts may intersect but they are not equivalent. According to Tisdell (2003), "Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are related" (p. 28).

Significance of the Study

This qualitative case study of what effect, if any, that developing close personal relationships in an adult Sunday School class had on increasing a person's satisfaction with the class is valuable for at least four reasons. First, the research is needed to flesh out what is taught on the subject at evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges as well as to the laity. By introducing this study into Christian institutions of higher learning, it is

hoped that those responsible for executing Sunday School programs, such as pastors and ministers of education, will become more aware of effective practices of conducting adult Sunday School programs.

Second, even though the ideas used in this study replicate standard Southern Baptist recommendations as to organization and practice, they are not universally promoted in all Southern Baptist churches. Rainer (1999) suggests most Southern Baptist churches are not executing these ideas to their fullest advantage. He posits that those churches that are, appear to be reaching people and assimilating them into the local church effectively. This study may encourage the greater use of these ideas in actual practice in evangelical churches.

Third, since the research will require the development and administration of an actual adult Sunday School class based on practices commonly found in Southern Baptist churches, it may be able to serve as a model for others interested in creating such a program.

Fourth, this research may serve as a catalyst for more in depth study on how to meet people's needs through Sunday School.

Limitations

The following limitations of this study are noted.

1. Because the researcher will have to work within the framework allowed by Calvary Bible Church, the length of the Sunday School class is limited by their guidelines to 60 minutes per session. The shortness of the class periods may hinder the development of personal interrelationships within the class.

2. Qualitative interviewing is a highly personal and personalized process. Though letting the students speak for themselves as much as possible through the interview process should have helped mitigate bias, the validity of the results of this type of study depended on the researcher's ability to be objective in the interview and coding process (Patton, 1990).

3. Since the study was limited to young adults in a small mid-west community, the results may not be generalizable to other age groups, areas of the country, or even the state.

4. Although other Christian denominations may have developed effective systems of administering Sunday School programs, this study was limited to the examination of the those recommendations promulgated by the Southern Baptist Convention as applied to an independent Bible church.

5. This research was essentially a study of educational program organization centered on the development of interpersonal relationships. Although this study was conducted in the context of a church environment and even though the subject matter of the lessons was Biblical in nature, it was not a study on spiritual development or spiritual education. Further, the study was conducted through the venue of Sunday School, which is a subset of religious education; in this case specifically evangelical Christian religious education. This is a much narrower topic than spiritual education. As Tisdell (2003) says, "Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are related" (p. 28).

Assumptions

In designing and executing this study, the researcher made several assumptions.

1. The Southern Baptist Convention is correct in that Sunday School is a good venue through which to stimulate a person's sense of belonging to the local church and satisfaction with the organization.

2. Faithfully attending and assimilating into a Sunday School is a good thing and should, therefore, be encouraged. Active involvement in Sunday School helps adults improve their relationship to other church members and to God.

3. The subjects of this study were, for the most part, honest and accurate in their responses to interview questions as to their experiences related to Sunday School during the study. This is said knowing that, in this type of research, a certain amount of inaccuracy will almost surely creep into the process at some point. This is simply unavoidable in dealing with human personalities. As Patton (1990) so correctly stated in regard to qualitative data collection, "Total trust and complete skepticism are twin losers in the field. All things in moderation, especially trust and skepticism" (p. 143).

4. Although this researcher's personal involvement in local evangelical churches and Sunday Schools over the past thirty-five years may have biased him as a researcher, it was also a positive factor in his ability to analyze and understand the Sunday School experience created for this study.

5. Because of the nature of this study, this researcher was intimately and personally involved with the subjects of the study. This may have added a level of bias to both the researcher and the subjects in regard to the collection and interpretation of data.

Summary

This qualitative case study attempted to address the problem that attendance at American evangelical churches is declining. It will seek to identify factors that

contribute to satisfaction with adult Sunday School. Experts in the field of church growth have long held that creating a sense of belonging to the group was a key factor in developing a growing, effective church program. Furthermore, they have claimed Sunday School was the best venue through which to create this sense of belonging (Francis, 2005; Francis, 2006; Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Hunt, 1997; Mims, 2001; Rainer, 1999; Taylor, 2003).

To accomplish the research's objectives, this study placed young adult Sunday School learners (eighteen years old to mid-thirties) in a stable class environment, based on the practices generally used within the Southern Baptist Convention, for four months. This included creating an age-graded cohort class, designing lesson plans in accordance with the Experiential Learning Model, and providing opportunities for group interaction outside class time. Data was gathered through the use of semistructured interviews with selected class members.

The study is significant because it adds to the professional research on the subject of adult Sunday School which, in turn, may encourage the use of more effective methods of organizing and executing Sunday School. In addition, it was hoped that this research may serve as a catalyst for more in depth study on how to meet people's needs more effectively through Sunday School.

CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the effect, if any, that developing close personal relationships in an adult Sunday School class had on increasing a person's satisfaction with the program. To do this, the researcher placed adult Sunday School learners in a stable class environment, similar to that recommended by the Southern Baptist Convention, for four months with the option to stay together longer if they so desired. Lessons were developed and taught the lessons according to the Experiential Learning Model (ELM). Also, the researcher provided opportunities for group interaction outside class. In addition to research into the specific category of adult Sunday School, this study was informed by research in cohort education, group dynamics, adult learning theory, and affiliation needs.

Cohort Literature

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines "cohort" as "a group of individuals having a statistical factor (as age or class membership) in common in a demographic study." In reference to adult education, a cohort is defined variously throughout literature on the subject. Most commonly, the term is reserved for some group of adult students taking the same program of study at the same time in a formal educational environment (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Barnett and Caffarella (1992) have written, "typically, a cohort consists of a group of students who enter a program of studies together, completing a series of common learning experiences over a one to two year period" (p. 1). Sometimes "the emphasis is on making sure that

the participants have common experiences around the same philosophy" (Collins, 2005, p. 35).

Lawrence (1997) was more specific when she defined a cohort as "a group of 12 to 20 adult students who meet together once a week for a four hour block of time over a period of 14-18 months" (p.1). According to Cordiero, Kureger, Parks, Restine, and Wilson (1993), the University of Washington's Danforth programs for educational leadership typically run cohorts of 18-20 students. Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett (1995), states, "most leadership preparation programs prefer to limit the size to no more than 25 participants, which allows students to develop closer relationships with their peers and faculty to attend to the needs of individual students" (p. 6). Brooks (1998) suggests limiting a class to somewhere between ten and twenty students. In his opinion, this is the optimal size for interaction. Similarly, Brookfield (1990) states "A group smaller than this can easily become introverted, with selected members periodically repeating their particular obsessions. A group larger than this can be intimidating to those members who find public speaking difficult" (p. 194).

Pemberton and Akkary's (2005) definition of cohort, on the other hand, is much more nebulous than those cited above. They studied six female doctoral students at Portland State University who were pursuing a degree in Educational Leadership between 1993 and 2000. In their case, no one in authority from the school put them in a cohort unit. They didn't even necessarily proceed through the program at the same speed or take the same classes together. They just became friends and developed what they called the Sisters cohort. More than anything else, it was a support group of sorts. "[T]he Sisters' camaraderie and interpersonal connection was an important and sustaining source of peer

support and motivation throughout course work, comprehensive examinations, and dissertation research"(Pemberton & Akkary, 2005, p. 2). The Sisters became a cohort by virtue of their own choosing.

Drago-Severson and Berger (2001) worked with cohorts from the Polaroid Corporation enrolled in the Continuing Education Institute's program for adult high school completion. Their cohorts were structured similarly to those used by Lawrence (1997) in that they met together "for two hours, two days a week, over a fourteen month period" (Drago-Severson & Berger, 2001, p. 384). Nevertheless, like Pemberton and Akkary (2005); Drago-Severson, Kegan, Popp, Broderick, & Portnow (2001) have a view of what constitutes a cohort that focuses less on physical structure and more on the members of the group choosing to develop close relationships. To them, a cohort is "a tight-knit, reliable, common-purpose group" (p. 15). This expands the definition beyond simply being a group of people taking the same classes at the same time. It speaks of relationships that help. Despite the fact that these students were in closed cohorts and that they were required to proceed through their program of study together in a lock-step manner, they came to the conclusion that what truly made them a cohort was the fact that they chose to develop supportive relationships to help each other through their classes. In their words, "As we see it, learners in this program were a cohort not simply because they were taking the same classes at the same time with the same teachers. Learners in this group became—transformed themselves into—a cohort" (Drago-Severson & Berger, 2001, p. 384).

The use of cohorts is not a new concept in adult education. Modern educational reformers originally introduced the cohort model in the 1940s. Saltiel and Russo (2001),

however, point out that the use of cohorts as an educational structure predates our literature on the subject. In this context, they discuss the fact that the military's basic training units are very much closed, lock-step cohorts.

By the 1960s the cohort concept was flourishing in the adult educational community. Cohorts were associated with small group discussion and were being used as a way of granting students more power over their own educational experience. Unfortunately, it fell into disrepute because of current societal trends. At the time, school organizations tended to focus on consolidating power in the hands of a single administrator rather than on a system of power sharing. Saltiel and Russo (2001) suggest this may have been a conservative overreaction to the radicalism of the time. "In view of all that was occurring in the educational society in the 1960s, it is easy to understand why these early efforts were not sustained" (p. 7). Philosophically, the time simply wasn't right for the notion of a wider distribution of authority in this country (Basom et al., 1995; Drago-Severson et al., 2001).

Eventually, during the 1980s, the use of cohorts was revived in response to changing educational and societal philosophies. By that time, the 1960s generation of students, against whom the conservative administrators were reacting, had made significant inroads to positions of authority in educational administration themselves (Basom, et al, 1995). At the same time, corporate America had also begun to use the cohort concept to good effect. The increased use of the cohort system in business probably influenced the eventual adoption of this format in education (Marshall, 1995; Maher, 2001).

By the early 1990s, the use of cohorts was becoming increasingly popular as educational reformers directed their efforts toward using instructional methods aimed at including a greater amount of interactive and collaborative type learning opportunities in educational administration programs (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Murphy, 1990). In noting this increasing popularity, Barnett and Caffarella (1992) make the connection between organizing students into physical/ administrative cohorts and the use of more interactive, interpersonal, and collaborative learning techniques. Others also make this connection (Fahy, 2002; Imel, 2002; Murphy, 1990; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Maher (2001) goes a step further by asserting that the increased use of cohorts was a response to wider societal interest in group dynamics and team building in major corporations. In his opinion, education programs, as is often the case, were responding to the demands of the customer: American business.

In regard to student access, adult education programs have developed two basic types of cohort systems: open and closed. As the name implies, a closed cohort system allows much less flexibility in the students' curricula than does an open system. In the extreme, a closed cohort system is one in which a group of students enters the program of instruction together; takes all their classes together; progresses through their courses in a sequential, lock step fashion; and graduates together. In some cases students may only have the opportunity to take classes with other members of their cohort (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992). They are not allowed to mingle with outsiders, at least not in a classroom environment (Barnett & Muse, 1993). This is more for administrative convenience than for any other reason. Maher (2001) conducted a study of one Masters Degree in Education program in which only the first ten months (ten of twelve credit

hours of core classes) was run as a closed cohort. The rest of the program operated as an open cohort.

Open cohort systems have broader parameters for course completion than do closed cohort systems. Members of this type of cohort will usually take some, but not all classes together. For example, while a program might have a standard set of required courses which the cohort will take as a group, the school might have a menu of acceptable electives, any of which will satisfy some aspect of the program's graduation requirements. Everyone in the cohort may, or may not, attend the same electives. Additionally, in most open cohort systems, students are allowed to join at virtually any time that is convenient for them in a sort of "rolling admissions" arrangement (Maher, 2001, p. 3). This creates special challenges for teachers and staffs that those administering closed cohorts don't have to address. For one thing, this type of system is more complicated to administer because each student will be taking different classes. Not everybody follows the same program of instruction.

For the purpose of this study, a Sunday School class is a very open cohort. This adds a unique challenge to keeping a sense of cohesion and support while actively seeking to keep the membership fluid. According to Francis (2006):

> A…Sunday School class is an open group. An open group intentionally seeks to involve and connect with people who are not currently members and encourages new people to join the group anytime. An open group also celebrates when members leave to serve in other age groups. Unlike a closed group—a study group with a fixed membership that does not accept new members once the study begins—an open group is ongoing in nature.

> New people can join or visit an open group anytime—whether the group is meeting for Bible study or having a party. This strategy impacts how the group approaches these activities (p. 8).

Aside from the basic feeling of support gained from being a member of a group, cohort learning has several important advantages for students. Lawrence (1996), for example, lists six such benefits that relate to interpersonal relationships developed through working together in an educational setting.

--Building a learning community. They bonded as a group and developed a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. In a religious context, Vogel (1991) refers to this as becoming "a *caring community* of pilgrims (italics hers)" (p. 121).

--Experiencing a collaborative process. The cohort members developed a broader perspective of the subject material by hearing how others in the group viewed and processed the material.

--Knowing and learning. Students in the cohorts developed an appreciation for new ideas, perspectives, and experiences by communicating with others with varying opinions.

--Valuing multiple perspectives. Members learned the value of the varying perspectives other people brought to the discussion. It helped them see how important the life experiences; to include culture, profession, and age; of different members of the group were to fully understanding an issue. Being in a cohort even improved tolerance of diversity in some cases (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992).

--Bridging interpersonal connections. This benefit speaks to the idea that, in many cases, being a part of a cohort helped people create subgroups that provided mutual

support as the individuals struggled through their coursework. This particular benefit is seen again and again in similar research (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Brooks, 1998; Drago-Severson & Berger, 2001; Knowles, 1980; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005).

--Facilitating individual development. This benefit was a natural outgrowth of the others. The group members nurtured, supported, and validated one another as they grew intellectually. This improved their self-confidence and encouraged them to stretch their limits even further. All these benefits, though not necessarily unique to cohort learning, are enhanced by it.

In the world of adult education, the research seems to indicate that the use of cohorts is not, and should not be, just a convenient method of organizing adult learners. The cohort learning experience has the potential of being something much deeper and much more important to the students than a way of getting them through a program of study (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Per Norris and Barnett (1994), "to view the [cohort] structure merely as a method of course delivery, a vehicle for socialization, a convenient scheduling design, or as an upbeat, fashionable 'in' approach is to do cohort structure an injustice" (p. 34). The available research is filled with examples of how students benefit from being part of a cohort program in ways not related to administrative convenience.

One of the most significant benefits of putting adult learners in cohorts is the fact that they enjoy the support and collegiality of working with and around a group of socially interactive people (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Brooks, 1998; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). They make friends and develop close relationships as they work through their program of studies. The research is very consistent that adults

identify this as a significant advantage (Brooks, 1998; Kasten, 1995; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Saltiel & Russo, 2001).

As noted above, the "Sisters' Cohort" in Pemberton and Akkary's (2005) study was developed informally by six female doctoral students for the express purpose of providing them with a support network of trusted friends. It is a common conclusion in cohort studies that the emotional support provided by the group is a key contributing factor in students staying in their programs until graduation (Johnson & Hill, 1996; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998). According to Saltiel and Russo (2001):

> Cohort members support each other in ways that traditional learners might not be aware other learners need. For example, when personal or professional issues cause cohort members to consider dropping out of the program, other members support them by encouraging them, assisting them with their work, helping them develop solution-oriented strategies to deal with the problem, or grouping together to protect the member. Many cohort members have referred to help from their fellow students that pulled them through a crisis and kept them in school (p. 70).

The students appreciate it as a matter of survival in a challenging educational environment, made all the more difficult by the demands inherent in the life of an adult learner. To many of them, it is the support offered by the group that makes surviving the process possible.

Similarly, Francis (2006), in helping church goers overcome their fear of inviting friends to church, gives the following advice:

> Just share a word about how your class or group has helped you understand the Bible and discuss God's Word without feeling inadequate. Talk about how something you learned in Sunday School helped you cope in a specific situation, how others prayed for you when you faced a tough challenge, or how the class rallied around you during a crisis (p. 10).

Francis (2006) advises Christians to share four things attending Sunday School has done for them. All four involve overcoming difficulties or feelings of inadequacy. Two of them relate directly to the feeling of support they got from other members of their Sunday School class. He understands the promise of a supportive group is a key factor in why people choose to join a Sunday School class. Conversely, having a Sunday School class fail in this promise is also a key factor for disillusioned people to leave the group. "People have a lot of reasons for dropping out of active involvement. The number one reason, however, is that they had some crisis in their lives and did not feel like anyone responded" (Francis, 2006, p. 31).

"For most students, the cohort group becomes such an integral part of their graduate school experience that they want to continue this association after the program has ended" (Barnett & Muse, 1993, p. 406). Many students continue an informal relationship with fellow former cohort members for several years. "The camaraderie and mutual trust that develops is a powerful motivation for continued involvement" (Hill, 1992, p. 10). Some universities try to involve former students in small ways with follow on cohort groups and reunion-like gatherings (Barnett & Muse, 1993). One university,

Virginia Tech, has taken a much more aggressive approach to the problem. Here the administration makes a five-year commitment to the cohort, via a series of group seminars, to help them through some of the career struggles they are likely to face. Barnett and Muse (1993) posit that, "this formal continuation of the cohort group's professional network may be particularly important given the isolation experienced by many educators, especially as they begin a new administrative role or return to the classroom" (p. 406-407).

An adult learning cohort is designed largely to create a "community of learners" (Kasten, 1995, p. 179) that can draw on one another for support and expertise. Since group cohesion and interpersonal relationships appear to be important components of cohort education, it seems advisable to add a discussion of group dynamics at this point.

Group Dynamics

> Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

As ancient as the book of Ecclesiastes is, King Solomon was probably not the first to recognize this simple, yet profound truth: we are stronger and more effective when we work as a team. Bruce Tuckman first described his four stages of group development in 1965: forming, storming, norming, and performing. He believed that every group, to be truly effective, had to go through each of these four stages of growth.

--Forming. During this phase, the group depends largely on the leader for direction and control. However, even at this early stage in the process, members begin to form dependency relationships on one another (Tuckman, 2001). Group members will not yet have developed their individual roles, i.e., how they fit into the larger group. Equally problematic, the team as a whole will not have very well developed goals either. Because of this, the leader will have to set the agenda as to their immediate objectives.

--Storming. This is a difficult time for the group. The individuals are struggling between the desire to belong and the desire to maintain their separate identities (Tuckman, 2001). Because they have not established consistent rules of operation, they have a hard time coming to appropriate decisions. Group members are also likely to challenge the leader's authority as they struggle to find their own place in the organization and their relationship to each other. This, naturally, creates some emotional tension. The leader must keep the group focused so it doesn't get distracted from its purpose. On the positive side, it is at this stage that individuals begin to form alliances and subgroups within the larger body. Moreover, the group members begin to get a clearer picture of what they want to accomplish, what their purpose is. Correspondingly, the leader tries to ease up on the reins a little and become more of a coach than a director, letting the group begin to find its own way. Referring to adult educational cohort programs working through this stage, Saltiel and Russo (2001) note, "There is a subtle shift in who holds the power. The group dynamics are already established because the cohort members know that they have the power of the collective group" (p.63).

--Norming. This phase is marked by feelings of harmony and consensus. As such, group members may participate in extracurricular activities (either as a whole or in

bits and pieces). In short, they have become friends. There is a strong sense of unity and commitment to the group. This comes as no surprise. In fact, "The cohort-based program model expects learners will develop higher levels of cohesiveness in this strong supportive atmosphere" (Saltiel & Russo, 2001, p. 55). This cohesiveness, or sense of shared unity and solidarity binds a group together (Ridgeway, 1983). They have learned to trust one another and so have become willing to share "intimate, personal opinions" with the group (Tuckman, 2001, p. 78). Also, by this time in the developmental process, the leader has been able to move into the role of facilitator; leadership becomes more democratic. Furthermore, members of the group have pretty much settled into a set of roles, and their corresponding responsibilities, with which they are comfortable. Everybody pretty much knows his or her place within the team and is content with it. Nevertheless, they will devote some time to refining how the team members work together.

--Performing. By now, the team has a better appreciation for the big picture and, therefore, how what they are doing fits into it. The individual members have bought into and accepted the goals of the team as important to themselves (Tuckman, 2001). They are invested in the success of the group (Zander, 1982). They also understand more clearly how the team ought to function and are willing to make the necessary changes to achieve their goals. Although team members still view the leader as a mentor and guide, the leader has given up even more authority and provides more general guidance than explicit detail when assigning tasks (Tuckman, 2001).

In 1977, Tuckman, working in conjunction with Mary Ann Jensen, introduced a fifth stage of group development, which they called "Adjourning" (Tuckman & Jensen,

1977). As the name implies, this is not actually a phase during which the group makes positive strides in performing its assigned functions. Rather, it refers to that time during which the need for the group's existence comes to an end and it must disband. In cohort education terms this would probably correspond to graduation, even though members of some cohorts remain friends and keep in contact long after their program of study is finished (Barnett, & Muse, 1993; Brooks, 1998; Maher, 2001). This can be a very hard emotional time for members of the group as they realize they will no longer be working closely with people to whom they have become very close. It is for this reason this stage is sometimes called "Mourning" (Tuckman & Jensen, 1971). Leaders should be cognizant of the difficulties breaking up the team will have on its members and should prepare them for it (Tuckman, 2001). This phenomenon relates directly to a problem commonly faced by growing Sunday School classes.

If a Sunday School class is functioning effectively, it will eventually grow to a point at which it must be split to allow for new growth. This moment will bring out some of the same emotional turmoil that actual adjourning will. It will necessitate breaking some relationships in the larger group to enable members of the two smaller groups to develop bonds within their new classes and with new people (Francis, 2006; Hunt, 1997). The teachers of the two groups will need to work together to make sure this is not too painful. They should control the split in such a way that members still have some of their friends in the new smaller groups. They should also plan larger parties so that they can get together with older friends from time to time (Francis, 2006; Hunt, 1997).

As stated above, a sense of collegiality and support is one of the main benefits of using the cohort model in adult education (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Brooks, 1998;

Pemberton & Akkary, 2005; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). However, this does not always occur (Kasten, 1995). Just because people are doing something together, it doesn't mean they are a group. In this context, Norris and Barnett (1996) claim, "A cohort, conveniently arranged as a structural component to 'reformed' educational administration programs may, or may not, be a fully functioning group" (p. 4). Zander (1982) makes the same point: "A number of persons jointly engaged in an activity—traveling on a sightseeing tour, picking apples in an orchard, working in a personnel department, attending a seminar—are not necessarily a group, but it may become one" (p. 1-2). Becoming a real, functioning, effective group doesn't just happen. It takes considerable effort to do it well. As Nesbit (2001) says,

> Cohorts are created not born. They are successful when everyone works collaboratively and collectively on improving their own and other's learning experiences. It takes self-responsibility, patience, courage, humor, commitment, sensitivity, and a lot of hard work to create such an enriching learning experience for everybody (p. 3).

What then, are the signs that a collection of individuals has become a "group?" Zander, lists several qualities that indicate a group has actually formed: "they talk freely, are interested in their set as a whole, feel that associates are helpful, try to assist colleagues, refer to their collectivity as 'we' and to other social bodies as 'they,' and faithfully participate when members gather" (Zander, 1982, p. 2). Effective groups are characterized by communication and a variety of other personal interactions (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992).

Forsyth (1990) takes the point a step further and states that the best indicator a cluster of people has become a group is their interdependence. Otherwise they are just a collection of individuals with no synergy. This sentiment is echoed by Johnson and Hill (1996), "Membership in a group is not necessarily defined by similarity, but by continuing interaction and interdependence" (p. 219). Whether in a group learning environment or in a corporate setting, they truly rely on each other to accomplish their collective goals. Just as importantly, their collective goals are inexorably linked to their individual goals (Lawrence, 1997; Maher, 2001; Zander, 1982). No one can afford to be a Lone Ranger. Saltiel & Russo (2001) state it this way: "The sense of a common fate, the feeling of all being in it together, creates a sense of 'if you go, we all go'" (p. 79). They expect the group's support and depend on one another to do their part for the group (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). This interdependence creates a powerful synergy within the group (Saltiel & Russo, 2001). In Forsyth's (1990) view, this makes the group real. Otherwise, they are just a collection of individuals struggling to pursue their own agendas. According to Zander (1982), "a body of people is not a group if the members are primarily interested in individual accomplishments, are not concerned with the activities of other members or see others as rivals" (p. 121).

In an effective, well-designed group, with appropriate goals and working relationships, there is a shared feeling that what is good for one member is good for all.

> Individuals are intricately interwoven into groups and groups become reflections of individuals. Individuals are supported, affirmed, and inspired in groups—they are transformed. In turn, individuals transform groups through their collective efforts and commitment to a meaningful

> purpose. Groups empower individuals; individuals empower groups (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p. 2).

This makes the connection between individuals in the groups very strong.

Also, because of how learning in a cohort takes place, it may be difficult to even separate individual work from collaborative work. In this context, Saltiel and Russo (2001) make the following statement:

> [T]he very nature of the cohort program … blurs the definition of independent work. What is 'independent' work in a cohort program? Is it individual, not dependent on or affiliated with the work of other students? Is it free from the influence, guidance, or control of the other students? Given the culture created by the supportive and collegial nature of the cohort, the trust and openness that is nurtured and valued, can it be that independent work in the traditional sense is impossible (p. 63).

Members of well-integrated cohorts tend to enjoy the sense of distinctiveness being in a group gives them. They often devise ways to identify themselves as unique from everybody else. Cohort members deliberately create a variety of quirks and group-specific rituals designed to set them apart as a distinct, clearly identifiable miniature society (Brooks, 1998).

Another sign that a group has begun to create strong bonds is the members' willingness to accept and even help enforce behavioral norms (Zander, 1982). For example, tight groups will not tolerate someone keeping the other members waiting unnecessarily for no good reason or not finishing their part of a larger project. Likewise, the individual would try to be faithful to his or her commitments for fear of letting down

the group. Of course, it is inevitable that a member will push the limits and the group will have to deal with willful failure to conform. Eventually, the organization will deal with those who do come to habitually violate the group's rules (Zander, 1982).

How, then, can we encourage "groupness?" There is a great deal of literature devoted to the problem of stimulating and energizing a sense of cohesiveness and familiarity within a group. It is important to remember that transforming a collection of individuals into a close, unified group doesn't just happen by accident. It must be carefully planned (Kasten, 1995). Zander (1982) lists three factors that go into creating a functioning, effective group: proximity, homogeneity, and group distinction.

--Proximity. The first step in getting a group of people to bond is to put them in a room together. Make them see, touch, and hear each other. "Persons who are within easy reach of one another are better able to do things jointly, and these coactions encourage a sense of unity" (Zander, 1982, p. 2). It is positive human interaction directed toward a common purpose that creates unity. Many adult learners in the same program of instruction have established close bonds simply by car-pooling to and from class (Kasten, 1995, p. 185).

Additionally, organizations often take the opportunity of birthdays, retirements, and other similar events to bring people together in a friendly, warm atmosphere to help develop interaction, which in turn breeds unity. The more frequently a person comes in contact with another, the more likely it is that they will feel comfortable with the relationship and have warm feelings about each other and develop into a functioning group (Kasten, 1995; Zajonc, 1968). Correspondingly, if people are separated from each other for some reason, their feelings of camaraderie will cool and will need to be revived.

This is easier to accomplish with smaller groups than with larger ones (Scott, 2003). "People more readily see themselves as members of a group if there are not too many associates—less than twenty-five or, better, close to seven" (Zander, p. 2). Students tend to break up into smaller groups if there are too many in a class for them to get to know comfortably. There is some evidence that if a group grows to over twenty people it will fracture and lose some of its effectiveness (Kasten, 1995).

--Homogeneity. The more alike are the individual members to each other, the more likely they are to effectively coalesce into a tight-knit, supportive group (Forsyth, 1990). Despite the fact that we generally like to think of ourselves as open, accepting people, the truth is most of us prefer to spend our time with those who are like us in ways that are important to us such as age, religion, income level and other basic demographic indicators. Smart organizations take advantage of this aspect of human nature. For example, in Japan, it is a common business practice to recruit friends out of the same university and to place friends in the same offices (Zander, 1982). This works out well because it provides employees with a comfortable working environment.

--Encourage the sense of group distinction. "Individuals more easily perceive themselves as parts of a social entity if their set is separate from others" (Zander, 1982, p. 4). Among the techniques Zander (1982) recommends to enhance this sense of distinctness are providing a particular room or office area for the group and making sure they have equipment specifically set aside for them.

It takes careful planning to develop and maintain the proper group environment. Adult educators take this lesson from group dynamics into the development of cohort learning groups. This is especially true in the opening stages of a program (Kasten,

1995). The initial set up of a cohort-learning environment is absolutely critical (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992). Instructors and administrators only get to start each cohort once. If they do that badly, it is very difficult to undo the damage and move the group in a positive direction. Realizing this, many schools devote a lot of time and resources at the beginning of a program to conducting intense, group-centered activities that are intended to stimulate the bonding process (Barnett & Muse, 1993). According to Barnett and Caffarella (1992):

> Faculty and students often espouse that the advantage of a cohort is that a more intimate, safe, and supportive learning environment can be created if the same group of students remains together for a concentrated time period…Such a supportive learning climate may not always develop naturally, but may need to be purposely attended to, especially at the outset of the program (p. 5-6).

Small intense workshops (one to two weeks in length) can be very helpful. To encourage the development of interpersonal relationships among cohort members, the University of Northern Colorado has,

> students enroll as a cohort in an intensive seminar during their first two semesters on campus where students provide feedback to one another on their written papers, assist each other in achieving personal and professional goals, conduct collaborative research projects, and form a network of student colleagues who provide mutual support throughout their entire doctoral program (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992, p. 4-5).

This program is especially effective because it not only puts the cohort members together in a collaborative working group, but it also requires them to share a great deal about themselves with each other. Sometimes cohort program administrators take their students on off-campus retreats to work on team building and exercises to develop team commitment (Barnett & Muse, 1993).

> Regardless of the format used in these initial learning experiences, the intent is to assist students in developing a better appreciation for the aspirations, skills, and attitudes of their cohort colleagues, which serves as a foundation for establishing lasting relationships later in the program" (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992, p. 7).

These intense, brief seminars create a base of personal understanding within the group that set the stage for the entire program of instruction and even beyond graduation.

Directing a group toward a common goal is also important to group cohesion. For example, in the corporate world, the members of a business team might direct their collective efforts toward some important objective the team is trying to achieve such as reaching a high sales quota or manufacturing a certain number of a key product (Zander, 1982). In an adult learning environment, the ultimate goal is probably graduation, with subordinate goals of passing individual classes and class related projects. Teachers of adult cohorts trying to develop cohesiveness design their classes and projects in such a way as to force collaboration and interdependence. Only by working together can they succeed. This can be a very unifying force (Basom et al., 1995; Kasten, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1992).

In addition, groups develop better interconnections if members feel they have an equal voice in setting the agenda, that is, if it is operating democratically. Adults, and this includes adult learners, like to know they have some control over their life and learning circumstances (Scott, 2003). According to Barnett and Muse (1993), "A growing number of adult educators underscore the need for participants in an instructional setting to have some control over both the content of the learning experiences and the group's decision making processes" (p. 408). According to Caffarella (1992), this is key to establishing collaboration between members. Therefore, fostering an egalitarian environment in a learning cohort is especially important. Creating such a democratic learning process encourages commitment and buy-in to the group because they actually play a part in establishing the group's goals and objectives (Caffarella, 1992; Maher, 1985; Schniedewind, 1983; Shrewsbury, 1987). If the individuals feel they have a genuine say in how the cohort is run, they are much more likely to actively participate and develop relationships with each other. Thye and Lawler (2004) contend that even if a group is not well developed in other respects, the fact that the individual members enjoy an equal sharing of power will help the group bond. As important as it may be to develop a strong sense of group cohesion, it is also important to understand something about how adults learn.

Adult Learning Theory

Malcolm Knowles considerably influenced the field of adult learning beginning in the 1960s. The centerpiece of his theories was his andragogical model and his characteristics of adult learners. Knowles (1980) believed that teachers, program designers, and administrators should take these characteristics into account when they

design adult educational programs and classes. Learning in a cohort setting is almost always associated with group and collaborative learning and several prominent adult educators have acknowledged the connection between the cohort system of learning and Malcolm Knowles' model, specifically his characteristics of adult learners (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Brookfield, 1990; Maher, 2001).

With Knowles' (1980) theories in mind, it is easy to see how cohort learning could facilitate the use of certain aspects of his characteristics of adult learners. Those seeking to successfully teach adults in cohorts ought to be aware of Knowles' principles. As Barnett and Caffarella (1992) state:

> For the cohort experience to be effective, faculty must be cognizant of the characteristics of adult learners, especially their need for the acknowledgement and use of their experiences and prior knowledge, the differing ways they go about learning, and their desire to be actively involved in the learning process versus being passive recipients of knowledge (p. 11).

The reverse is also true. Ignoring the general trends of adult learner personalities will significantly hinder efforts to teach them effectively and could negate some of the advantages of group learning. The following then, are Knowles' characteristics of adult learners:

--Self-concept of the learner. "It is a normal aspect of the process of maturation for a person to move from dependency toward increasing self-directedness" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Adults tend to enjoy the whole process of learning more if they feel they

have a part in deciding what is going to be learned and how it is going to be learned. Not everyone matures at the same rate.

A teacher can speed the group maturation process in at least two ways. First, in order to encourage self-directedness, teachers must present themselves as facilitators rather than as mere lecturers. Teachers should guide student discussions more than simply discharge wisdom (Wise & Ezell, 2003). This will help students feel the weight of their own responsibility for their success and learn to depend on each other more. Second, an instructor can grant, or even force, individuals to choose some of what they study (either for writing assignments or individual class presentations). Third, students can be placed in small groups to develop collaborative projects. Working in smaller groups will give the more timid students the chance to develop some confidence in a safer, quieter environment than the larger group affords. More importantly to the premise of this study, working in smaller subgroups will help generate a sense of cohesiveness and supportiveness faster than staying in the larger group.

--Role of learners' experience. "As people grow and develop they accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning—for themselves and for others" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Merriam and Caffarella (1998) concur with this sentiment. Knowles (1980) lists discussion as one of the primary methods through which people learn by experience. In addition to learning through discussion, adults often seek validation and respect for their experience from the group (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992). Finding such validation binds individuals together through feelings of good will.

Newcomers to a church environment may not feel comfortable discussing Bible topics. This can create a challenge for the group to validate their visitors. Group discussion is a way in which this challenge can be overcome. The discussion leader should guide the conversation in such a way as to allow those with less Bible knowledge to discuss the practical lessons they have learned in life. As Lieb (1991) has said:

> Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. [Teachers] need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, they should draw out participants' experience and knowledge that is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.

It is important to focus on personal application in a Sunday School class. By keeping a Bible-based discussion centered on practical relevance, even newcomers to a church setting can contribute to, or at least see the sense of, the conversation. Bruce Wilkinson (1992) studied the sermons of those considered the greatest preachers in history and discovered that somewhere between 45 and 75 percent of their material was devoted to application. It is for these reasons that most Southern Baptist adult Sunday School literature is designed at the high school level and contains more application than theology. They are seeking to make visitors as comfortable as possible while still nurturing those who have been studying the Bible for many years.

--Readiness to learn. “People become ready to learn something when they experience a need to learn it in order to cope more satisfyingly with real life tasks or

problems" (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). This concept speaks to the adult learner's perception of how relevant a class's material is to his or her life. Again, this is why Sunday School material should be heavy on application. People need to feel the time spent in a Bible study will impact their lives in a positive way. One other important aspect of this characteristic of adult learners is the idea that people go through several life stages as they mature. These life stages correspond, in general terms, to age categories. Robert Havighurst (1961), for example, divides the adult maturation process into three broad age categories: 18-30, 30-55, and 55 and over. Within these three over-arching categories Havighurst lists important developmental tasks that people must deal with. For example, 18-30 year olds usually have to make marriage and career decisions while people over 55 years old may have to cope with the death of a husband or wife. Erikson also posits that people pass through several developmental stages as they mature. He claims these various stages generally follow age categories (young adult, adult, etc), though he "maintains that as adults we may revisit earlier stages to resolve or re-resolve conflicts from earlier periods in different ways" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1998, p. 103). A key aspect of using a cohort model for Sunday School is to group adult students, as much as possible, by their age categories because they are often dealing with the same issues.

Knowles (1980) also acknowledges this as an important factor when grouping adult learners. What could be more natural than to group people according to the kinds of issues and challenges they are facing in their day-to-day lives? In this way, they can empathize better with one another and thus develop closer bonds of support within the group. In addition, similarly aged people are more likely to share more of the same interests than people from widely divergent age categories. They are simply more likely

to have more in common and, therefore, more upon which to base a lasting friendship. This is the impetus behind the age-graded system of adult Sunday School used by the Southern Baptist Convention (Mims, 2001; Hemphill, 2001).

--Orientation to learning. "Learners see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life. They want to be able to apply whatever knowledge and skill they gain today to living more effectively tomorrow" (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). Adults are goal-oriented. Adults are practical. As mentioned above, adults prefer to spend their time learning something that is relevant to them. They have had to deal with the harsh realities of life and don't want to waste their time. Many adults recognize the pursuit of spiritual needs as a legitimate and important use of their time (Rainer, 1999; Tisdell, 2003). An adult Sunday School class provides such opportunities.

The Experiential Learning Model (ELM) developed by David Kolb also takes characteristics of adult learners into account. Building on the foundation laid by Lewin, Dewey, and Piaget, Kolb made the critical link between learning and socialization. He understood that people learn in a variety of informal settings and often in conjunction with groups of other learners.

> And with this major achievement he knowingly shifts the ecology of learning away from the exclusivity of the classroom (and its companion, the Lecture) to the workplace, the family, the carpool, the community, or wherever we gather to work or play or love (Kolb, 1984, p. ix).

We don't necessarily learn sitting in rows of chairs listening to the "sage on the stage." A great deal of learning takes place in an interactive setting.

According to Kolb,

> New knowledge, skills, or attitudes are achieved through confrontation among four modes of experiential learning. Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different kinds of abilities—concrete experience abilities (CE), reflective observation abilities (RO), abstract conceptualization abilities (AC), and active experimentation (AE) abilities. That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE) (Kolb, 1984, p. 30).

This design can be seen diagrammatically at figure E.1.

Concrete Experience (CE) is characterized by personal involvement, feeling rather than thinking, sensitivity to people, and learning from actual experiences. It can either be an event that occurs naturally in the learner's life experience. It can also be a project generated by an instructor as part of a classroom experience. Regardless, in Kolb's model it is the starting point of learning.

Reflective Observation (RO) is the second learning mode. It is characterized by observation rather than action, willingness to consider and appreciate different points of view, looking for meaning and patterns in what is observed, and seeing implications/connections between various phenomena and facts.

Abstract Conceptualization (AC) is the fourth learning mode. It is characterized by the use of logic, ideas, and concepts through the scientific approach; quantitative analysis; and thinking rather than feeling.

Active Experimentation (AE) is Kolb's final learning mode. It is characterized by influencing events through action, seeking practical applications for knowledge, accomplishing things, and having a willingness to take risks.

It is easy to see that those learning modes that are opposite each other on the diagram are, in fact, opposite in characteristics. The characteristics associated with Concrete Experience (CE) are opposite those associated with Abstract Conceptualization (AC). Likewise, the characteristics associated with Reflective Observation (RO) are opposite those associated with Active Experimentation (AE). Kolb extrapolated from this that the four quadrants of his model would represent the four basic learning styles illustrated at figure E.2. The four learning styles then are as follows:

First, Diverging (CE + RO). This combination of Concrete Experience (CE) and Reflective Observation (RO) is characterized by being able to see relationships between facts, looking for alternative solutions to problems, discovering meaning and value, and orienting on feelings rather than logic.

Second, Assimilating (AC + RO). This combination of Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Reflective Observation (RO) is characterized by the ability to create theoretical models, inductive reasoning, being more concerned with ideas than people, and a preference for quiet thought rather than action.

Third, Converging (AC + AE). This learning style is a combination of Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE) and is characterized by the

ability to develop practical applications, deductive reasoning, preferring to work on technical problems rather than interpersonal tasks, and a talent for problem solving.

Fourth, Accommodating (CE + AE). This combination of Concrete Experience (CE) and Active Experimentation (AE) is characterized by a desire to do things (as opposed to thinking about them), the ability to adapt well to changing situations, a tendency to be impatient, and a need to rely on others.

It follows naturally from this that educators would be more effective if they were able to involve students in all four learning modes expressed in the model. The Command and General Staff College (CGSC) has developed just such a lesson plan design for the Army (illustrated at figure E.3). As stated earlier, the course material and student handouts for the CGSC faculty development program are all based on Kolb's ELM model. They specifically intended to link Kolb's model with small group instruction such as is often used in adult cohort learning. They have found a way to bring the advantages of learning by experience into the classroom.

The typical ELM class developed for CGSC instruction consists of five basic elements: practical exercise/group project (called a concrete experience), discussion of the practical exercise (referred to as the publish and process phase) which leads into the presentation of new information on the subject matter (generalize new information), a time to discuss the possible real world application of the theories covered in the lesson (called develop) and finally a test on the material (apply).

-- Practical Exercise (Concrete Experience). As often as possible a lesson should begin with a brief practical exercise (group project). There are several reasons for this. First, it helps place the learners in the affective domain. In the Kolb/Experiential

Learning Model lesson design the Concrete Experience learning mode is overlaid with a practical exercise. As stated above, CE is that mode which is characterized by personal involvement, feeling rather than thinking, sensitivity to people, and learning from actual experience. As such, the group project is designed to appeal to those characteristics. It should create an emotional response from the students. Bringing the students into the affective domain helps connect them emotionally to each other and to the lesson material. Appealing to the affective domain is enhanced in a cohort/close-knit group environment because of the personal relationships developed in that environment (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Reynolds & Sitharaman, 2000).

--Discussion of Practical Exercise (Publish and Process). This portion of the lesson overlays the Reflective Observation (RO) learning mode characterized by observation rather than action, willingness to consider and appreciate different points of view, looking for meaning and patterns in what is observed, and seeing implications/connections between various phenomena and facts. These attributes are especially in play during discussion of the practical exercise as the teacher helps the students make connections between the practical exercise and the subject of the lesson.

--New Information (Generalize New Information). Once again, per figure E.3, the new information portion of the lesson overlays the Abstract Conceptualization (AC) learning mode of the Kolb model. This mode is characterized by the use of logic, quantitative analysis, and thinking rather than feeling. This part of the lesson will appeal to students rating high in the AC mode of learning because in it, they will be gathering information whereby to analyze the ideas being presented.

According to Brookfield (1990), discussion is a key element of an effective learning session. He gives four compelling reasons to use discussion to enhance cognitive development in a classroom:

1. To expose learners to a diversity of perspectives on an issue, topic, or theme

2. To help learners to externalize the assumptions underlying their values, beliefs, and actions

3. To assist learners in perspective taking; that is, in coming to see the world as others see it

4. To introduce learners to elements of complexity and ambiguity in an issue, topic, or theme (p. 191-192).

He goes on to say,

> The overarching purpose of discussion is to help learners to explore their experience so that they become more critical thinkers; that is, to help them to become contextually aware, to develop reflective skepticism, to be able to unearth and analyze the assumptions informing their values, beliefs, and actions, and to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting (1990, p. 192).

It is this understanding of the value of group learning that has led to much of the increasing interest in cohort education programs. It seems to help people learn the material better.

--Application of material (Develop). The fourth phase of the class, develop, is overlaid on top of Kolb's fourth learning mode, Active Experimentation (AE). As

implied by the name, this mode is characterized by a desire to influence events through action, seeking practical applications for knowledge, and doing things. The teacher will run the application phase in a similar manner to the discussion of the practical exercise. He or she will start with a rough idea of where the conversation should go and will ask guided questions to lead the students in that direction. Once again, the students are led to bring their ideas to the table as they share with one another as to how what was learned in class could be useful to them. The teacher should understand, however, that the group might go in a completely unexpected direction. The students may have seen something the teacher has missed and should be prepared to react flexibly to their divergence (Brookfield, 1990).

--Test (Apply). Accredited academic institutions are generally required to test their students on what they have been taught. Because of the nature of Sunday School, this phase will not be utilized in this study.

Educators have come to realize, almost as an afterthought, that this small group learning model often used in cohort programs creates affiliation bonds between the group members and that the discussion aspect of the class greatly enhances those bonds. People want to connect to others.

Affiliation Needs

And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone

Genesis 2:18

Loneliness leads many people to education.

Cyril O. Houle

The concept of affiliation needs is related to the study of group dynamics. Whereas group dynamics deals with how groups work and develop, the study of affiliation needs relates more to the idea that people seem naturally drawn to groups. To begin with, most people are born into groups, called families, and live in them most of their lives. Being part of a group is not only the norm; it is almost unavoidable in any kind of society. Sigmund Freud was the first to equate family relationships with early forms of group dynamics. He maintained, among other things, that people seek to affiliate themselves with groups in order to achieve a sense of belonging and acceptance (Forsyth, 1990). Despite the fact that Freud's theories are controversial and not universally accepted, he makes a good point in this instance. It is common for people to refer to certain groups of which they are members as "family." That word has become synonymous with close personal ties, mutual affection, and support.

Although others have written on satisfying the affiliation needs of adults in an educational setting (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Caffarella, 1992; Francis, 2005; Francis, 2006; Hunt, 1997; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Taylor, 2003), Cyril O. Houle dealt with this subject as long ago as 1961 when he wrote his classic work "The Inquiring Mind." In that book he describes what he considers to be the three basic types of adult learners, each type with its own motivation for involving themselves in continuing education: goal-oriented, learning-oriented, and activity-oriented. It is this last category with which I am here concerned. One of the key reasons many activity-oriented adults go back to school is to make friends. According to Houle (1961), "Loneliness leads many people to education" (p. 19). In this one brief, yet profound, statement he cuts to the heart of why many adults take on themselves the burden, trouble,

expense, and effort of continuing their education: they are lonely and are looking for an opportunity to connect with other people. Adult education provides them that opportunity.

> The adult educational institution, like the church, is an open and socially accepted place for meeting people and making friends. It has, as it were, a kind of preventive psychiatric role. In mass society many individuals feel lost. They have little or no intimate fellowship and they miss the sense of belonging to a small natural group in which they are important and respected" (Houle, 1961, p. 19-20).

There are three points that naturally present themselves in Houle's (1961) statement in regard to the need of adults to feel an affiliation with others they care about. First, he equates the local church with the opportunity to attend school as an adult. There is certainly a lot of truth to this. Both are open to the community at large; both claim to be able to improve a person's lot in life; both are full of people seeking relationships; and both, as Houle says, are socially acceptable places to meet people.

Second, Houle (1961) uses the terms "lost" and needing a "sense of belonging" when describing people's feelings when they are not part of a group that cares about them (Barnett & Muse, 1993). In the same way, according to Saltiel and Russo (2001), "Prospective students are often attracted to a cohort-based program because they want to be part of a group who will be learning together" (p. 78). Kasten (1995) also speaks of the isolation many students feel when they attend large impersonal universities. She says putting students in cohort programs in which they are part of a consistent, stable group of learners; helps prevent that feeling of isolation. In fact, Kasten (1995) reported that

"increased feelings of support and belonging gathered from close ties with other students" were "the most positive factors identified by…students" (p.181).

Third, people need to feel important and respected in a group. In a school environment, adults have the chance to get good grades, contribute intelligently to the class discussion, do well on class presentations and papers, and thereby gain the admiration of their peers. According to Barnett and Caffarella (1992), adults often seek validation and respect for their experience from the group through class discussion. Finding such validation binds individuals together through feelings of good will (Houle, 1961).

Interestingly, much of the research on the affiliation needs of adults has fallen under the umbrella of feminist literature. The general consensus is that women usually have a stronger desire for social affiliation and personal intimacy than do men (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986; Caffarella, 1992; Gilligan, 1977; Hayes, 1989; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005; Schniedewind, 1983; Shrewsbury, 1987). As Chodorow (1974) states, "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (p.44). This is born out in common everyday experience. For example, in local churches, one will often find that the women's groups are much more active than the men's groups. At least part of this has to be because women care more about relationships than do men.

All this being said, not all adult learners choose a cohort type program for the sake of camaraderie. Some prefer it simply because of its administrative simplicity (Saltiel & Russo, 2001). In some ways it is easier on the students to take classes in a rigid, lock-step fashion. There are no decisions about which classes to take; students

always know there will be a slot available for them; and they can be relatively certain as to when they will finish the program. Still, the overwhelming evidence of research suggests that students truly enjoy being part of a group of people who become friends (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Caffarella, 1992; Francis, 2006; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). They like the emotional support of the group that a cohort program provides and they don't like going through the process "alone" as in the case with more traditional programs of instruction.

Wlodkowski (1991) also mentions the need people have for being connected with a group. In that context he discusses the importance that people place on the mutual support they get from a warm, accepting group of learners. "In such an environment, people feel trust and an emotional bond with at least a few others; because of this, there exists a spirit of tolerance and loyalty that allows for a measure of uncertainty and dissent" (Wlodkowski, 1999, p.70). Creating and maintaining such a sense of trust, belonging, warmth, and friendship is one of the factors that repeatedly appears in the literature on Sunday School growth.

Sunday School Literature

Sunday School originated in Great Britain in the 1780's when Robert Raikes established an English literacy program for young boys. Raikes was a devout Anglican layman concerned about the rising delinquency rates among young factory workers. As a means of preventing such delinquency, he organized fellow laypersons to teach English with the Bible as the primary textbook. Basic literacy training was to be followed up with religious studies. Since most of the children Raikes hoped to target were working in factories Monday through Saturday, he decided to hold class primarily on Sunday, hence

the name Sunday School (Francis, 2005). The program became very popular and grew rapidly. By 1831, "Sunday schools in Great Britain were ministering weekly to 1,250,000 children" (Towns, 1993).

In due course, the movement spread to America where Robert Flake, a Baptist layman embraced it and adapted it to local needs (Francis, 2005). In the early 1900s he established a version of the program in his own church. He "was so successful that…he was asked to move to Nashville in 1920 to head the [Baptist] Sunday School Department" (Francis, 2005, p. 3). The system established by Robert Flake remains the basis for today's Southern Baptist Sunday School program.

How, then, does the research from diverse disciplines relate to growing an effective, vibrant Sunday School program? Sunday School is not just a social club. Even so, there are social aspects to any type of group learning, even those based on Bible study. Formal adult education programs are also not just social clubs. Nevertheless, the research indicates that the support group aspect of learning in a small group, cohort environment not only enhances learner satisfaction with the program but also encourages students to stay in programs that are very challenging, even in the face of difficult personal circumstances. Additionally, the overall sense of satisfaction a person feels for an adult education program has some impact on whether current students and graduates tend to invite others into their own program or similar programs. This is also the case with Sunday School and other Bible study programs. "Actually, 80-90 percent of people surveyed say they first came to the church they currently attend because someone invited them…People who are being blessed by their experiences at church invite other people to experience that blessing" (Francis, 2006, p. 8).

Churches that are growing and meeting the needs of people are those which create within their membership a sense of belonging to a group, a sense of fellowship, which is achieved primarily through their Sunday School programs (Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Hunt, 1997; Rainer, 1999; Taylor, 2003; Warren, 1995). Elias (1993) also claims that many people find value in the relationships built with others while part of adult learning groups such as are found in Sunday School. However, Sunday School is not primarily a social club for making friends. What then, is the purpose of Sunday School?

According to Mims (2001), there should be one driving force in the ministry of a church: the Great Commission. By way of explanation, the "Great Commission" refers to Jesus' last command to His disciples:

> And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Matthew 28: 18-20).

Within the evangelical church, this statement is universally held as Christ's marching orders to His church to evangelize the world. Mims (2001) advises that churches use it to focus their efforts in developing and administering a Sunday School program. In the same way, it should be the focus of every small group Sunday School class. The members must have a purpose that transcends personal and group needs around which they can unify and coalesce (Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Zander, 1982).

Sunday School classes, and in the larger context, Sunday School programs, should adopt and pursue the Great Commission as that purpose (Mims, 2001).

To achieve this one unifying purpose, Mims (2001) says there are five essential church functions for church growth: evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and worship. With the exception of fellowship, individuals working alone could accomplish any of these. Fellowship has to happen in a group. However, all of them fall more naturally into the sphere of corporate responsibility (Francis, 206; Hemphill and Taylor, 2001; Hunt, 1997; Mims, 2001). This is clear both in the Bible and in church growth and discipleship literature on the subject. Furthermore, in the process of doing these things as a group, the interrelationships within the group are strengthened (Francis, 2006; Hunt, 1997). Rainer (1999) makes a similar connection between strengthening group bonds through four of the five functions listed by Mims (2001):

> The research is clear if not overwhelming. Sunday School is the most effective assimilation methodology in evangelistic churches today. It is a place where teaching, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, and evangelism can all take place. It is the place where relationships are formed and people become connected to the church (p. 47).

Organizing an adult Sunday School program by age and social similarity of the group members is also critical to creating group cohesion and Christian discipleship (Fitch, 1989; Francis, 2006; Mims, 2001;Taylor, 2003; Rainer, 1999). According to Hemphill and Taylor (2001): "[Age-graded organization] supports discipleship by providing a context for Bible study that considers the characteristics, needs, and learning styles of the learners assigned to the group" (p. 62). People of the same age will

generally be dealing with similar issues and will prefer to study the Bible from the perspective of what they are currently experiencing in their lives. As an example, a 19 year old boy is probably much more concerned with what the Bible says about dating and selecting a life-long mate while a 45 year old man wants to know how to deal with his teen-age children properly.

Similarly, James Fowler (1981) has theorized that spiritual development follows a uniform pattern. According to Dr. Fowler, that pattern of development is strongly related to age. This would suggest that age grading students might have the advantage of giving them the opportunity to discuss their most pressing spiritual issues with others facing similar concerns.

In addition, the membership of individual classes is relatively stable with this system (Fitch, 1989; Rainer, 1999). People in one Sunday School class are generally expected to stay with their group until they move to the next higher age category or get married and move from a singles class to a married couples class (assuming their church's Sunday School program has both categories of classes). This, again, is to encourage the making of solid friendships based on time spent together studying the Bible as it relates to situations age-grouped people generally share. In most Southern Baptist churches this is not strictly enforced, but it is the expected norm.

This supports several of Mims' (2001) functions of an effective church. It enhances fellowship/making friends because participants are grouped together for extended periods of time. It also supports evangelism in the same way. Under the Mims (2001) model, members invite their unchurched friends to join a Sunday School group of people very similar to them in several basic categories (age, income, marital status, etc).

As they make acquaintances in the group, it is hoped they will eventually feel comfortable enough to explore the possibility of coming to faith in Christ and "join the family." If the group is constantly being reshaped and realigned, as is done at Calvary Bible Church, it is presumably more difficult for an outsider to develop close relationships with church members unless there are other avenues available to create an environment for relationship building. Lastly, this method of organizing adult Sunday School would support a church's ministry function in the same way. Referring to Christian education in general, Samuel Canine (1993) identifies "the help and caring a small group provides" (p. 148) as one of the advantages of "using small groups in adult Christian education" (p. 148). Because of the stable group environment, people get to know each other and their needs better and care more deeply about meeting those needs.

The key is consistent, caring personal contact. Unfortunately, there are limits to how many people we can care deeply about. As noted above, experts in adult education have wrestled with this problem in determining the appropriate group size (Basom et al., 1995; Brookfield, 1990; Cordiero et al., 1993; Lawrence, 1997). In this case, professional educators and Sunday School growth experts are in close agreement on appropriate class size. An adult Sunday School class should start with about 10 to 12 people. Any less than that and the class will not have enough inherent synergy to function well as a group and there will not be enough people to share the load of the various responsibilities of running the class (Anderson, 1993; Francis, 2006; Hunt, 1997). Furthermore, the class should split into two groups when it grows to a point where 25 people are in regular attendance for a period of about six months (Anderson, 1993; Francis, 2006; Hunt, 1997).

There are several good and practical reasons for this. First, it is at about this point that class members naturally begin to cluster into smaller groups, somewhat isolated from each other (Francis, 206; Hunt, 1997). Most people just don't have enough emotional energy or time to maintain relationships with more than a few close friends. This is supported by research in the field of group dynamics (Zander, 1982). Second, classes that grow larger than 25 become increasingly difficult for teachers/class leaders to properly manage. Most Sunday School teachers are part time volunteers who work full time jobs somewhere else. Caring for 25 people is about their limit. Third, it is difficult to find appropriate classrooms that can adequately accommodate more than 25 people. One of the most statistically dependable predictors of church and Sunday School growth is that when a church building is 80 percent filled, the church will stop growing (Anderson, 1993; Hunt, 1997). As the room becomes more and more crowded, people start to feel cramped. This cramped feeling stifles growth. People like their space.

Nor is it strictly a Southern Baptist concept that people prefer to be clustered in smaller groups. Linda Vogel (1991) mentions this very human characteristic in commenting on Jesus' feeding of the 5,000. She alludes to the fact that Jesus broke the crowd of several thousand into smaller groups of 50 as part of His creating a homey, hospital atmosphere in which fellowship could more easily take place. She also observes that the social atmosphere of the group is even more important than the mere physical aspects of the group. Vogel (1991) believes:

> Teachers and learners together create a space where each can dare to be vulnerable…It needs to be an environment where persons can express anger and doubt without being judged; it needs to be place where

> persons can speak without embarrassment about how God has touched their lives (p. 104).

Curriculum also plays an important part in developing relationships within a cohort Sunday School group. Francis (2006) warns against using a Sunday School curriculum that would be too in depth for non-Christians and even new Christians to readily understand:

> If Bible study becomes most important, the Sunday School may do a good job of teaching. But outreach and assimilation may become less effective. A symptom of this is members and leaders demanding 'really deep Bible study' because 'we're all mature Christians.' This may sound okay, but this reflects a misunderstanding about the intent of Sunday School to reach and incorporate—invite and connect—new people (p. 6).

Note that he is relating Sunday School's purpose directly to the Great Commission as in the Mims model. The Southern Baptist approach is very uniform in this respect. New people and those less well versed in the Bible should be made to feel as comfortable as possible as they gradually develop connections and make friends in the group.

Along this same line, curriculum should be designed to support the concept of an extremely open cohort, i.e., one that not only allows, but also aggressively encourages the addition of new members. The lesson plans should be written in such a way that someone walking into a Sunday School class for the first time will not require a lot of background information just to understand what is going on.

> Because Sunday School classes are open groups, choose curriculum materials that support keeping them open. Each Bible study experience should be self-contained. That is the primary advantage of ongoing (dated) curriculum resources. It allows learners to engage in a unit of study around a topic, character, or book of the Bible, but each lesson also stands on its own, providing a satisfying experience for the first-time visitor, the long-time absentee, the every-other-week attender, and the never-misses-a-Sunday member (Francis, 2006, p. 19).

The material should be common enough for everyone to be able to enjoy and from which to derive value.

As an aside, there is a place for more advanced, in depth Bible study, but it is not Sunday School. Francis (2006) advises there are a variety of venues in which such studies can be offered. In many churches, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening are devoted to this purpose. Some offer a weekly home Bible study for advanced Scripture teaching. These groups are usually closed groups and last for a specified length of time. Once they start, new members are not normally admitted. Also, these closed studies involve a much greater level of commitment to the program. Unlike Sunday School, consistent, faithful attendance and weekly preparation are expected. These types of closed cohort programs will take on their own aspects of group cohesion. However, it must be remembered that these are for limited duration. Follow on closed studies are also meant to involve new people as the church population grows (Francis, 2006). Nothing in the church is truly “closed.”

None of this happens by accident. It takes careful planning and execution to develop and maintain a Sunday School class that supports the growth of tight-knit, close personal relationships while, at the same time reaching out to the community to bring in new members. This research hopes to help facilitate this difficult process.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to determine and describe the effect, if any, of purposefully organizing a young adult Sunday School class as an age graded cohort. There are several aspects of adult education that touch upon this topic. Aside from literature on Sunday School, itself, this study is informed by research in cohort education, group dynamics, adult learning theory, and affiliation needs.

The discussion of cohort literature described the various attempts at defining cohort education within the broader scheme of adult learning. It also reviewed the history of cohort education and how it has been modified and refined over time.

The section devoted to group dynamics outlined the basic theories of Bruce Tuckman in regard to the formation and development of groups. This section also covered some of the research devoted to how to speed the development of groups and how to make them work more effectively.

This chapter also included information on the adult learning theories of Malcolm Knowles and the Experiential Learning Model used by the Command and General Staff College that is based primarily on the work of Kolb. This section was included here largely for background on lesson plan development as it relates to group cohesion and the improvement of interpersonal relationships.

The segment committed to affiliation needs laid out the literature concerning the general human need people have for connecting with others. Research indicates that this need can and has been met, at least to some extent, through small group cohort learning experiences.

The final section connected the information from the previous four to the literature on Sunday School. This study has been designed to take the data from the various disciplines within adult education and apply it to the development of an adult Sunday School class.

CHAPTER 3 - Methodology

This chapter discusses the research design used for this study. It includes the four basic questions used to guide the research, a rationale for choosing a qualitative research design, indicators of quality in qualitative research, the data collection protocol used in this study, a discussion of the pilot study interview process, discussion of sample selection, and methodology used for data analysis and interpretation.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed for this study:

First, based on the participants' perceptions, what are the advantages, if any, to developing a sense of belonging in Sunday School groups?

Second, based on the participants' perceptions, does establishing classes as stable, age-graded cohorts enhance assimilation into and satisfaction with the group?

Third, based on the participants' perceptions, does creating an interactive adult Sunday School experience enhance learners' sense of belonging to the group?

Fourth, based on the participants' perceptions, does providing opportunities for group interaction outside class time enhance learners' sense of belonging to the group?

Rationale for Selecting a Qualitative Research Model

This study employed a qualitative research design in an attempt to explore the effect, if any, that developing close personal relationships in an adult Sunday School class had on increasing a person's satisfaction with the program. A qualitative design

was chosen for several reasons. First, this study was exploratory in nature (Creswell, 1998). In the conduct of qualitative research the collection of data and its analysis often, if not always, take place at the same time (Holloway, 1997). For example, as interview results are collected, patterns may emerge before all the information has been gathered up. This allows the researcher to follow up on emerging trends and narrow the focus of his or her research. As Bogdan and Biklen (2003) phrase it,

> You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts. The process of data analysis is like a funnel: Things are open at the beginning (or top) and more directed and specific at the bottom (p. 32).

Second, this study sought to allow the subjects of the research to speak with their own voice as much as possible (Creswell, 1998). The interview protocols used were designed to allow them that freedom of expression and help them tell their story in their own words.

Third, the study sought to provide an extremely detailed view (Creswell, 1998) of the dynamics present in an age-graded adult Sunday School class such as is typically found in Southern Baptist churches. There is already considerable research at the macro level as to the value of adult Sunday School in general and organizational aspects of Sunday School programs (Francis, 2005; Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Mims, 2001; Rainer, 1999; Taylor, 2003).

Fourth, this research sought to study individuals in their natural setting, allowing them to interact with each other as they choose. This is a key aspect of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Holloway, 1997; Merriam, 1998) in

that removing subjects from their natural environment can lead to artificial conclusions (Creswell, 1998). In the same way, Holloway (1997) insists, "Researchers must respect the context and culture in which the study takes place and try not to change it during their exploration" (p. 6). In the case of this study, most of the participants were would be newcomers to the group as time passed. This was, in fact, a hoped for event. However, that growth and the feeling of newness and consequent discomfort participants might experience is also a part of the natural adult Sunday School setting.

Fifth, qualitative research tends to be highly descriptive in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As such, according to Creswell (1998), qualitative research ought to be used by someone interested in using a predominantly literary or narrative style of presenting information. The research seeks to tell the stories of those involved in the program. A literary venue is the best way to do that. In this same vein, those most likely to be interested in the study and its results, i.e., ministers and Sunday School directors, are much more likely to be receptive to a narrative approach than to a numerical/quantitative one (Creswell, 1998). For this reason, it makes sense to employ qualitative research methods that better support a more literary style.

Finally, this researcher was an active part of the study in question (Creswell, 1998). This study was designed to allow the researcher to be a part of, or at least an observer of, almost everything the subjects did as a group. In fact, he ran the class and developed the curriculum used for the class. The concept that researchers can actually develop close relationships with their subjects during the study has increasingly gained acceptance over the past few years. As Carol Jones (1991) states,

> The gradual departure from stressing the interviewer as objective observer (a detached 'outsider'), has led to a recognition of the possibilities for researchers to be 'insiders' in the research relationship, interacting, rather than merely establishing a 'rapport' with the people to whom they are speaking and observing (p. 205).

Quality Indicators to Qualitative Research

Lincoln and Guba (1985) characterize quality in qualitative research (or in their language, "naturalist") through the use of four terms: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In relation to conventional research; they have these four terms corresponding roughly to internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity; respectively.

Various steps were taken to ascertain an appropriate level of credibility (internal validity) for this study. Among those steps were prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, referential adequacy, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Part of establishing the credibility of research is length of time spent with the subjects of the study (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) say, "prolonged engagement, is the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the 'culture,' testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of the respondents, and building trust" (p. 301). A key corollary to prolonged engagement is the use of persistent observation of the subjects.

> If the purpose of prolonged engagement is to render the inquirer open to the multiple influences—the mutual shapers and contextual factors—that

> impinge upon the phenomenon being studied, the purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail. If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304).

This study took place over a four-month period. During that time, the group met at least once a week for an hour-long class session at which the researcher was present. In fact, the researcher taught the lessons which he had designed, as previously mentioned, according to the Experiential Learning Model (ELM) with special emphasis given to the more interactive aspects of the class. Each lesson began with a brief, small group exercise related to the lesson material and calculated to encourage interaction that the researcher was able to observe. A typical lesson outline can be found at appendix F.

In addition, participants of the study were invited to attend extracurricular activities planned as part of the research project. At least once a month they were given the opportunity to take part in some activity outside of class time. These activities normally ran three to four hours on a weekend night and included such events as potluck meals, game nights, barbecues, bowling, and hay rides. Some activities were designed for the whole family (children included) and some were only for the adults. On the adults only nights, the group arranged for centralized childcare at the church building. The researcher also attended these events. This gave him more opportunities to observe and analyze the group's interactions. Furthermore, many in the group were already part of the larger church organization and were personally familiar with the researcher as a

member of the church and routinely interacted with him and his family at church worship and social events.

Triangulation is the process of establishing research credibility through acquiring data from multiple sources (Creswell, 1998; Holloway, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). One system of accomplishing this is to interview several people with the same questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The current study employed this method.

Referential adequacy means to keep an accurate record of an event so it may be reviewed later. This helps ensure a more accurate analysis of the event. For the purpose of this study, referential adequacy was achieved through the simple means of recording the interviews with the various subjects and then having those recordings transcribed.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) call member checking "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). According Holloway (1997),

> Researchers verify their findings through member check, returning to the participants for their response to the findings and interpretations. The participants in a setting have the opportunity to comment and indicate whether they recognize their own experiences from these and/or to give additional information (p. 101).

In the context of an interview, member checking gives the subjects the opportunity to review a transcript of their interview and ensure it properly represents their true opinions (Creswell, 1998). This study was designed to provide its subjects with that opportunity.

In the view of Lincoln and Guba (1985) it is not the role of a researcher to "specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can provide only the thick

description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (p. 316). Holloway describes Lincoln and Guba's "thick description" as,

> detailed portrayals of the participants' experiences, going beyond a report of surface phenomena to their interpretations, uncovering feelings and the meanings of their actions. Thick description develops from the data and the context. The task involves describing the location and the people within it, giving visual pictures of setting, events and situations as well as verbatim narratives of individuals' accounts of their perceptions and ideas in context (p. 9).

These descriptions are designed to help others in making transferability decisions, i.e., if it worked in one place, it should work in another (Creswell, 1998). The aim of this study was to provide enough depth and detail as to the experiences of the subjects in a four-month long young adult (eighteen to thirty-five years old) Sunday School class "to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers" (Creswell, 1998, p. 316).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert it is difficult to achieve dependability and confirmability in qualitative research, because of its emergent nature. The very character of a qualitative case study assures it will be unique to some extent. As a solution, they suggest that researchers should maintain an accurate audit trail of all procedures and findings. This will allow interested parties to review the work in detail, as desired. To accomplish this end, all recordings, transcripts of interviews, journal records, schedules,

and lesson plans created during the execution of this study will be preserved for review for a period of at least five years after the research is complete.

In addition, the researcher employed a team of doctoral students who also reviewed the collected data and analyzed the interviews to identify emerging trends. Each interview was evaluated by the team and discussed with the researcher. All emerging trends were agreed upon before inclusion in this study. This was very useful for two reasons: First, as the researcher discussed their findings with them it provided authentication as to what patterns were actually present. Second, they were able to point out patterns the researcher had overlooked, which gave rise to yet one more review of the data to confirm the new trend's existence.

Data Collection Protocol

This study used in-depth interviews as its primary data collection tool. According to Merriam (1998), "interviewing is a common means of collecting qualitative data" (p.71). It was determined that, in fact, using personal interviews was the best and most effective way of obtaining the information desired because it would allow the subjects of the study to expand on their responses to questions without limiting them to the preconceived notions of the interviewer (Jones, 1991). To this end, a series of open-ended questions was developed to assist those being interviewed to most clearly tell their own stories. As Patton (1990) said, "the common characteristic of all three qualitative approaches to interviewing is that the persons being interviewed respond in their own words to express their own personal perspectives" (p. 286). Of course, these interviews will be conducted in person, if at all possible in that this will allow the researcher to pick up on nonverbal cues from the interviewee (Creswell, 1998).

The researcher used a semistructured interview protocol (Merriam, 1998). A list of open-ended questions has been developed (Appendix C) which allowed the interviewees the opportunity to arrive at their own conclusions rather than merely giving them the option of selecting from a menu of possible answers. This is preferable to a highly structured interview process in that "rigidly adhering to predetermined questions may not allow you to access participants' perspectives and understandings of the world. Instead, you get reactions to the *investigator's* preconceived notions of the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74).

In addition, the semistructured protocol allows the researcher to use his or her expertise and knowledge of the subject to move the discussion into previously unforeseen areas of which the interviewee may not be aware. As Merriam (1998) says, "This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 74).

The researcher personally conducted all the interviews, either in the homes of the interviewees or in my own home, whichever was more convenient for the subject. On average, the interviews took 43 minutes. The shortest was 30 minutes; the longest was 76 minutes long. Furthermore, as is most commonly the case (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998), all interviews were tape-recorded.

Protection of Human Rights

The researcher made every effort to insure the anonymity and privacy of the interviewees is protected. Within the study, each subject was given and referred to by a fictitious name. Further, though the actual transcripts of each respondent will be maintained for five years, that information will not be available to anyone outside the

study. These precautions are especially important since it is anticipated that the interviewees will have made close personal connections within the church, in general and within the young adult Sunday School class, in particular. The Kansas State University Institutional Review Board, having scrutinized the details of the study, gave their permission to conduct this research on November 25, 2008 (Appendix A). At the beginning of the study, potential participants were briefed as to the procedures to be followed, the kinds of questions on the interview protocol, and then asked to sign a standard Consent for Research Participation Form (Appendix B).

Pilot Study of the Interview Protocol

The researcher conducted a pilot interview protocol with two people from two different local churches, neither of them being Calvary Bible Church (CBC). Both were heavily invested in their church's Sunday School program. One was a man. The other was a woman. One of them was an adult Sunday School teacher. The other was a coordinator of women's ministries.

Both interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed to accommodate proper analysis of the results. Based on the results of the pilot interviews, the questions were modified to enable the subjects and the researcher to gain the depth of insight required of the study. In addition, conducting the pilot provided the researcher with valuable practice in actually interviewing subjects.

Sample Selection

As stated previously, Calvary Bible Church (CBC) does not organize their adult Sunday School program in such a way that allows for groups of people to stay together for more than one quarter (three calendar months) at a time. Furthermore, very few

church members from the age group (18 to early 30's) with which this study was concerned attended Sunday School regularly, if at all. This research used part of CBC's adult Sunday School program as an exploratory case study by applying the open cohort concept to just one class. The class itself was open to anyone meeting the very basic criteria of age (approximately 18 to mid-30's) whether they were members of the church or not. The class, then, is the study's population. Because of the small population available for the research and because of the social dynamics already existing within the church, the study could not define the members of the class any more specifically than by age, i.e., some were single, some married, and some married with children. Further, since participation was voluntary, the population (members of the class) was completely self-selected. Whether they continued in the class or attended faithfully was strictly up to them.

The study's sample was taken from the overall population of the class. Not everyone in the class was interviewed for the project. To select interviewees (the sample), this study employed a purposeful sampling technique, also called purposive (Merriam, 1998). The researcher selected a sample from the total class that represented a range of demographics from within the proscribed age category, i.e., gender, marital status, and age within the overall range of ages represented in the group. In addition, he chose those that attended at least ten class sessions prior to the interview. Finally, he wanted to interview those that had some prior experience with Sunday School so they could compare those experiences with the class designed for this research. In the end, the researcher interviewed 10 members of the class, 4 women and 6 men, between the ages of 18 and 33.

According to Patton (1990), "Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples…selected *purposefully*" (p.169, italics his). As Merriam (1998) states, "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). Probability sampling, most often used in quantitative research, is not the best method for meeting this goal (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). Rather, "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

In this study, an attempt was made to select a cross-section of different categories of student within the class. For example, the class demographics will permit people from 18 to early 30's to attend. That age span can account for significant differences in life style and maturity. It was considered preferable to have interview representation from persons at the lower-end of the age scale as well as those from the upper end of that scale. Similarly, some were single and some married, some male and some female. The researcher tried to create a good representative cross-section of interviewees from within the larger class.

Data Analysis

As stated previously, the researcher began conducting interviews with the subjects at about the four-month mark. Further, all interviews for this study were recorded and transcribed to assist in analysis. In addition, the researcher took notes during each

interview and wrote down general impressions immediately after the discussion was completed.

Many researchers warn of the difficulties surrounding the analyzing of qualitative data. For example, Marshall and Rossman (1989) say data analysis is "the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat" (p. 112). Merriam (1998) cautions researchers against letting their records pile up into insurmountable, inscrutable piles of information. Patton (1990) has ironically observed, "analysis finally makes clear what would have been most important to study, if only they had known beforehand" (p. 371). The researcher tried to minimize this risk by having analysis take place concurrently with data collection and by beginning data analysis immediately following the first interview and continuing it through the end of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Holloway, 1997). This procedure is in accordance with Merriam's (1998) advice. In her words,

> Data analysis is one of the few facets, perhaps the only facet, of doing qualitative research in which there is a right way and a wrong way…the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it *simultaneously* with data collection (p. 162, italics hers).

Any other method risks the researcher becoming overwhelmed with the sheer volume of information.

The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts looking for patterns and themes common among the interviewees (Boyatzis, 1998; Marshall & & Rossman, 1989; Patton, 1990). As Holloway (1997) has stated, "Data analysis in *qualitative research* means

breaking down the *data* and searching for codes and *categories* which are then reassembled to form themes" (p. 43, italics hers). Also, as mentioned earlier, the researcher employed a team of doctoral students who also reviewed the interviews for emerging trends. This proved to be very helpful in identifying and verifying patterns in the data.

This process can be tedious and intellectually challenging (Marshall & & Rossman, 1989). Holloway (1997) breaks down the procedure as follows:

> In re-reading the data, thoughts and observations can be recorded, and a search for regularities can begin. The first interview…is scanned and marked off into sections of data which are then given codes: words or short sentences which contain the gist of the sentence or paragraph. The second and third interview transcripts are then analyzed and compared with the first. Commonalities and similar codes are sorted and grouped together. That is, researchers look for recurrent ideas and consistent patterns in the data. This happens throughout data collection and analysis (p. 44).

This process is what Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (1998) have called the constant comparative method.

Summary

This study employed a qualitative research design in an attempt to identify key factors that make Sunday School more attractive to adults. A qualitative paradigm was deemed best for this research for several reasons: the study was exploratory in nature, the researcher wanted to allow the subjects of the research to speak with their own voice as

much as possible, the research sought to study individuals in their natural setting, and the researcher arranged for himself to be an active part of the study in that he actually ran the Sunday School class in question.

Various steps were taken to ascertain an appropriate level of credibility for this study. These steps were prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, referential adequacy, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Every attempt was made to provide rich descriptions of the participants' experiences, conclusions, and feelings in order to collect material of such a quality that could be reasonably transferred to other situations. As to the dependability and credibility of the study, the researcher maintained an accurate audit trail of all procedures and findings.

The researcher used a semistructured interview protocol to gather data. All interviews were conducted personally by the researcher who ensured they were accurately transcribed. In addition, a pilot interview protocol was conducted prior to this study that played a key role in the development of the final product.

This study employed a purposeful sampling technique to select participants. An attempt was made to select a cross-section of different categories of student within the class. To do this, the researcher selected a sample from the total class that represented a range of demographics from within the proscribed age category, i.e., gender, marital status, and age within the overall range of ages represented in the group. In addition, he chose those that attended at least ten class sessions prior to the interview. Finally, he wanted to interview those that had some prior experience with Sunday School so they could compare those experiences with the class designed for this research.

Finally, data was collected and analyzed simultaneously, beginning the analysis immediately following the first interview and continuing it through the end of the study. The data was analyzed using what Merriam (1998) calls the constant comparative method.

CHAPTER 4 - Findings

Findings as Related to the Research Questions

The research questions focused on the participants' experiences in Sunday School and small group Bible studies. This chapter presents the findings in detail, drawing from the transcribed interviews. The quotations used for this report were edited for grammatical correctness and clarity. The participants verified the accuracy, context, and completeness of the information presented.

Research Question One

Based on the participants' perceptions, does establishing classes as stable, age-graded cohorts enhance satisfaction with the group?

While analyzing the interview responses, this researcher realized that several of the class members actually considered this to be two issues, rather than merely one. Some responded differently to the concept of stable groups than they did to age-graded groups. That being said, the thing that stood out most prominently in the participant responses was their appreciation for having the opportunity to develop relationships with people as members of a stable Sunday School cohort. They liked meeting with the same people in the class from week to week. This was the theme that was most notably in the forefront of their thinking.

Stephen's opinion represented the dominant thinking of the group on the importance of having Sunday School comprised of stable groups.

> I think it's a good idea because, first of all, when you have a stable group you have people that you can form a bond with. Whereas if it's changing

> too much or too often you don't really get to know anybody. And not only do you not get to know anybody, you don't have any motivation to get to know anybody because you know that you are not going to be around each other for more than a few weeks and then you'll be moving on. Now, we're in our second quarter, as a group and I've already found myself more motivated towards getting to know people and talk to people in the group because I realize we're going to be together at least another, probably, a couple of quarters after this.

Like most of the participants, Nathan has had a lot of experience with small group Bible studies. In recalling the best one he ever attended, his clearest memory of it was, "the strengths and friendships that grew out of it, you know the fellowship and shared faith. We really grew strong friendships through that. That's probably what's most vivid in my mind."

His wife, Rachel, felt the same way about her favorite Bible study in which she participated several years ago. The aspect of it she cherished most was the relationships she developed with the other young women in the group.

> I think the reason that I liked it was because we were people that knew each other and weren't afraid to open up to each other about things. It was a more intimate group and you felt comfortable talking about whatever was going on. There wasn't any of the awkwardness that comes with people that you don't know as well. You didn't need to feel like you needed to hold anything back.

John also valued the familiarity and openness a stable group provides. Like Nathan and Rachel, he has attended several Bible studies as a young adult. When he was in college, he and some friends got together once a week and studied some Bible-based literature. However, it wasn't the lessons he remembered most fondly, it was the relationships he had with the other men in the group.

> That was the one I liked the most because it was all people you knew pretty well and you had good relationships with so you could be more transparent. It's easier if you're with a small group of people that you know very well. You tend to get more out of it because you're freer to talk and you know where everybody is coming from. And of course it helps that you know everybody there real well.

Again, John reiterated it was the relationships he liked best about that study group. "After we did our Bible study we would usually hang out and eat or watch a movie or something. Just spending time having fun together like you do when you're in college. That was probably the best Bible study group I've been involved with that I enjoyed the most."

For John, relationships were the key to a good Bible study. He even related knowing the others in a group well to learning the material better.

> Like with the Sunday School discussion, if you had a bunch of strangers sitting around studying the Bible, unless they're all really outgoing, you're probably not going to have a whole lot of people speaking up about this, but if they all know each other, they're comfortable. If you're around people you don't know and if you don't feel secure in the group, you don't

> want to say something and look like a dummy. I think the more close you are in that group from spending time together, the more likely you are to have better interaction and probably learn better, I think, than with just a bunch of strangers.

Similarly, John enjoyed his young adult class for the same reasons. "It's always the same group of people. It's not like, OK, you go to one Sunday School class for a quarter and then you go to another one and it's all different people. It's nice to have a group to do things with where you kind of get to know the people and you kind of learn off of each other."

Some of the participants went so far as to express displeasure at how Calvary Bible Church (CBC) organizes its Sunday School program. For example, Nora, who enjoyed the stability of her young adult Sunday School class did not appreciate CBC's normal mode of operating.

> It's been great coming to class and seeing the same people every week and getting to talk to them. I think that is very important. With our church, when we split up every semester we have a new group and a new topic, but you're with an entirely different group of people and so you don't really get to interact with them as much and get to know them as much because you're constantly switching and every quarter you have a different group of people.

Nora's husband, Martin felt the effectiveness of having a young adult Sunday School class might be hindered by the fact that it was the only cohort class in CBC's program.

> I think it's a good idea, but I also think it has limited value if the concept is not bought off on by the church. In general it's a sound concept, but again, if the church is not buying off on it wholeheartedly, you're going to suffer from other competing Sunday School classes, from a lack of focus and resources provided by the church to support the project. So I think that one individual class by itself is not necessarily going to stand very strong. But if the church is behind it, it is a potentially very powerful tool. If the church doesn't back it, I think it's just—it will succeed on a small level, but not as well as it would were it to be part of the church's strategic vision.

Stephen agreed with Martin in that it would be more effective if the church's whole Sunday School program were set up as a series of stable, age-graded cohorts rather than just the young adult class.

> Another thing that isn't necessarily a flaw with how our class is set up is the fact that we're dealing with a program within a church system structured completely different than our Sunday School class. I mean it's eating our resources, so to speak. In fact, the way that it's structured is almost opposite of our Sunday School class to the point where it does cause a conflict, in fact it's causing difficulties. So, one of the things that could improve, is that if the whole church could move in a direction to try to restructure their Sunday School classes to a similar structure.

Nathan, added that CBC's policy of not having stable classes hampered the development of personal relationships within the church as a whole, "One of the

hindrances is probably the different classes switching off quarterly so that people jump around and don't necessarily grow in their relationships with any particular people just because the classes change so frequently."

Several of the participants, however, were a little conflicted on the issue of basing the church's Sunday School program around stable groups of people as opposed to changing class make up every quarter. On the one hand, they wanted to bond with a permanent group. On the other, they did not want to become totally focused on themselves and become cliquish. On balance, they much preferred stable groups but wanted some venue through which to reach out to the larger church.

Nathan, for example, even though he enjoyed being part of a stable group, pointed out that changing classes every quarter might help members meet new people and expand their circle of friends. "That may also be a benefit because it also allows you to not be surrounded by just the same people all the time but you get to expand your horizons and meet new people in the different classes."

All ten also expressed appreciation for having a group circumscribed by age. For some, this was the deciding factor in regard to joining the young adult Sunday School class. John, for example, said he joined CBC in the first place largely because of the presence of young adults in the church. John and his wife, Wanda, had attended a Church of Christ in California for several years. Wanda, in fact, had been raised in a Church of Christ. When they moved into this area they visited several churches looking for a new church home. They did not join the local Church of Christ. Instead, they joined CBC. This was not for doctrinal reasons. Rather, it was a decision based primarily on the demographics of the two churches.

> Have you been to very many Churches of Christ? There's generally a lot of older people in them and one thing I was looking for specifically was more younger people, around my wife's age, because she's new, having just moved here. So I was looking for somewhere where she could feel more belonging and have more people, more young ladies around her own age to be plugged in with. Because I can tell you at the other church we went to there wasn't a whole lot of people kind of in our demographic and we were looking for somewhere we thought would be better for her to be a part of and have more of a sense of belonging with. That was one of the things that kept us there, coming to CBC, that there were people our age and people that seemed easy to develop relationships with. That was one of the big things for us.

Wanda agreed with her husband's assessment. One of the main reasons she wanted to join CBC was because, "They had young people there." She wanted to join the young adult Sunday School class for the same reason, to get to know more of the young people in the church.

> It was going to be with people our age, you know, and so I thought I'd get to know some of the people better. I think it is nice to have a young adult group just so that they can meet other people their age and I think that helps keeping the young people wanting to go to the church and being with other young people and being able to have that time of fellowship with other young people.

Nora also appreciated being part of a Sunday School class with people who are roughly the same age as her. She thinks this helped her make closer connections more quickly.

> Part of the reason I like being with people my own age is those are probably the people I am going to hang out with outside of church and so being in a Sunday school class with them is fun because I get to see them in their church setting and how they interact and then we get to go out and go shopping together and get to see a different side of each other I guess.

Rachel also expressed an opinion that was common throughout the interviews. She considers being in a Sunday School class consisting of people of similar age valuable because it makes it more likely that they will all be in similar circumstances and will, thus, have some important things in common. "With similar ages you're going to have similar life experiences and be in similar places in life. You're probably going to all be in the same boat somewhat. I think that will help you relate to people better. And I think having young adults mainly there would be a draw for some people, that they would feel comfortable with people their own age."

Fowler (1981) has theorized that spiritual development follows a uniform pattern. According to Fowler, that pattern of development is strongly related to age. This would suggest that age grading students might have the advantage of giving them the opportunity to discuss their most pressing spiritual issues with others facing similar concerns, as Rachel suggests.

Rachel's husband, Nathan, said one of the main reasons he joined the young adult Sunday School class was for that very reason. However, he added to this viewpoint that

the stability of the group, coupled with longevity in the church will provide the basis for he and his wife to develop very long-term friendships with other similarly-aged members of the class.

> We enjoy getting to know other young couples and we still consider ourselves sort of new to the church. We thought that being a part of a group of young people that are in the same general place in life as we are, starting out as young families and stuff and building that relationship early would help make, in the long term, friendships that would serve us throughout our life. I think it already has in some cases.

Stephen's opinion on this was typical of most in the group. However, he added to it by mentioning the cultural mindset that exists within people of different age categories. It wasn't just that people of similar ages would be dealing with similar issues that caused him to think age grading is a good idea. For him, there is more to it than that. People of approximately the same age are going to share a cultural mindset that significantly younger or older people might not have in common. Stephen was the only participant to raise this issue. Nevertheless, it may be a valid point in view of Massey's (2006) research on generational differences. Stephen feels this similar cultural mindset helps set the stage for closer connections between people.

> And I do like the idea of age-grouping also because it just makes sense to me that people who are closer to my age probably have a more similar background because they grew up in a similar era, you know through the same time period as opposed to someone who grew up in the fifties or forties or sixties or whatever. They probably wouldn't be able to relate to

> me nearly as well on a personal level. I would probably want to be with people closer to my own age group because even though they might have different interests and things we would still probably have similar life experiences as far as growing up is concerned and being in my same generation and having a closer idea of what my life situation is.

Not everyone in the group, however, felt this connection quite so vividly. To the contrary, Michael seemed to be struggling with that very issue. At 18 years old, Michael was one of the youngest members of the class. Most were between 25 and 30 years old and have established their own lives apart from their parents. Some were even older. Michael, on the other hand, just graduated from high school and still lives at home with his parents while he saves money for college. From his perspective, the class was not made up of people of a similar age category of which he is a part. He feels like the youngster attending a class full of older people.

> There was a little bit of awkwardness when I realized the fact that I'm eighteen and George (not his real name) is thirty-six. He's twice my age. I had a little bit of struggle establishing the relationships and being able to feel comfortable in the class that way, and suddenly being thrust from the environment of me and my teenage friends to people who are mid to late twenties plus. They were significantly older than me.

This researcher also happens to think the age spread in the class is too wide. It would probably be more effective to break the age groups down into smaller segments, which would allow CBC to provide a class for the college age young people, like Michael. However, one of the limitations of this study is the simple fact that CBC has a

relatively small membership. This researcher would prefer to have enough people closer to Michael's age to make up a whole class but it is not currently possible.

Even though the participants clearly indicated they liked the idea of age-grading Sunday School classes, these responses were sometimes tempered by a desire to have greater access to older, more mature Christians in the church. Some felt they were missing something by not having contact with them as part of the class structure. Paul's comments in this regard are representative of many in the group in that he sees the importance of learning from those older than himself even though he has chosen to attend the young adult class, "There's no greater satisfaction for me than to be able to talk openly with educated men that are further along in their faith. To be perfectly honest with you, that's where I feel like I'm accomplishing something."

When Paul first came to the church, he noticed that they were adding a new building to the existing structure. He is a professional electrician by trade. Wanting to be useful, he volunteered his services to help wire the new building. As it happened, that job was already being done by one of the church's deacons, who is also a professional electrician. The two started working together on the project and, quite naturally, the men developed a very close relationship as the older man mentored the younger Paul who was seeking an understanding of the Christian faith. This relationship with an older man was key to Paul eventually committing his life to Christ.

Nora also articulated her conflict over age-grading in the following way:

> I think that it's a good idea, it has it's pro's and it's cons. I think on the one hand it's good, like with our young adults group, none of us knew each other very well and now we have more camaraderie with each other

because we are in the same Sunday school group. But I also see the con in that we don't get to hear wisened people talk and share their experiences and we don't get to see the younger people who are growing up in their faith and seeing how God is working in those younger people and shaping their lives. I think that can be a bad part of age specific Sunday school classes because you don't really get to interact with other age groups and see the wisdom of the older people and the growth of the younger people.

Her attitude was especially interesting here in that she was very insistent that this researcher create the young adult class so she could have more opportunities to make friends her own age. Nonetheless, she was certainly not alone in her sense of conflict over this issue. John was also keenly aware of the benefits and problems with age-grading Sunday School classes.

You can really benefit from having older people who have a lot more life experience, who aren't where you're at in life. Because if you're just around people who are where you're at in life it might be a little bit harder to move ahead to mature and get more wisdom and knowledge from people that haven't been there. Like there were times when I've taken classes with older people and it's been good to have some older people who have been there and know stuff. Like if you have a group of just young guys, you know, 'Well we've learned all we can from each other. Now where do we go from here other than just what you're learning from going through life?' The younger group is good because you get more of a sense of belonging and get to know people and enjoy spending time

> together but it's also good to spend time together with people who are older and have more knowledge and can help you out if you've got a question.

Rachel echoed John's sentiments in this regard. "But the downside is that you don't have people that are older than you there that have been through it already and have come out on the other side who can say, 'Well, this is how I did it.' You don't have, I guess, wisdom, wisdom that comes with age if you segregate more. So I would see that as a downside."

As mentioned earlier, Michael, because of his young age, struggled with making connections in the class. One corresponding upside for him was being around those who are older than he is from whom he feels he can gain useful insights.

> Prior to the young adults class I didn't really talk to Mr. Jones (not his real name) all that much. I never really met him in the sense of spending a lot of time with him goofing off at a party or whatever. But with this setting with the young adults class I've been able to do that. As I get to know them more I get to know more about the lives of the people in the church, how the church is functioning, how the body of Christ is doing in this church and I get to be edified by those that are older than me.

Oddly, even though the class was designed to allow young adults of similar age and circumstance to develop relationships, Michael felt it helped him by putting him in regular contact with older people.

> I had to sort of become an adult in that sense of dealing with people. I mean by that just going out in the work world myself and suddenly

realizing a lot of the responsibilities of the adult life. This class has kind of helped me to deal with some of those issues and encouraged me in saying, "okay, this is for you, we're here, we love you and we can help you out during that time."

Research Question Two

Based on the participants' perceptions, does providing opportunities for group interaction outside class time enhance learners' sense of belonging to the group?

Prior to conducting this study, this researcher had expected the participants to indicate that their interaction taking place during the Sunday School class would be the most significant aspect of their developing a sense of belonging among themselves. There were two reasons for this expectation. First, Sunday School would provide a consistent, weekly opportunity for the young adults to get to know each other. The extracurricular activities only occur once a month. Second, the class design would force interaction. It would be difficult to be a wall flower in a small group activity with three to five other people than at a party where no one was coaxed to interact. Surprisingly, most expressed the monthly activities as being more important than what happened in the Sunday School class session in regard to building relationships.

In retrospect, the reasons for this should have been obvious to the researcher. First, the monthly activities were much longer. They usually lasted at least three to four hours depending on the activity. Sunday School lasted exactly one hour with a church service following. This precluded anyone from staying late to discuss some important aspect of his or her life. Second, they felt more relaxed in the casual setting provided by the monthly activity than in the more formal atmosphere of the Sunday School hour.

They felt this way despite my best efforts to create a casual atmosphere in the room. Third, they generally viewed Sunday School as a time to focus on learning, which is a good thing, but it seemed that attitude actually hindered relationship building. These three aspects came out repeatedly in their interviews. Nora briefly summed up all three points.

> I would say the activities outside of Sunday School especially helped me connect with them because we have more time to talk about each other and get to know each other than we do in the Sunday School class. I think that they are very important because those are the times where we have time to just talk with each other and get to know each other better. Because in Sunday school you're there to learn the Word of God and you don't always have the opportunity to say, 'Hey, how's your baby doing' or 'How's this going?' and the fun times are just a time for us to break the ice and relax and not have to be spiritual. We can just be who we are and we get to know each other better that way.

Nor was this feeling exclusive to the women in the class. The men generally felt the same way, though perhaps not as intensely as a group as the women. In giving his impressions of the monthly parties, Stephen echoed Nora's sentiments.

> Those have probably been some of the more valuable things simply because the context of the Sunday School class itself is more formal. I mean our class setting is pretty loose and casual but, nonetheless, it is a class. It's kind of like when you're at school as a kid. You have school and then you have recess or field trips or other activities or after school

> stuff. You get to know the other kids differently, you know, more personally when you are doing something more fun or interesting. You get to know people more personally and then you get more interested in their lives and it makes them more interested in your life, which causes a bond.

Moreover, Stephen was single. He recognized that he did not have the built in relationship that having a spouse could provide to the married couples in the class. For him, this created an even greater desire to find opportunities to build relationships, not looking for a wife, just making friends. This concept was so important to him that he wished there were more group activities. "My personal preference would be to have the class grow and have smaller groups that could have activities maybe every couple of weeks." In addition, he wanted to organize some get-togethers just for the single people in the class, "I figure single people have different needs and different views of life than people who are married and have kids. Besides, young single people usually have more flexible schedules and an easier time getting around to do stuff and sometimes more free time because they don't have as many family obligations."

John had a slightly different take on the monthly parties. He looked at them as times when he could compare notes with his peers as to how their lives were going and even seek advice on personal matters, something that wouldn't fit so well in a Sunday School environment. "And then you get time to talk with people and just see where they're at in life, you know, like 'Am I the only one whose kid doesn't listen when I tell him to?' or 'What do you do in different situations?' Stuff like that. I mean, I really enjoy it. I think it's valuable."

His wife, Wanda, looked at the monthly activities much the same way, “It’s fun and helpful to be around people who are around the same spot you are and just talking with them. You can always ask questions about stuff you’re going through and maybe somebody will have an idea.”

Also, there were certain aspects of the monthly activities that were conducive to outreach into the community. For example, when they first started attending CBC, Paul’s wife was hesitant to join the Sunday School group. According to Paul, “It’s the type of a personality she has. She’s a shy sort. She doesn’t like necessarily brand new things. She doesn’t like being in groups of people.” Eventually, Paul brought her to an informal cookout put on by the young adult class. This relaxed atmosphere enabled her to meet and begin to bond with some of the others in the group. After that evening, she became one of the class’s most faithful members.

In fact, the two of them enjoyed it so much they have created their own opportunities for fellowship by inviting several of the couples over to their house to get to know them better. Paul found great pleasure in building relationships with others in the church. “The whole idea of fellowship, regardless of whether it’s an activity or whether it’s a dinner or whether it’s a Bible study outside of the church is to get you filled back up. That can be done through your brothers and sisters that you have through the church, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be at the church.”

Research Question Three

Based on the participants' perceptions, does creating an interactive adult Sunday School experience through the use of the Experiential Learning Model enhance learners' sense of belonging to the group?

In this regard, Wlodkowski (1999) said that adults in an interactive, cooperative environment "tend to develop supportive relationships across different ethnic, language, social class, and gender groups" (p. 105). In this study, the patterns which arose from the interviews seem to validate Wlodkowski's assertion.

All the participants, in one way or another, suggested that the interactive nature of the Sunday School lessons helped them develop a sense of belonging to the group. A key piece of the Experiential Learning Model is the fact that it encourages group discussion. From the perspectives of the participants, this was very significant to their enjoyment of class sessions. More importantly, having the chance to interact with other members of the group was crucial to making them feel like they belonged. Nora, for example, liked the interactive aspects of the Experiential Learning Model, especially the opportunity to discuss the material with others in the class, because it made her feel like she was really getting to know them better.

> I think that's really important. I feel I belong more to this group because of our discussion time. You know, we're all a part of this group. It's not just coming in and listening to you teach and share with us some great wealth of knowledge. We get to be a part of that. We get to share what we know or what we've learned, and I think that's really important. To me it makes me feel I'm more a part of the group because I'm hearing their lives and who they are and what's important to them.

For Nathan, discussion not only made him feel more a part of the group, it helped him feel accepted and respected by the others.

> I think just the discussions in the Sunday school class, giving my thoughts and having other people listen and agree or not agree, you know, you get a sense of acceptance. Like someone will say, 'Oh, that's a good thought.' So you're not thinking, 'Oh I'm off in left base somewhere.' You get people agreeing with what you say and that's probably done more to add a sense of belonging than anything else.

This is a common trait among adult learners. According to Barnett and Caffarella (1992), adults often seek validation and respect for their experience from the group through class discussion. Houle (1961) also claimed that finding such validation binds individuals together through feelings of good will.

Wanda took Nathan's idea a step further. For her, class discussion was a self-validation issue. It not only made her feel like she was more a part of the group, having others listen to her made her feel affirmed and important. Concern for the group's opinion of her caused her to want to contribute in some way.

> You feel like that what you have to say is valuable, that people care what you have to say. If you don't get to say something it's kind of like you're just there and you don't really feel like you have anything important to say, like the group could be just fine without you. It makes you feel a little bit more like you're contributing something, not just a bump on a log.

Some of the participants, like Stephen, appreciated the insights about the lesson material he gained from talking it over with other members of the class. It helped him learn better. Nonetheless, he liked the dialogue that went on in class even more because of how it helped him get to know the others better.

> I think having discussion is a key piece of having a successful Sunday School class and small group fellowship because that's where you get to know other people. You get to understand other people's opinions and viewpoints and you get to understand where other people are coming from. It creates, I think, a sort of dynamic where people are able to grow closer to each other through a discussion, you know, sometimes even arguments, not huge violent arguments but small disputes you'll have over a piece of Scripture. It helps me to feel more closely related to the class and to other people as we're all sort of taking part.

John also considered class time interaction valuable in that it helped him get to know others in the group. He went a step further, however, and expressed disappointment with other Sunday School classes he attended in that they did not provide such opportunities and, hence, did not enable him to get to know anybody. "I think, from my perspective from traveling around and doing stuff with different groups and different churches, I go to one where it's not interactive at all, I'm kind of just sitting and doing the lesson and when it's over I just think 'Now I can go' and you don't know anybody."

Paul tends to be very gregarious. As such, it is no surprise that he enjoyed the interactive format used in the young adult Sunday School class. However, he also thought interaction in class was a key piece to developing a sense of belonging to the

group. To him, it was almost like an obligation to interact with others. "I think that's very, very, very important even to the point where if somebody's not participating, I feel as though maybe they should be. On a scale from 1 to 10 it's definitely an 8."

In the minds of the participants, the most common alternative to an interactive lesson was one that was primarily lecture. Several of the participants took the occasion of their interview to compare interactive classes with lecture-based ones. Though they acknowledged that there is a time and place for lecturing, they still felt Sunday School was more enjoyable if they were given the chance to mingle during class time. Nor did they equate this feeling primarily to learning styles. Rather, it reflected their desire to get to know others and to feel like what they had to say was important.

Susan was one of those who liked to be heard. She described the best Sunday School she ever went to as being interactive, an open forum where people could share their ideas. "It was kind of different than most Sunday Schools. Like he would talk a little bit and if somebody had a point to make we would voice our opinions about that certain point." She liked that because, "everybody got to voice their opinion, and nobody's opinion was wrong. In most classes we used to sit and listen to the teacher teach for an hour and we might get to say something at the end."

In the same way, Rachel appreciated the deliberately interactive nature of the current young adult Sunday School class. She compared her current interactive young adult class with other, lecture-based classes she had attended in the past.

> It's a nice alternative. People are wanting something with a little different set up. I think it's important. It allows you to voice your opinion and hear other people's opinion. I think in doing that you really get to know people

more and you do feel like you kind of have a bond with them when you're interacting together and you're learning together.

Another aspect of the Experiential Learning Model lesson design the participants enjoyed was that of subdividing the class into smaller groups so they could work on short projects related to the lesson material. This allowed members to have a chance to interact with just a few people. Michael's comments here are fairly representative of the group as a whole.

> In the class I think all the different activities we did were creating a sense of belonging. We were either breaking down into smaller groups or pitting me with those on my team against another team or something like that, which creates instant camaraderie. I felt like a part of the group for the most part because of the activities. And it allowed me to break down some of my normal barriers.

Rachel also liked the notion of breaking into smaller groups. So much so that she wanted to expand the concept to include a time of small group prayer at the beginning of class. Several of the young adults are routinely late for class. Since most of the lessons actually begin with a small group project that sets up the rest of the class period, I felt I couldn't start until I was fairly sure everyone had arrived. This was causing some frustration among the group because it was wasting their time. We originally tried Rachel's idea as a way to make use of this wasted time. Those who came in late simply joined one of the small prayer groups. It became immediately apparent, however, that most participants really appreciated the small group prayer time itself. It allowed people time to share their burdens and joys with one another before actually beginning the

lesson. This had the effect of increasing interaction and warming up the crowd as they came in. It helped break the ice and get people talking. Rachel, herself, thought people open up more in small groups. "I think sometimes in that big silence people are afraid to be the one to break it when you're in a bigger group. I don't know why."

Several participants singled this out as especially valuable. Stephen was one of those.

> One thing I like is that recently we have started doing small group prayer. We weren't doing that at first. Now we are dividing the class into 3, 4, or 5 person mini-groups, depending on how many people are there. That's been one thing that I really enjoyed because it allows you to come into closer fellowship with some of the people and to share your needs and concerns and to hear the needs and concerns of other people and become more involved with them.

Unlike Stephen, Susan tended to be shy. The small prayer groups helped her be able to open up a little, "I like the way we pray in small groups. I don't like praying in front of a huge group. It makes me feel awkward."

Research Question Four

Based on the participants' perceptions, what are the advantages, if any, to developing a sense of belonging in Sunday School groups?

As noted previously, most members of the class felt like they belonged, or at least like they are beginning to belong to the group. Further, several of them were able to recall times when they were involved in previous small group Bible studies where this sense of belonging was especially strong. They were able to articulate a few reasons why

this feeling was valuable to them. The most prominent was the sense of support they felt for one another.

In the context of people's need for being connected with a group, Wlodkowski (1999) discussed the importance that people place on the mutual support they get from a warm, accepting group of learners. "In such an environment, people feel trust and an emotional bond with at least a few others; because of this, there exists a spirit of tolerance and loyalty that allows for a measure of uncertainty and dissent" (p.70).

Nora has had a great deal of experience with Sunday School and other Christian Bible studies. She grew up in a foreign country as the daughter of Christian missionaries. Eventually, she became a missionary herself and served as such in Hungary for three years. Recalling what she described as the best small group Bible study of which she had ever been a part she said she liked it because, "They were able to be real with each other and help each other go through some difficult things. We also got to experience the joy of the good things that were happening. It gave us the encouragement and the strength to continue on."

She liked her young adult class for very similar reasons. Again, she commented here on the value of our small group prayer time. "I like that we spend the first few minutes in prayer with each other. I think that's a good thing. Because it helps people to kind of relax and be able to share their burdens and know that there's people praying for them." John also appreciated the opportunity to share burdens during the prayer time.

> That's something we usually don't target in other places in the church. It's good to have someplace where people can say, "Hey, I'm having a hard time with something." It's good for people to be able to talk about

stuff to people and it's good to know that there are other people that are going to pray for you. I like that. I think that's been a good improvement.

A second advantage of developing a sense of belonging to the Sunday School group which the participants identified was that of accountability. Christians not only have a responsibility to support one another in difficult situations, they also have a duty to hold one another accountable for their actions and attitudes. The Christian ethic requires a strict moral code. The participants believe not only that they should help hold one another accountable for maintaining this code but that belonging to a group facilitates that process.

Nathan, for example, attended a young men's Bible study a few years ago. He said it was useful in that it was a good venue for the members to help each other and hold each other accountable for doing the right things in their lives. "I think the young men's group was sort of an encouragement, accountability type thing. Just trying to help each other through some of the struggles that young men have, whether it's temptations of women, or pride, or distractions. Just trying to encourage each other to take the faith seriously."

He also pointed out that one reason some people might avoid joining a stable Sunday School class was that they would hope to avoid any accountability. You can hide your lifestyle if you are able to avoid people getting to know you better.

Some people are hesitant to join a class they know they're stuck with because they enjoy the anonymity of being able to jump from class to class without too much accountability, which could be a negative thing. If you're in the same class for 6 months, people know if you are there or not.

> If there are 12 other classes you could be in, nobody's going to be like, "Huh, where's Nathan and Rachel this week?" For all they know, they could be in class "B," which they very well might be.

Of course, Nathan understood that the flip side of accountability was knowing that others in the group care if you are there or not, that someone would miss him if he didn't show up for some reason. He appreciated having others in the class care about him. "People asking, 'How you doing. We missed you last week when you were sick.' That helps a lot."

Others, besides Nathan, identified lack of accountability as one of the weaknesses in Calvary Bible Church's (CBC's) Sunday School program. Because there is no stable group from quarter to quarter, no one knows who is attending Sunday School and who is not. No teacher is responsible for knowing this, nor do they have any implicit duty to find out and check on members and make sure they are all right. Wanda noticed this, but wasn't sure why it was the case.

> I don't know, it's like you could not show up and nobody would notice or anything. Like they just don't pay attention to who's in the class. If you decided to stay home it wouldn't be that big of a deal to them. They might not even notice that you're not there. I don't know, it's just a bunch of different people and they don't always remember who was there.

She contrasted that attitude with the stable cohort created for this study in these words: "In your class, we do kind of know everybody's name and we do stuff together and we know who is supposed to be there because you do pay attention. It's a good thing

because it makes people think they're wanted and it makes it hard for people to be lazy and skip out."

Other Patterns Suggested by the Data

Essentially, this was a study on building relationships for the purpose of enhancing people's enjoyment of an adult Sunday School program. This being said, there were three concepts that appeared in the interviews that the researcher was not specifically looking for but that might be of interest to those in Sunday School program development. These three concepts were gender differences, evangelism, and adult learning theory.

Gender Differences

One thing that became very apparent was the difference between how the male and female participants perceived their experiences in the Sunday School class. This difference was not at all surprising, in fact, it could have been easily predicted considering that much of the research on the affiliation needs of adults falls under the umbrella of feminist literature. The general consensus is that women usually have a stronger desire for social affiliation and personal intimacy than do men (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986; Caffarella, 1992; Gilligan, 1977; Hayes, 1989; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005; Schniedewind, 1983; Shrewsbury, 1987). As Chodorow (1974) stated, "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (p.44).

By her own admission, Rachel, brought a female perspective to how she thought about the role of Sunday School in a Christian's life. She felt it ought to include a

considerable amount of relationship building. In regard to the church's overall Sunday School program she said,

> Being a woman, I think it's more important for us to make personal connections. I think our other Sunday School classes are mostly in a teaching format where people are mostly just sitting and listening and learning from the teacher. There's not necessarily group prayer time or anything where you can connect with the person sitting next to you.

Nora added the following perspective, which was common among the female members of the class. Speaking of CBC's Sunday School program as a whole she said, "I think that we don't have enough fellowship. We don't have enough small group interaction. Often times the Sunday school is so focused on Biblical knowledge and having a teacher instructing you and imparting knowledge that there's not a lot of time for discussion to find out what other people think."

Also, even though she thought her cohort class was on the right track as far as giving people opportunities to develop relationships, she didn't think it was doing enough. The class ought to do more. None of the men in the class said anything like this: "I would say that our class is better at fellowship, better at giving people opportunities to discuss and have that time. But I think personally it's not enough time. I think there needs to be more of that interaction, more opportunity for people to share what they're thinking."

Meanwhile, Nora's husband, Martin expressed what appeared to be a more male viewpoint when he emphasized the instructional aspects over the relational aspects of Bible studies he has attended. "I kind of liked the Bible studies where the teachers are

informed and present the material well. I'm more interested in studying material and engaging in the material than I am in the social aspect of the classes." Unlike his wife, who really enjoyed the moments spent at the beginning of class getting to know the others better, Martin actually complained about the time he considered wasted by this non-learning activity.

> The weakness with the class is that we try and do too much. We spend about 15 to 20 minutes before class starts chatting and praying, stuff like that. I understand that's important for developing relationships but I'm going to Sunday school for the purpose of learning. I'll develop my own relationships within the Sunday School class by attending Sunday School with those people and learning with those people. I don't view idle chitchat at the beginning of class for 15 minutes as being constructive.

Nevertheless, even he acknowledged the value of class activities designed to build relationships, "But now there is the developmental part, the socialization part which is of some value."

Evangelism

Another concept that emerged was that of using the young adult Sunday School class as a tool for evangelism. The number one reason people join a church or Sunday School is personal invitation by a friend. As Francis (2006) says, "Actually, 80-90 percent of people surveyed say they first came to the church they currently attend because someone invited them…People who are being blessed by their experiences at church invite other people to experience that blessing" (p. 8).

Most of the young people that attended the young adult cohort Sunday School class first started coming because I invited them. One of the few exceptions to this was Susan. Her motivation for coming to class was also because she was invited, but not by me. She was new to CBC and, in her words, comes "because Don and Sharon (other members of the class) asked me to go their church and I went to your Sunday School class with Sharon and I like it."

Much of the literature on church growth centers on the issue of using stable, age-graded Sunday School classes as the recruiting arm of the church (Hemphill & Taylor, 2001; Mims 2001; Taylor, 2003). Sunday School should be used for evangelism. Under the Mims (2001) model discussed in chapter 2, members invite their unchurched friends to join a Sunday School group comprised of people very similar to them in several basic categories (age, income, marital status, etc). As they make acquaintances in the group, it is hoped they will eventually feel comfortable enough to explore the possibility of coming to faith in Christ and "join the family."

In line with this thinking, one of the reasons for conducting this study was to help refocus the church more on developing relationships both within and outside the church. In Martin's mind, spoke to the issue of evangelism or outreach to the community.

> I do not personally view our church as relationship oriented. I believe that changing how we do Sunday School would change the church's focus to be relationship oriented. I think that one aspect alone would give the church a lot of strength. One of the problems this church faces is that they do not reach out to the community. They don't form relationships or bonds within the community."

Adult Learning Theory

As might be expected in any discussion of education, the participants often made comments that went beyond the scope of this study. They were, naturally, interested in the relationship-building aspects of the research. However, some evidence appeared in the interviews that related to various aspects of adult learning theory. For example, several of the participants mentioned that they learned better through discussion than they did through straight lecture. This might indicate a preference for the concrete experience aspects of Kolb's (1984) learning model in that they enjoy personal involvement and are sensitive to other people while engaged in learning.

Conversely, only two of those who identified a learning preference even mentioned they might prefer some kind of physical activity. Wanda was one of these. She still fondly remembered her days in children's Sunday School when she had the opportunity to conduct little craft projects as part of the lesson plan. "Well, I liked Sunday School when I was little because you got to color the picture of Jesus and eat snacks and stuff, but now that I'm older, I kind of like classes that deal with stuff you're going through." In Kolb's model, she might lean toward a convergent learning style, which includes active experimentation. She enjoyed the class discussion a great deal, but this was because she takes pleasure in getting to know her friends better, not because it helps her learn the material better.

She did bring out a point, though, that some of the other participants raised during their own interviews. They wanted their class to be practical. They wanted it to be relevant to their daily lives. This is typical of adult learners. According to Knowles, "People become ready to learn something when they experience a need to learn it in order

to cope more satisfyingly with real life tasks or problems" (1980, p. 44). This concept speaks to the adult learner's perception of how relevant a class's material is to his or her life. This is why Sunday School material should be heavy on application. People need to feel the time spent in a Bible study will impact their lives in a positive way.

Beyond these few points, however, there was not much material in the interviews to draw any significant conclusions on learning the material presented in class and how that related to adult learning theory. This is not surprising since it was not the focus of the study.

Summary

This chapter presented trends suggested by analyzing the participants' responses to the interview protocol as they related to the research questions. The aspect of the class that stood out most prominently was the participants' appreciation for having the opportunity to develop relationships with people as members of a stable Sunday School cohort. All ten also expressed appreciation for having a group circumscribed by age. This, however, did not appear to be as strongly felt as their appreciation for being part of a stable group of friends. Some felt they were missing something by not having contact with older, more mature Christians as part of the class structure.

For the second research question, the researcher was surprised to learn that the monthly activities outside class time were more important to the interviewees than the actual Sunday School class in regard to developing relationships. The relaxed, informal atmosphere was very important to them in building friendships.

In regard to creating an interactive adult Sunday School experience the participants all felt as though the class format did, indeed, significantly encourage a sense

of belonging to the group. Two issues emerged here. First, the opportunity to discuss lesson material among themselves and having the opportunity to voice their opinions was very helpful for this purpose. Second, dividing into small groups to conduct short projects or have prayer time was very helpful to creating warm feelings of camaraderie. They also appeared to very much appreciated having discussion-based lessons as opposed to lessons primarily devoted to lecture

In regard to the fourth research question, the group identified two distinct advantages to developing a sense of belonging in Sunday School groups. The most prominent was the sense of support they felt for one another. The second was that they viewed belonging to the group as part of developing a sense of accountability for one another.

There were also three other common themes that emerged from the data that were not suggested by the research questions. The first and most prominent of these was the very apparent difference between how the male and female participants perceived their experiences in the Sunday School class. The women appeared to enjoy the relational aspects of the class more than the men, while the men appeared to appreciate the learning and knowledge gaining aspects more. This difference is supported by a considerable body of research on the affiliation needs of women.

The second general pattern to emerge was that of using the young adult Sunday School class as a tool for evangelism. Creating a cohort Sunday School program provides a friendly place to which members can bring their unchurched friends. This is a key point to using Sunday School as the primary venue for church growth.

The third general pattern was a small amount of data relating to adult learning theory. Though there was not much material in this category, most participants expressed the opinion that they tended to learn better through discussion rather than lecture. Also, they tended to appreciate a lesson more if it had practical application to their lives.

CHAPTER 5 - Analysis and Recommendations

This chapter summarizes the results obtained from the participant interviews, identifies several trends that emerged from an analysis of the data, and will discusses these trends with reference to other literature on the subject. Analysis of the data allowed the researcher to draw several conclusions that are stated here. In addition, this chapter presents implications and recommendations for practice and further research based on those findings. In general, the data appears to indicate that the standard Sunday School literature published by the Southern Baptist Convention is correct in saying that stable, age-graded cohorts and interactive small group Bible study lessons promote overall satisfaction with the program and enhance the building of relationships.

Emerging Trend # 1: Young adults value being a part of a stable group

The members of the class interviewed consistently expressed appreciation for the idea of being part of a stable group. This was true whether they were referring to their current young adult Sunday School class, which was the subject of this research, or to another small group Bible study to which they have belonged in the past. The opportunity to become a part of a group of similarly aged, friendly people was very important to drawing them into the class. In fact, this was the reason most often cited by the participants for attending. They liked meeting with the same people in the class from week to week. This was the theme that was most notably in the forefront of their thinking.

The literature on educational cohorts suggests there are two basic types of cohort: open and closed (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Maher 2001). As the names naturally imply, open cohorts allow for the introduction of new members. Closed cohorts generally do not, or at least make it difficult. The literature based on Southern Baptist Convention practice, insists that Sunday School classes be run as very open cohorts. This is by design to encourage members to bring friends into the fellowship and camaraderie of the group. As Mims (2001) says, "the open group is a foundational strategy that serves as an entry point into the church for unbelievers" (p. 102). In addition, Francis (2006) asserted, "A…Sunday School class is an open group. An open group intentionally seeks to involve and connect with people who are not currently members and encourages new people to join the group anytime" (p. 8). In fact, special pains should be taken to make newcomers feel welcome whether they attend an actual class session or are merely attending an extra-curricular activity, such as a party or barbecue, sponsored by a cohort class. As such, the classes are supposed to grow and change as people assimilate into the group.

Also, adult Sunday School curriculum should be designed to support the concept of an extremely open cohort. The lesson plans should be written in such a way that someone walking into a Sunday School class for the first time will not require a lot of background information just to understand what is going on. Each lesson should be a self-contained unit with its own learning objectives not dependent on previous classes. This will help a visitor or new member feel more comfortable in the class. He or she will already feel awkward at being an outsider entering someone else's world. The lesson plan should be a reflection of the fact that everyone in the class wants the visitor to feel

relaxed and at ease with the situation. As Francis (2006) has stated, "Because Sunday School classes are open groups, choose curriculum materials that support keeping them open. Each Bible study experience should be self-contained" (p. 19). He added that this practice would help provide "a satisfying experience for the first-time visitor, the long-time absentee, the every-other-week attender, and the never-misses-a-Sunday member" (Francis, 2006, p. 19).

Even though age-graded Sunday School classes are operated as open cohorts, they are built around a core of members who are with the group for an extended period of time. This was consistent with the class used in this study. A few individuals left temporarily either to teach another class for a short time or to attend a new members class required by the church. They returned to their young adult cohort class at their earliest opportunity. Also, during the time they were unable to attend the young adult class, they continued to participate in the monthly extra-curricular activities to maintain their connection to the group. In short, the connection they felt to the group appears to have been enough to keep them involved even when pulled from the class for periods of time, whether for service or by requirement.

In the same way, there is educational cohort research to substantiate the claim that the opportunity to be part of a group encourages members to not only become involved, but to stay involved. According to Hill (1992), "The camaraderie and mutual trust that develops is a powerful motivation for continued involvement" (p. 10). It appears that members of an effective group want to stay involved with that group, for a variety of reasons. Realizing this, Virginia Tech makes a five-year commitment to their educational cohorts to keep them in touch with other former students. They do this via a series of

group seminars that are designed to help them through some of the career struggles they are likely to face after graduation (Barnett and Muse, 1993).

The young adults who participated in this study also enjoyed the camaraderie and friendships made available to them by being part of a stable cohort. All of the participants expressed appreciation for this aspect of the class, in particular.

Emerging Trend # 2: Age-grading Sunday School classes enhances relationship building

As noted in chapter four, the participants generally viewed the issue of belonging to a stable group as separate from belonging to a group defined by age, even though both factors were accounted for in one question and referred to one type of group. Regardless, all ten expressed appreciation for the concept of being grouped with people of a similar age. This is a common theme in the literature and is usually associated with the simple fact that it is most logical to group people according to age because they are more likely to have more in common and, therefore, more upon which to base a lasting friendship (Havighurst, 1961; Knowles, 1980). This, of course, is the driving force behind the age-graded system of adult Sunday School used by the Southern Baptist Convention (Mims, 2001; Hemphill & Taylor, 2001). What could be more natural than to group people according to the kinds of issues and challenges they are facing in their day-to-day lives? In this way, they can empathize better with one another and thus develop closer bonds of support within the group. In addition, similarly aged people are more likely to share more of the same interests than people from widely divergent age categories at least in part because of generational/cultural issues emphasized by researchers such as Massey (2006).

This was a common opinion throughout the interviews. Rachel, for example, said she considered being in a Sunday School class consisting of people of similar age valuable because it makes it more likely that they will all be in similar circumstances and will, thus, have some important things in common. "With similar ages you're going to have similar life experiences and be in similar places in life. You're probably going to all be in the same boat somewhat. I think that will help you relate to people better."

Fowler's (1981) research indicated that spiritual development follows a uniform pattern. According to Fowler, that pattern of development is strongly related to age. This would suggest that age grading students might have the advantage of giving them the opportunity to discuss their most pressing spiritual issues with others facing similar concerns. In like manner, Hemphill and Taylor (2001) contended that an age-graded adult Sunday School program "recognizes that pupils of the same age generally have similar spiritual needs" (p. 65). These two researchers from opposite ends of the spectrum in regard to the meaning of spiritual development both independently reached the same conclusion, which was confirmed by this study.

Subordinate trend: Desire for older mentors

What was surprising in this context was that even though the participants clearly indicated they liked the idea of age-grading Sunday School classes, these responses were sometimes tempered by a desire to have greater access to older, more mature Christians in the church. Several felt they were missing something by not having contact with them as part of the class structure. Paul's comments in this regard were representative of many in the group in that he saw the importance of learning from those older than himself even though he chose to attend the young adult class.

> The positive as far as having widespread ages in a class would be what would be learned from somebody who is further along in their faith. There's no greater satisfaction for me than to be able to talk openly with educated men that are further along in their faith. To be perfectly honest with you, that's where I feel like I'm accomplishing something.

This is somewhat paradoxical in that a Sunday School class could not be both age-graded and, at the same time, include people of diverse ages. Even more surprising was the fact that none of the participants identified this researcher, at 55 years old, as satisfying that need for them. The researcher had assumed that he was filling that role in his position of teacher and administrator. For whatever reason, this was not the case.

In some respects, this may be a healthy trend. Younger Christians do have a lot to learn from someone older and wiser in the faith than themselves. There are a variety of things a church can do to accommodate this need. Most churches have multiple venues through which older and younger Christians can mingle in casual, relaxed settings. Calvary Bible Church (CBC), for example, conducts church wide fellowships following the evening service every Sunday. Also, both the men and women's ministries routinely hold meetings that are open to everyone without respect to age.

In addition, most churches, including CBC, have a board of elders or deacons that provide leadership for the church in general. Each elder or deacon is normally assigned a number of people in the church to "shepherd." This researcher recommend that churches consider assigning members of their leadership boards to various adult Sunday School classes. Whatever members are in those classes would, therefore, fall under the purview

of that elder or deacon. This would streamline the lines of communication in the church and provide the Sunday School class teachers someone to assist and mentor them.

In my opinion, this topic bears further research. In an era when the wisdom gained by age seems to be held in low esteem, it was surprising and refreshing to see young adults place value on building relationships with older, more mature Christians. This finding raises several questions from which the educational community in general and the Christian community in particular might benefit: Is this a uniquely Christian / religious attitude? Would young adults appreciate a mentoring relationship with someone already established in a secular career? Could this finding be affected by gender, social class, or race?

Emerging Trend # 3: Young adults appreciate the support they get from the class

Another common trend that presented itself in the interviews was that the participants liked the support offered by their young adult Sunday School class and other small group Bible studies to which they have belonged. The literature on educational cohorts is replete with references confirming this (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Brooks, 1998; Drago-Severson & Berger, 2001; Knowles, 1980). For example, the members of Pemberton and Akkary's (2005) "Sisters' Cohort" reported the support of the group as a defining characteristic of their group: "[T]he Sisters' camaraderie and interpersonal connection was an important and sustaining source of peer support and motivation throughout course work, comprehensive examinations, and dissertation research" (p. 2).

Similarly, Lawrence (1996) mentioned that being a part of an educational cohort helps people create subgroups that provided mutual support as the individuals struggle

through their coursework. Also, in this regard, Kasten (1995) spoke of the isolation many students feel when they attend large impersonal universities. She claimed putting students in cohort programs in which they are part of a consistent, stable group of learners; helped prevent that feeling of isolation. Moreover, she reported "increased feelings of support and belonging gathered from close ties with other students" were "the most positive factors identified by…students" (p.181).

In this same vein, referring to the Virginia Tech post-graduation cohort program, Barnett and Muse (1993) suggested that, "this formal continuation of the cohort group's professional network may be particularly important given the isolation experienced by many educators, especially as they begin a new administrative role or return to the classroom" (p. 406-407). People do not like to feel isolated. They enjoy the feeling of support they get from being part of a warm, friendly group of people. The young adult Sunday School class appears to be meeting this need.

Not surprisingly, group dynamics literature also supports this finding. A cohort adult Sunday School class is a type of group. As such, it should go through some of the stages of group development commonly found in the research and evidence some of the characteristics of groups. According to Norris and Barnett (1994), in an effectively functioning group "individuals are supported, affirmed, and inspired" (p. 2). The participants in this study confirmed this phenomenon in their experience with the young adult class.

Subordinate trend: Value of accountability

Another concept, closely associated to the idea of support, was that of accountability. In some contexts, the word "accountability" has a negative connotation,

as though somehow the person being held accountable is in trouble. That was not the case with the participants in this study. They looked at accountability as something to be sought after. In their minds, they looked at being held accountable for the way they live and the choices they make as a way to help them live more closely in line with the Bible.

Nathan, for example, felt developing relationships with other Christians was useful in that it was a good venue for the members to help each other and to remind each other that they have an obligation to live a moral life. Referring to a Bible study to which he belonged several years ago, Nathan said,

> I think the young men's group was sort of an encouragement, accountability type thing. Just trying to help each other through some of the struggles that young men have, whether it's temptations of women or, pride, or distractions of stuff. Just trying to encourage each other to take the faith seriously.

This suggests that people who are serious enough about their faith to spend time in Sunday School are willing, perhaps even eager, to be challenged to live a godly life. As a recommendation, it might be appropriate to suggest those running an adult Sunday School class ought not to be too bashful about gently confronting their students with the obligations God has placed on their lives. However, it is important remember that statements like Nathan's were made in the context of a close, trusting relationship he had with several of his friends. He was not an outsider making judgmental pronouncements on the others. He was a member of the team.

Nathan's point is not lost on those who have developed Sunday School growth literature. Sunday School is not just a place and time where people get together, build

relationship, talk, and have fun. It should be all of those things but it should also encourage members to maintain a lifestyle that reflects the teachings of God's Word. Like any other school, Sunday School is supposed to teach something and help the students learn how to apply that learning in their daily lives. Having taught them something, there has to be an element of helping them incorporate their knowledge into their relationships, job, education, and other important aspects of their lives. In a Christian church setting this is a key concept.

The difficulty arises in how to address accountability without offending the members of a class. It may not always be possible. People are very sensitive about how others view their personal performance, especially in matters involving morality, as Sunday School often does. Nathan, and others in the group, feels the need to be held accountable and the group needs to work through that problem. This can be done most effectively in an environment of trust and friendship. John Hunt (1997) addressed the issue of blending acceptance with accountability. To him it is a matter of speaking the truth in a loving, non-condemning way.

> Accountability needs to find the razor's edge of speaking the truth in love. If we communicate condemnation to those who fail (and everyone fails), we miss the Gospel entirely. There is no place for condemnation in the Christian experience. There is, however, a place for truth spoken in love (p. 34).

Nor is individual accountability strictly a problem in Christian education. Wlodkowski (2008) discussed methods he has used to promote a sense of individual responsibility in the classroom. One of the pitfalls of collaborative, small group learning

is that some students will hitchhike off the others in the group. They do not contribute very much, either by effort or result. This not only puts an unfair burden on his or her partners but it retards his or her ability to learn. Both of these outcomes are unacceptable. In general, Wlodkowski placed the burden of holding students accountable for their learning squarely on the shoulders of the students. In the same way, Hunt (2008) advises Sunday School teachers to lead the class to be accountable to each other and to God.

Also, like Wlodkowski, Hunt recommended classroom techniques that, while bringing individuals' attention to their responsibilities, allow them enough anonymity to avoid embarrassment. Compare the following suggestions from each of these men and note the similarities.

> Wlodkowski: A simple and positive way to support individual accountability and prevent related conflict among group members is to brainstorm answers to the question, How would we like to find out whether someone in our cooperative learning group thought we were not doing enough to contribute to the benefit of the total group? Then write the possible answers for all to see and assess them. Such procedure can go a long way to avoid unnecessary suspicion or shame (p. 146).
>
> Hunt: Ask questions such as "What is one thing you could do this week to demonstrate your concern for the lost?" When someone says, "I could pray once for my neighbor John," make a hero out of that person…It is also a good idea to ask each week about the application suggested the previous week. For example, you might say, "Last week we talked about praying for our non-Christian friends. Did anyone do this? What other

> steps could we take?" In an open group such as a Sunday school class or a cell group, accountability needs to be kept pretty simple (p. 34).

The similarities are striking. First, both suggest a brainstorming session. This technique allows for a certain amount of anonymity. No individual is put on the spot by name. The question is made to the group and contributions are voluntary. Second, each offers an opportunity to report back to the group. This allows for reflection and an opportunity to vow to improve at some point before the final report is rendered. This helps protect the individual's self-esteem. Third, both are handling their students very gently, avoiding any embarrassment, while at the same time softly prodding them to do the right thing, whatever that might be. Fourth, both clearly understand that accountability; whether it is to God, to the group, or to their own education; is ultimately a personal matter. No one can make anyone else be the right kind of person. The most effective accountability is that which a person lays on him or herself.

The similarities are even more remarkable because they are in such radically different contexts and spheres of learning. People are people, regardless of the setting. Christian and secular education have a lot they can learn from each other. Christian educators need to admit their secular counterparts might have some good ideas. John Hunt is one Christian educator who has accepted that premise with excellent results.

> To gain fresh insight, I began reading secular (even humanistic) management, sales, and marketing books. I found some truth in these books and continue to read them with pleasure and profit. Some of their ideas, of course, are totally incongruent with biblical teaching and must be

discarded. But many ideas are readily adaptable to Christian ministry. They're just good common sense (p. 152).

Nevertheless, this study does not provide enough evidence to draw strong conclusions on the idea that people are craving the opportunity to be held accountable. Such a belief may stroke our pride in that it presents a picture of us as truly wanting to do the right thing. However, this research was not specifically designed to gather that information. As a recommendation, further research should be conducted on this subordinate trend to see if this finding is applicable to a variety of societal groups, religions, age categories, races, and genders.

Emerging Trend # 4: Extracurricular activities help build relationships

Informal gatherings were much more important to the participants in this study as a means of getting close to other people and developing relationships than the Sunday School class times themselves. As noted in chapter four, this was a surprise. This researcher had anticipated the participants to indicate that the interaction taking place during the Sunday School class would be the most significant aspect of their developing a sense of belonging among themselves. There were two reasons for this expectation. First, Sunday School would provide a consistent, weekly opportunity for the young adults to get to know each other. The extracurricular activities only occurred once a month. Second, the class design would force interaction, whereas the monthly activities do not require interaction. The setting was much less controlled.

This researcher identified three reasons articulated in the interviews to account for this feeling. First, the monthly activities were much longer. They usually lasted at least three to four hours depending on the activity. The extended time apparently allowed

them the opportunity to warm up to each other, something the time constraints of the Sunday School class didn't permit. Sunday School lasted exactly one hour with a church service following fifteen minutes later. There is no opportunity for members of the class to stay late and chat about one another's lives. Second, they felt more relaxed in the casual setting provided by the monthly activity than in the more formal atmosphere of the Sunday School hour. This was despite my best efforts to create a casual atmosphere in the room. Third, they generally viewed Sunday School as a time to focus on learning, rather than relationship building.

Two young ladies in the group organize and run the monthly extracurricular activities for the class. The researcher shared this finding with them and asked their opinion. Like the researcher, they both initially expressed surprise. Upon reflection, however, they concluded that it is logical. As Nora said, "Yeah, that was surprising. I thought about it for awhile and went, 'Well, Duh!' It makes sense." That was approximately my own reaction. From the literature on Sunday School growth this researcher understood the value of informal gatherings and how they facilitate group development. Nevertheless, the comparative power of it surprised him.

Literature on adult learning often emphasizes the value of creating a relaxed, informal atmosphere in the classroom setting (Brookfield, 1999; Knowles, 1980). Following the advice of Brookfield, Knowles, and others, the researcher went to great lengths to make the Sunday School class hour as informal as possible. Despite the researcher's best efforts, the members of the class still regarded it as a primarily official setting. Stephen, for example, expressed it this way, "the context of the Sunday School class itself is more formal. I mean our class setting is pretty loose and casual but,

nonetheless, it is a class. It's kind of like when you're at school as a kid." He, like most of the others, expressed the feeling that what really helps him connect with other members of the group was the extracurricular activities.

Since Sunday School literature has a different focus, it places more emphasis on giving people more opportunities to relate to one another outside the confines of the church. Hunt (1997), for example, recognized the value of informal gatherings to developing relationships. He claims, "We need people with the gift of party to help us with the evangelistic and disciple-making process" (p. 63). It was because of this injunction that the extracurricular activities were originally added to this study. In context, Hunt generally considers informal parties as very effective ways to reach out to the community for the purposes of evangelism.

> The greatest unmet need in your community is love. People crave fellowship and love. They want to know and be known and to be loved. They want to socialize—to talk and listen and share and laugh. They want close, personal friends with whom they can be totally honest. They also want a network of casual friends who will support them, who will enjoy football games and meals with them. When we love people and spend time with them, they become much more open to hearing about the gospel (p. 63).

Nevertheless, this naturally applies to those who are already in the group. Just because they join a Bible study doesn't imply that they suddenly lose the need for relationships. Parties are also critical to developing bonds of friendship within the existing group. He asserted that people don't attend Sunday School primarily to study

the Bible. They are probably there to see their friends more than anything else. They attend for the relationships. According to Hunt (1997), "the truth is that most adults do not attend Sunday School because they have a burning desire to know more. They would like to learn, but they also want to meet some friends" (p. 52). In this connection, not one of the ten participants in this study indicated they attend for the purpose of Bible study. They may appreciate the lessons, but they come for the relationships.

In light of this, it might be advisable for Sunday School directors and teachers consider to place more emphasis on informal gatherings to enhance relationship building. One fairly simple step churches could take would be to extend the time between Sunday School and the worship service. Give the people the opportunity to relax and visit with one another. It would probably be wise to provide coffee and some light snacks at the same time to help lighten the atmosphere.

Emerging Trend # 5: Relationships more important to women than to men

As stated in chapter two, much of the research on the affiliation needs of adults has fallen under the umbrella of feminist literature. The general consensus is that women usually have a stronger desire for social affiliation and personal intimacy than do men (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986; Caffarella, 1992; Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1977; Hayes, 1989; Pemberton & Akkary, 2005; Schniedewind, 1983; Shrewsbury, 1987). Naturally, this predisposition evidences itself in common everyday experience. For example, in local churches, one will often find that the women's groups are much more active than the men's groups. This is certainly the case at CBC where there are several opportunities every month for the women of the

church to get together for small group Bible study and fellowship. The men have one meeting per month and it is usually poorly attended. At least part of this has to be because women care more about relationships than do men.

Prior to starting the young adult class, some of the more prominent women in the church approached the pastor and asked if he could arrange a women's only Sunday School class. They were concerned that there were not enough opportunities for the women to fellowship with their friends. The pastor asked the researcher's wife if she would be willing to lead a lady's Sunday School. She agreed to teach the class. By all accounts, everyone, including the researcher's wife, enjoyed it and had a good time together. Since then, however, she has expressed the opinion that it is not appropriate to separate the men from the women for Sunday School. She fears that women visitors would feel uncomfortable being in a class without their husbands and that visiting husbands would not wish to attend a class without their wives. This would hinder the church's growth. She is probably correct in this assessment. But that is not the point. Regardless, the men of the church have never approached the pastor with a similar request for a men's only Sunday School class. Only the women have done so.

This belief was born out by the participants themselves, especially the women. Rachel, for example, felt that Sunday School ought to include a considerable amount of relationship building, just time to chat and get to know each other. She attributed this desire to the simple fact that she is a woman: "Being a woman, I think it's more important for us to make personal connections." At her suggestion, the researcher added a time of small group prayer and sharing to the beginning of the class. This took away

from actual lesson time, but several women in the group mentioned it as being very valuable to them.

This finding is also supported by comparing how the women experienced the young adult Sunday School class with how the men felt about it. From Nora's perspective,

> I would say that our class is better at fellowship, better at giving people opportunities to discuss and have that time. But I think personally it's not enough time. I think there needs to be more of that interaction, more opportunity for people to share what they're thinking.

Nora's husband, Martin, on the other hand, expressed a characteristically male viewpoint by emphasizing the instructional aspects over the relational side of the class.

> The weakness with the class is that we try and do too much. We spend about 15 to 20 minutes before class starts chatting and praying, stuff like that. I understand that's important for developing relationships but I'm going to Sunday school for the purpose of learning. I don't view idle chitchat at the beginning of class for 15 minutes as being constructive.

Satisfying both these divergent views on what ought to take place during the Sunday School hour is a challenge. It is often difficult to merge relationship building and learning in a way that meets both objectives and fulfills the needs of both these people. For this study, the researcher deliberately chose to design the Sunday School lesson plans according to the Experiential Learning Model (ELM) specifically to help people build relationships while learning the material well. Both are critically important to the success of the local church. As Hunt (1997) has stated, "there is no virtue in ignorance.

[However, another] equally important, purpose of small groups is to provide a place where people can build relationships" (p. 52).

Emerging trend # 6. The Experiential Learning Model (ELM) facilitates relationship building

Wlodkowski (1999) stated that adults in an interactive, cooperative environment "tend to develop supportive relationships across different ethnic, language, social class, and gender groups" (p. 105). The patterns that arose from the interviews seem to validate Wlodkowski's assertion that students involved in interactive learning tend to develop supportive relationships that he referred to as inclusion. All the participants, in one way or another, suggested that the interactive nature of the Sunday School lessons helped them develop a sense of belonging to the group.

Per the Experiential Learning Model (ELM), the lessons used in this study normally began with a small group project designed to promote interaction while focusing the students' minds on some aspect of the material to be covered in class. Though this aspect (the concrete experience) of the model is, as Kolb (1984) has suggested, important in the adult's learning process, this study was more interested in the effect it would have on encouraging the building of personal relationships in the class while they are in the process of learning. There appear to be two advantages to the small group projects in developing relationships. First, it creates an energy that helps people drop some of the barriers they place around themselves. Michael's comments in this respect pointed specifically to this idea.

> In the class I think all the different activities we did were creating a sense of belonging. We were either breaking down into smaller groups or

> pitting me with those on my team against another team or something like that, which creates instant camaraderie. I felt like a part of the group for the most part because of the activities. And it allowed me to break down some of my normal barriers.

Susan had a slightly different take on the small group activities. To her they were "fun." She liked the energy and friendly competition they created with the group. Just as importantly, though, she concluded that, "If everybody is forced to interact they will eventually interact." Like Michael, she felt that the small group projects helped break down the personal barriers people often build around themselves. In this respect, the small group projects act like icebreaker games with more purpose than simple interaction.

The small group projects designed for this study didn't require much in the way of overly personal information. As Wlodkowski (2008) suggests, icebreakers should avoid intruding too much into people's private lives. Students often regard this with fear and will actually tend to withdraw if they are called upon to be too revealing. Sunday School teachers should be especially careful of this because a visitor to the class may be willing to interact with a group on some fun or mentally challenging activity but will be offended at being put on the spot to reveal what they regard as private information.

The second reason the small group projects helped encourage relationship building appeared to be that they allowed members to have a chance to interact with just a few people. The participants in this study consistently mentioned this as an advantage in their interviews. This advantage of the breakout groups became apparent when the class added small group prayer to the beginning of the class. It is human nature to be more open with a few people than with a crowd. Rachel recognized this but admitted she

did not understand why it is the case. "I think sometimes in that big silence people are afraid to be the one to break it when you're in a bigger group. I don't know why." Susan echoed Rachel's feelings on the matter but attributed it to her own shyness. The small prayer groups helped her to open up a little, "I like the way we pray in small groups. I don't like praying in front of a huge group. It makes me feel awkward." For his part, Stephen focused more on the result of being in a smaller group. For him, being with only three or four people allowed him "to come into closer fellowship with some of the people and to share your needs and concerns and to hear the needs and concerns of other people and become more involved with them."

Wlodkowski's (2008) experience supports this finding. He suggested that inclusion could be enhanced by the use of collaborative learning techniques such as are often present in experiential learning models. One specific technique he recommended was to "randomly form small groups in which learners exchange concerns, experiences, and expectations they have" (p. 118). This was essentially what the young adult class did every Sunday morning as they broke into their small prayer group time. Shortly thereafter, they did it again as they were assigned to work on a brief group project related to the lesson.

For whatever reason, the breakout groups appear to encourage more interaction, which seemed to enhance the students' ability to build relationships. This researcher would recommend Sunday School directors encourage more small group breakout moments for adult Sunday School classes, whether it be as group projects or simply sharing and prayer times.

Another advantage of using the Experiential Learning Model was that it encouraged group discussion. From the perspectives of the participants, this was very significant to their enjoyment of class sessions. More importantly, having the chance to interact with other members of the group was crucial to making them feel like they belonged. Nora liked to discuss the material with others in the class, because it made her feel she was getting to know them better. In her words, "I feel I belong more to this group because of our discussion time. To me it makes me feel I'm more a part of the group because I'm hearing their lives and who they are and what's important to them." This was a common theme among the participants.

Hunt (1997) emphasizes the value of class discussion in helping students make friends. He uses open-ended questions to generate interaction during class largely to cause them to interact. In his opinion, "Questions build relationships" (p. 52). He further asserts,

> The discussion prompted by good questions not only helps you know the group better, it also lets the group know the group better. The truth is that most adults do not attend Sunday school because they have a burning desire to know more. They would like to learn, but they also want to meet some friends (p. 52).

Stephen's comments support Hunt's assertions on this point. Although he valued the insights about the lesson material he gained from talking it over with other members of the class, he appreciated class discussion even more because of how it helped him get to know the others better.

> I think having discussion is a key piece of having a successful Sunday School class and small group fellowship because that's where you get to know other people. You get to understand other people's opinions and viewpoints and you get to understand where other people are coming from. It creates, I think, a sort of dynamic where people are able to grow closer to each other through a discussion. It helps me to feel more closely related to the class and to other people as we're all sort of taking part.

Subordinate trend: Discussion builds a sense of validation and acceptance

Another finding related to class discussion was that of validation from the group. People have an inherent need to feel important and respected. This is a common trait among adult learners. According to Barnett and Caffarella (1992), adults often seek validation and respect for their experience from the group through class discussion. Houle (1961) also claimed that finding such validation binds individuals together through feelings of good will. Nathan for example, approached class discussion as an opportunity to make friends as well as receive affirmation from the group.

> I think just the discussions in the Sunday school class, giving my thoughts and having other people listen and agree or not agree, you know, you get a sense of acceptance. You get people agreeing with what you say and that's probably done more to add a sense of belonging than anything else.

Wanda also regarded class discussion was a validation issue. It not only made her feel like she is more a part of the group, having others listen to her made her feel affirmed and important. Concern for the group's opinion of her caused her to want to contribute in some way.

> You feel like that what you have to say is valuable, that people care what you have to say. If you don't get to say something it's kind of like you're just there and you don't really feel like you have anything important to say, like the group could be just fine without you. It makes you feel a little bit more like you're contributing something, not just a bump on a log.

People like to be heard. They like to have their opinions matter to whatever group they belong. In this regard, Houle's (1961) comments are especially pertinent.

> The adult educational institution, like the church, is an open and socially accepted place for meeting people and making friends. It has, as it were, a kind of preventive psychiatric role. In mass society many individuals feel lost. They have little or no intimate fellowship and they miss the sense of belonging to a small natural group in which they are important and respected (1961, p. 19-20).

In light of this, Sunday School teachers ought to gently encourage everyone in the class to comment on some aspect of the lesson. This would give the group a chance to appreciate and affirm their opinions. Hunt (1997) supports this whole-heartedly. As a teacher, one of his goals is to get every person in the class to make some comment every week. Per the above discussion, he believes this helps the students connect with each other and, at the same time, creates in them a sense of being accepted and affirmed by the group. This goal is not as unreasonable as one might think at first glance. If a class is divided into smaller subgroups for a quick project or for a praying and sharing time, it becomes much more achievable. In fact, it is much more likely, as stated above, that

people will be more willing to participate in a discussion within a small group of four or five than in the context of the larger class.

Another way to encourage discussion, whether in small or large groups, is to focus on application related to the lives of the adults in the Sunday School class. Newcomers to a church environment especially may not feel comfortable discussing Bible topics. This can create a challenge for the group to validate their visitors. The discussion leader should guide the conversation in such a way as to allow those with less Bible knowledge to discuss the practical lessons they have learned in life. This concept is well documented in Sunday School literature. As Lieb (1991) has said:

> It is important to focus on personal application in a Sunday School class. By keeping a Bible-based discussion centered on practical relevance, even newcomers to a church setting can contribute to, or at least see the sense of, the conversation. It is for these reasons that most Southern Baptist adult Sunday School literature is designed at the high school level and contains more application than theology. They are seeking to make visitors as comfortable as possible while still nurturing those who have been studying the Bible for many years.

In the same way, Barnett and Caffarella (1992) have stated that when learning through discussion, adults often seek validation and respect for their experience from the group. Finding such validation binds individuals together through feelings of good will. This is simple common sense backed up by both secular and religious educators. People want to avoid looking foolish and have the opportunity to look smart. Sunday School

ought to provide them that opportunity. A well designed and taught small group Bible study lesson can do that.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

This chapter summarized the results obtained from the participant interviews and identified several trends which emerged from an analysis of the data. It analyzed how the findings relate to the existing literature and drew several conclusions based on that analysis. This chapter also identified six major trends and two subordinate trends from the data collected. In general, the data appears to indicate that the standard Sunday School literature published by the Southern Baptist Convention is correct in saying that stable, age-graded cohorts and interactive small group Bible study lessons promote overall satisfaction with the program and enhance the building of relationships.

Emerging Trend # 1: Young adults value being part of a stable group. The participants consistently expressed appreciation for the idea of being part of a stable group. This was the reason they cited most often for attending. They liked meeting with the same people in the class from week to week and the opportunity it gave them to associate with friends and build relationships.

Emerging Trend # 2: Age-grading Sunday School classes enhances relationship building. The participants generally viewed the issue of belonging to a stable group as separate from belonging to a group defined by age. Still, they all expressed appreciation for being grouped with people of a similar age largely because they assumed it would give them more in common with other members of the group and, therefore, more upon which to base a lasting friendship. A subordinate trend to this was that several of the participants expressed a desire for greater access to and mentorship from older, more

mature Christians. This was surprising because the participants clearly indicated they liked the idea of age-grading Sunday School classes. The researcher recommends further research in the field of moral and professional mentorship.

Emerging Trend # 3: Young adults appreciate the support they get from the class. Another common trend that presented itself was that people like the support offered by their young adult Sunday School class and other small group Bible studies. A subordinate trend, closely associated to the idea of support, was that of accountability. The participants viewed accountability as something to be sought after. In their minds, they looked at being held accountable for the way they live and the choices they make as a way to help them live more closely in line with the Bible. Part of the support they expected from the group was being held accountable for living a godly lifestyle. This suggests that people who are serious enough about their faith to spend time in Sunday School are willing, perhaps even eager, to be challenged to live according to the moral standards required by their religion. As a recommendation, the researcher suggested those running an adult Sunday School class ought to be willing to gently and lovingly confront their students with the obligations God has placed on their lives. It is recommended that further research on this subordinate trend be conducted to see if, indeed, this is a broad-based feeling applicable to a variety of religions, age groups, and ethnicities.

Emerging Trend # 4: Extracurricular activities help build relationships. Informal gatherings were much more important to the participants in this study as a means of getting close to other people and developing relationships than the Sunday School class times themselves. The data indicated three reasons for this. First, the extended time

devoted to the activities apparently allows people more opportunity to warm up to each other than Sunday School. Second, people feel more relaxed in the casual setting provided by the extracurricular activities. Third, people tend to view Sunday School as a time to focus on learning, rather than relationship building. It is recommended Sunday School directors and teachers place more emphasis on informal gatherings to enhance relationship building. It might also be useful to extend the time between Sunday School and the worship service to allow people to spend some informal, unstructured time together after class.

Emerging Trend # 5: Relationships are more important to women than to men. The data indicated that women generally appreciated the fellowship and relationship aspects of the Sunday School class more than did the men. This is consistent both with the literature and common experience. This is not to say the men didn't value relationships. They clearly did. It's just that the feeling was not as strong in men as it was in the women in the group. The use of interactive lessons that teach while providing opportunities to talk to one another may help find a happy medium in which both genders can receive satisfaction from a Sunday School program.

Emerging trend # 6. The Experiential Learning Model (ELM) facilitates relationship building. The patterns which arose from the interviews seem to validate the educational literature, both secular and religious, that interactive lessons such as those following the ELM do foster and promote relationship building. All the participants, in one way or another, suggested that the interactive nature of the Sunday School lessons helped them develop a sense of belonging to the group.

Summary of Implications for Practice

Several implications for practice are suggested by the findings of this research.

1. Designing an adult Sunday School program around age grading cohorts appears to be an effective way to encourage relationship building in a church environment. The participants all expressed appreciation for being grouped with people of a similar age largely because they assumed it would give them more in common with other members of the group and, therefore, more upon which to base a lasting friendship.

2. Churches should consider associating elders or deacons to specific Sunday School classes to act as "shepherds." Elders and deacons are normally expected to assist the pastor in supporting and encouraging church members. If elders and deacons were assigned specific classes, whatever members are in those classes would, therefore, fall under the purview of that elder or deacon. This would streamline the lines of communication in the church and provide the Sunday School class teachers someone to assist and mentor them.

3. Churches should consider providing mentorship opportunities. This would benefit the church in two ways. First, younger Christians would benefit from the wisdom and experience of older Christians. Second, more mature Christians would learn vital leadership skills as they help younger Christians grow in their faith.

4. Churches should provide numerous opportunities for members to participate in unstructured, informal activities to encourage relationship building. This can be done in a variety of ways. One fairly simple step churches could take would be to extend the time (perhaps thirty minutes) between Sunday School and the worship service. Give the people the opportunity to relax and visit with one another. It would probably be wise to provide coffee and some light snacks at the same time to help loosen the atmosphere. In

addition, people in leadership positions should organize small group get togethers outside of normal church settings. Such activities could take the form of parties, pot luck meals, picnics, and informal Bible studies.

5. Adult Sunday School classes should usually incorporate a time for small group breakout sessions. These sessions appear to encourage more interaction, which enhances the students' ability to build relationships. They could take the form of small group projects or simply sharing and prayer times, probably both.

6. Churches should lovingly and gently hold people accountable for adhering to the tenets of their faith. This research suggested that people who are serious enough about their faith to spend time in Sunday School are willing, perhaps even eager, to be challenged to live according to the moral standards required by their religion. Sunday School teachers, as those who are probably closest to the individual members of a church should accommodate that desire. It must be emphasized, however, that this must be done very gently and in a spirit of humility.

Recommendations for Further Study

Most of the above implications for practice come with a caveat: This study was limited to one Sunday School class in a small mid-western city. The participants were all Caucasian, approximately the same age (18 to mid-30's), and from the same local community. It is recommended that further research be conducted to determine if the findings of this research hold true for different age groups, races, and social class.

In addition, several of the participants indicated they would be interested in having more contact with older, more mature Christians. Though they did not specifically say so, this may indicate a desire on their part to develop mentoring

relationships with them. Research should be conducted to see if this is the case and to see if the more mature Christians reciprocate this desire. Would they appreciate and be willing to take the opportunity to mentor younger Christians? This could be a tremendous boon to the spiritual development of both the mentors and those they mentor. Furthermore, research is needed on how to develop and administer a program that would facilitate such mentoring relationships.

In Closing

This study was based on research with a young adult Sunday School class in an evangelical, non-Southern Baptist church. Its purpose was to ascertain whether the recommendations in the Sunday School growth literature published by the Southern Baptist Convention was, in fact, effective in encouraging relationship building among members. More specifically, the study was interested in three aspects of standard Southern Baptist practice. The first is purposefully organizing adult Sunday School classes as age-graded cohorts. The second is designing Sunday School lessons that involve student interaction through the use of group projects and group discussion, as is the case with lessons that follow the Experiential Learning Model. The third is to provide informal, unstructured social opportunities for class members outside of class time.

Although, this study was limited to a relatively small group of people in one Sunday School class, the data appears to indicate that all three Southern Baptist practices are effective in promoting relationship building. Furthermore, this aspect of the class was important to the participants' satisfaction with Sunday School.

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Appendix A - Institutional Review Board Permission

K-STATE
Kansas State University
University Research
Compliance Office
203 Fairchild Hall
Lower Mezzanine
Manhattan, KS 66506-1103
785-532-3224
Fax: 785-532-3278
http://urco.ksu.edu

Proposal Number: 4892

TO: Jane Fishback
Educational Leadership
354 Bluemont

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: November 25, 2008

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Effect of Personal Information on Adult Sunday School Attendance."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for one year from the date of this correspondence, pending "continuing review."**

APPROVAL DATE: November 25, 2008

EXPIRATION DATE: November 25, 2009

Several months prior to the expiration date listed, the IRB will solicit information from you for federally mandated **"continuing review" of the research**. Based on the review, the IRB may approve the activity for another year. **If continuing IRB approval is not granted, or the IRB fails to perform the continuing review before the expiration date noted above, the project will expire and the activity involving human subjects must be terminated on that date. Consequently, it is critical that you are responsive to the IRB request for information for continuing review if you want your project to continue.**

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

☒ There is no more than minimal risk to the subjects.
☐ There is greater than minimal risk to the subjects.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review at least annually, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Appendix B - Kansas State University Informed Consent Document

PROJECT TITLE: **Effect of Personal Interaction on Adult Sunday School Attendance**

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT: **EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): **Dr. Jane Fishback / William L. Page**

CONTACT AND PHONE FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: **William L. Page (913-758-3430)**

IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION:

SPONSOR OF PROJECT: **Kansas State University**

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: **To determine the effect, if any, that developing close personal relationships in an adult Sunday School class has on increasing a person's desire to attend.**

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: **I plan to gather the data from students through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol is designed to allow the participants as much freedom as possible to express their own views. I will tape the interviews and have them transcribed. I will then allow the interviewees to review the transcripts for accuracy.**

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:

Not Applicable

LENGTH OF STUDY: **Six Months**

RISKS ANTICIPATED: **None**

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: **This study may help churches better serve their communities by tailoring Sunday School programs to the needs and desires of adults.**

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: **Your name will not be associated with the results of the study. Only those involved in preparing the study will know which comments are specifically yours.**

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS: **No**

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS: **Not applicable**

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Witness to Signature: (project staff) _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix C - Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol
Project: Dissertation

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer: Bill Page
Interviewee:
Position of interviewee: Class Member

Description of Project: The purpose of this research is to try to understand people's motivations as to why they become involved in adult Sunday School and why they stay involved. This is strictly an interview designed to get your opinions on the subject. There are no right or wrong answers. I am just trying to find out what you think. The interview should take somewhere between forty-five minutes and an hour.

Questions:

1. General Information.

a. What is your religious background?

b. What experiences have you had in Sunday School or other types of Bible study?

c. What was the best Sunday School you can remember being a part of and why did you like it?

d. What are some things you like about this Sunday School class? What things would you like us to keep doing? What things would you change?

2. Class Fellowship Development. One of the things this Sunday School class was supposed to do was help class members develop friendships among themselves. I'd like to ask you some questions about that.

a. What do you think about the idea of age grading classes as opposed to how CBC currently runs their adult Sunday School program?

b. What do you think about having parties, get togethers, etc?

c. What kind of activities outside of Sunday School class would you like to have the group do?

d. Describe the relationships you have with the others in the class. Why do you feel that way?

3. Lesson Design. As you have probably noticed, we try to encourage interaction in the Sunday School class.

a. Describe how you feel about the way the lessons are run week to week.

b. What are your opinions about whether encouraging an interactive adult Sunday School experience adds to a sense of belonging to the group?

4. Is there anything else you would like to add that I might not have thought of?

Appendix D - Church Permission Letter

October 15, 2008

To whom it may concern:

William L. Page has briefed the Elder Board of the on the study he wishes to conduct at this church. He plans to set up an adult Sunday School class as on open cohort for 18-35 year-olds in an attempt to determine if such an arrangement increases member satisfaction with and participation in adult Sunday School.

Mr. Page has our permission to conduct this study with the understanding that we reserve the right to withdraw that permission at anytime should we deem such action to be appropriate.

Appendix E - Experiential Learning Model

Figure E.1 Kolb's Learning Modes

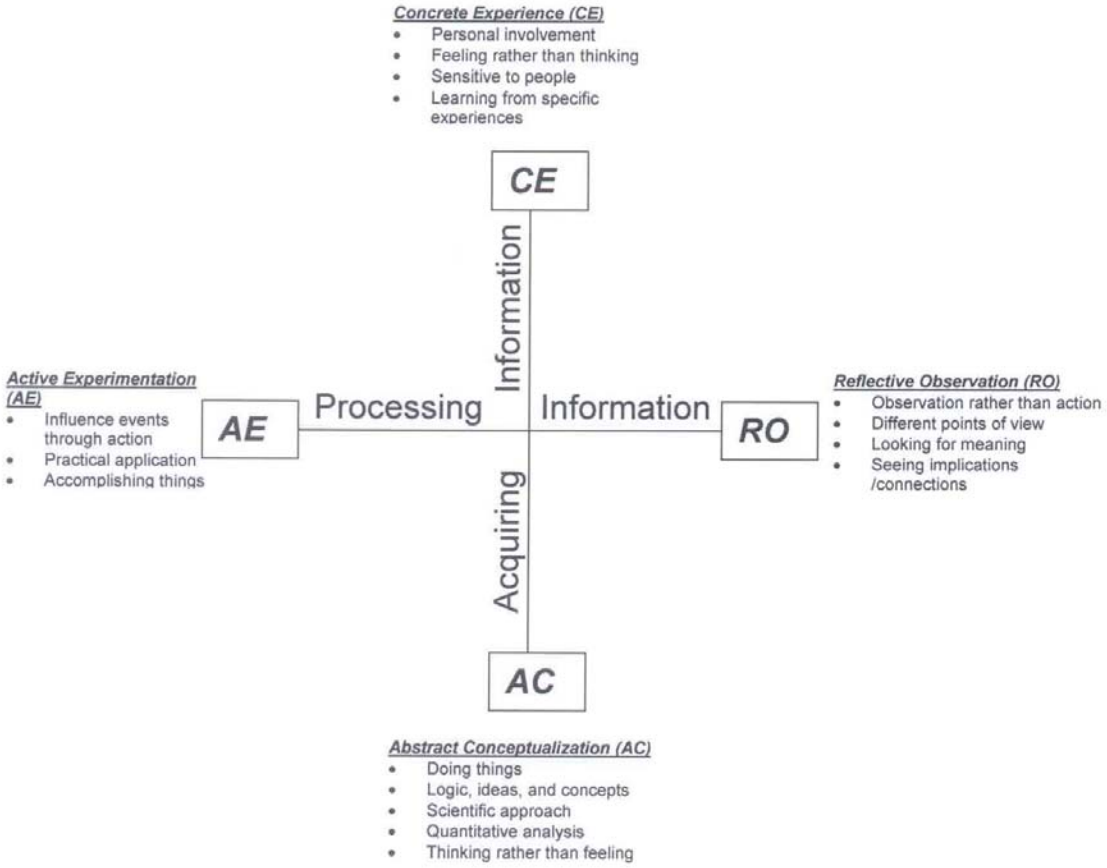


Figure E.2 Kolb's Four Basic Learning Styles

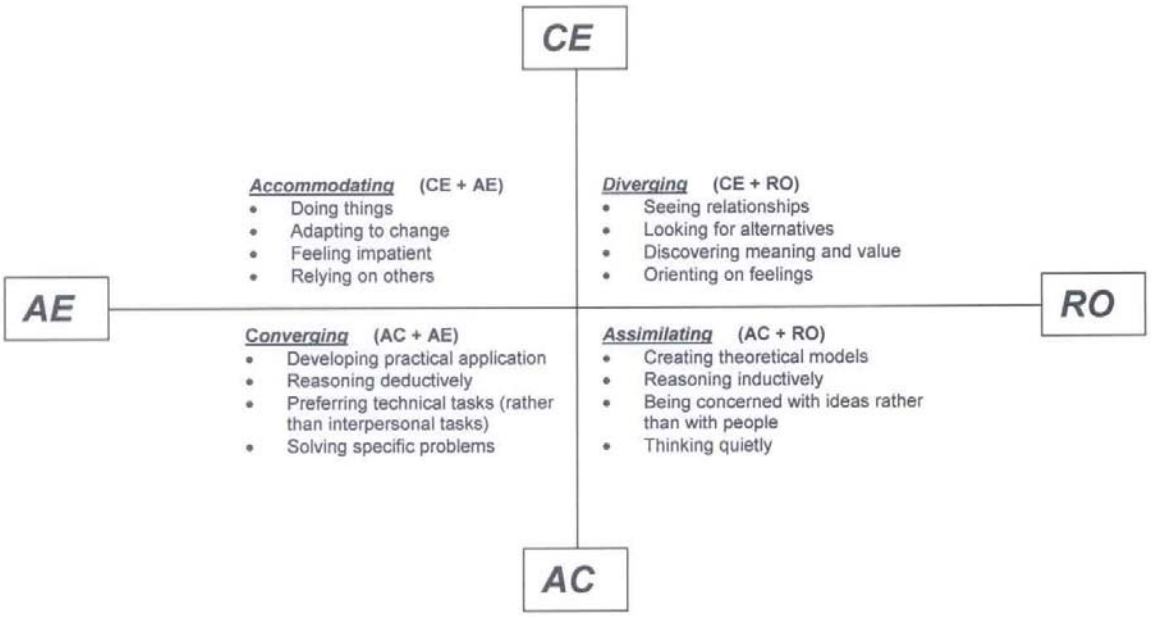
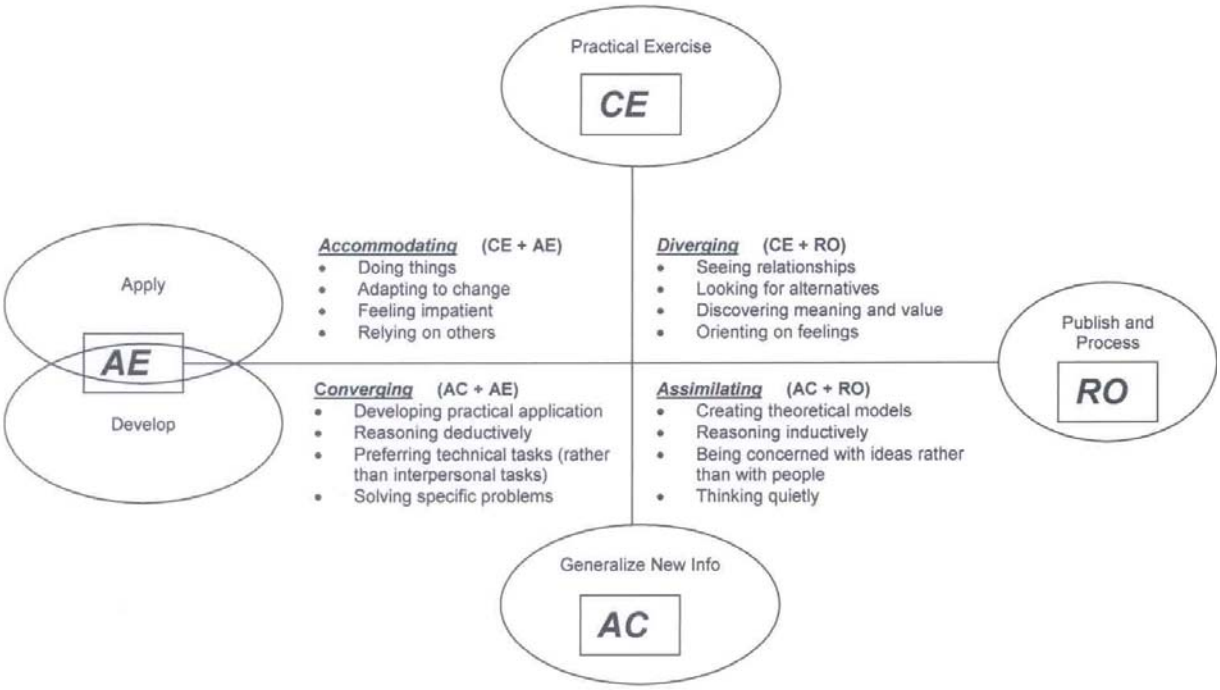


Figure E.3 CGSC Lesson Plan Design



Appendix F - Sample Lesson Plan

Lesson Title: Fullness of Time. Based on Galatians 4:3-4 (But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons).

Learning Objective. The purpose of the lesson is to show that God is always at work in our lives and surroundings to help us and to accomplish His purposes in the world.

Group Project (Concrete Experience). Explain "serendipity" to the class (a fortuitous coincidence). Break into small groups and have students share times in their lives when they felt like what was happening was serendipitous. Try to think of times that they thought were bad that turned out to be really good. After a few minutes of sharing, have everybody come back to the larger group. Invite a couple of people to share a serendipitous experience with the larger group.

Discuss Project (Publish and Process). This is done in the larger group. Use the following questions to guide the discussion.

a. When you were going through the experience, did you think that maybe God had something to do with the timing? Discuss God's constant presence in the lives of people even when they are not concerned with God at the time.

b. Have you ever written something like that down so you can keep a record of it? Journaling can help us recall the work of God in our lives and encourage us for the future. Use it to teach your children.

Transition to Lesson. There were a lot of serendipitous circumstances surrounding the appearance of Christ in the world. The Bible records many of them for us. Galatians 4:3-4 indicates that God sent His Son into the world when the time was right. What we are going to do today is look at how God prepared the world for the coming of Jesus Christ. We will relate that to how God works in the circumstances of our daily lives to help us and to serve His purposes for our lives.

God is always at work in our lives and surroundings to help us and to accomplish His purposes in the world. A lot of people don't see this. We need to be reminded to look. To do this, we are going to examine two passages of Scripture: Romans 8:28 and Galatians 4:3-4.

a. Rom 8:28 (And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.)

(1) He is working for our good. He is personally and actively involved in our lives to our advantage.

(2) There are no wasted pieces in our lives (all things). All means all and that is all, all means. Compare the hymn "Immortal, Invisible." God is never hasting, nor wasting (verse 2).

b. Gal 4:3-4 (But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under

the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons). He does everything at just the right time (fullness of time).

Lesson (Generalize New Information). Develop and Apply are incorporated into the lesson and the attendant discussion.

1. How God prepared the world for the arrival of Jesus Christ.

a. Roman Empire.

(1) Roman roads (Made travel to spread Gospel easier).

(2) Roman government (Pax Romana)

(a) Made moving around to preach easier legally. Only minor bureaucratic issues within the empire.

(b) The census for taxes that brought Mary to Bethlehem

(c) Kept persecution by Jewish leadership in check. Consider Paul who used his Roman citizenship for the Gospel on several occasions.

b. Greek influence

(1) Common language (Koine Greek).

(a) Greece ruled the world prior to the Romans. Through the conquests of Alexander the Great (died in 325 BC) they spread their language all over the known world. Since it was already in place, the Romans adopted it as a universal language for trade, education, etc.

(b) Made it easier to communicate. The average person could talk to anybody.

(c) Very descriptive and precise language to help make the preaching more clear. Also made Scripture accessible to the common man. Consider the Septuagint that was written in Greek so Jews all over Europe could read their Scripture.

(2) Empty philosophy. Culturally predominant throughout the Roman Empire. Did not satisfy the souls of the people. They were seeking something better. Christianity provided that for them.

c. Jewish situation

(1) Jewish Diaspora provided a foothold on the early missionary journeys. This dispersion was the result of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles (600-800 BC).

(2) Jewish Synagogues everywhere.

(3) Dissatisfied with their formal, empty religion. God broke them of their idolatry. They replaced it with extreme legalism. They made an idol of the Law. Caused the average Jew to want to seek a more spiritual relationship with God. Jesus provided them with the opportunity.

2. Lessons Learned.

a. God always goes before us.

(1) Joseph went to Egypt as a slave and became Prime Minister where he was able to save his family.

(2) Consider how God led His people with the pillar of cloud and fire during the Exodus wanderings.

b. God understands the real world and helps us deal with real problems. Roads, Language, Politics, Government Bureaucracy are all very human problems. He is not above thinking about mundane ordinary things and expects us to bring those kinds of

problems to us. He delights in helping us. He wants to build our faith in Him. He understands the realities of the problems we face. God made preparations then and now to help us overcome our difficulties.

c. God cares desperately for the lost. 2 Cor 5:18-20 (Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God).

(1) When we witness to someone it is like God is on His knees begging them to accept Christ so He can save them.

(2) Note the humility of God in sending His Son (cf Phil 2:3-8).

(a) He thinks of us as more important than Himself.

(b) He gave up the constant praise and adoration of heaven to face hatred, humiliation, and harm at the hands of those He was trying to help.

d. God will move heaven and earth to help those He loves.

(1) He has caused the rising and falling of entire nations for the benefit and instruction of His people. He crushed the Egyptian Empire as an example to His people of how powerful He was and how much he cared for them. Consider the nations that God raised up to discipline the Jews (Philistines, Amalekites, etc). He raised up the Persian Empire to conquer the Babylonians so the Persian King could send His people back to Israel. Great or small tasks are no different to Him. Which is harder for God: to give me a dollar when I need it or crush an entire nation? To God it is just the same.

Conclusion (Apply).

a. God always goes before us.

b. God understands the real world and helps us deal with real problems

c. God cares desperately for the lost.

d. God will move heaven and earth to help those He loves.