



Part 1: Creating a Transformational Sunday School | An Interview with Dan Duckworth

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Kurt Francom (Host):

In this episode, I get to let my hair down and relax. I'm here with my friend, Dan, Dan Duckworth.

Dan Duckworth (Guest):

You get to let your hair grow!

Kurt:

That's right! I've let it down. So, you're on the board of directors at Leading Saints, but you're really running the show, right?

Dan:

Oh, yeah. I'm pulling all the puppet strings. You can just see my arms moving around. I'm the boss.

Kurt:

Well, Dan and I are obviously good friends, but we also work together in our efforts at Leading Saints. You run a leadership organization for your day job, but we have the greatest conversations—podcast-worthy conversations that often never get recorded. So, anytime I can just pull you in here and say, "let's chat about stuff," there's always something that comes out of it.

So, when people ask what Leading Saints is, or what your involvement is, how do you describe it?

Dan:

Well, I was just at lunch with some folks, and Leading Saints came up because this guy works with nonprofits, so I was picking his brain a little. They always want to know what it's about, right? The lead-off is always, "Well, we started as a podcast." But if you could only see what we're going to become...

Kurt:

Yeah.

Dan:

His ears kind of perked up, and so we talked a bit about the idea of a mission to help bring Zion into the local experience of the Church. I think that's the exciting part about what we get to talk about and work on as an organization: Where is this headed? What are we creating? We've amassed a following of hundreds of thousands of people. So, how do we use that influence to further the work of the Church?

Kurt:

Yeah. We often talk about Zion-building, and that may be a new concept or framing for some listeners, but it's definitely the direction we're headed. How do you see the connection between leadership and Zion? Why "Leading Saints" and not "The Zion Podcast" or something like that? Why is this a leadership thing?

Dan:

Interestingly, the folks I was with—both marketers—instantly said, "We love the name Leading Saints because it's so specific. Clearly for Latter-day Saints, clearly about leadership." And, you know, when you think about Zion—if you define Zion as an exalted, unified community, gathered in Christ—this is a group of people of one heart and one mind. That never happens without leadership. Zion is the dream of all true leaders: to create a Zion community. And leadership and Zion are inseparable, two sides of the same coin. You can't have Zion unless you have transformational leadership, because the current state is not Zion. And without leadership, any Zion community would break down into entropy—disorder, eventually destruction.

So, leadership is the function of constantly creating or renewing the spirit of that community, the unity, and the basis for their identity.

Kurt:

I like to frame it as leadership being culture-building, or establishing culture. Anything a leader does contributes to culture, but it's not up to you to do it all, or to prod people along—the very nature of the community starts moving in that positive direction. When I think of the most religious word for "culture," I think "Zion," right? That's what we're trying to establish: a culture in our faith community, and that's Zion.

Dan:

Yeah, and every new leader who's called, at least those who really identify as leaders, have this desire to create Zion—how to create an amazing, extraordinary community, whether that's in a

ward council, a ward, a branch, Relief Society, or Elders Quorum. You were just called as Elders Quorum President—instantly, your heart and mind went to, “How do we transform this into something amazing?”

Kurt:

Yeah! Sometimes, when people hear “culture,” they say, “Oh, that’s not doctrine, that’s just culture,” as if culture is bad and needs to be gotten rid of. But the reality is, it’s not about getting rid of culture—we want to stimulate a really positive culture that facilitates the doctrine.

Dan:

Exactly. Culture is a hidden force—the memory of a thousand moments. Formally, culture is the imprint that the past makes on our choices in the present. We remember the way things have been done, the behaviors that get rewarded or punished. Over time, the goal of the community can become survival—so the culture reinforces safe, comfortable, predictable behaviors. When those no longer align with our goals, culture is a problem because it keeps us entrenched in the status quo.

But the work of leaders is to transcend or transform culture so you have a memory that supports your highest goals and ideals. When culture supports those things, it becomes a positive force. People can step in and immediately recognize, “This is how we roll. These are the behaviors that get us the results we want.” We’re no longer focused on comfort or safety, but on culture and behaviors that align with our mission—whether that’s preparing for the Second Coming, ministering to the sick and afflicted, or something else.

Kurt:

And in our faith tradition, we want to “follow the brethren,” so we often wait for cultural cues to come down from general authorities. Sometimes we don’t give ourselves permission to create culture; we feel like that’s not our role, that our job is just to unlock doors on Sunday, turn on lights, make sure there’s someone to pass the sacrament. That can be really limiting. What comes to mind when it comes to getting people out of that mentality? Sometimes it feels like we just need to wait for the general Church to tell us what to do.

Dan:

This is a problem. The analogy that’s been on my mind recently is Jacob chapter 5, the allegory of the olive tree, where the Lord of the vineyard comes down and gives instructions. In the last five or ten years, especially early in President Nelson’s ministry, we were getting directives from Salt Lake: “We want you to change”—ministering, Sunday School, youth programs, sacrament, whatever it is. In the allegory, once the Lord gives instructions, the laborers are supposed to go and labor, make the change happen.

We’ve had some great examples where leaders took those new instructions and created, innovated, did the culture-building work you’re talking about. But, by and large, if you look around the Church, things look the same as before those changes were implemented. It’s as if the Lord gave instructions and the laborers just said, “Oh, okay. I guess this is the new way it’ll

be,” and waited for things to change on their own. But in the parable, it’s the laborers who go and make the changes happen.

Kurt:

Yeah, and that’s the power of culture—it pulls us back to the status quo. Again, we’re not trying to be broadly critical, but how different does ministering look compared to home teaching? Does Sunday School feel different with “Come, Follow Me”? Has the two-hour block really shifted much? Some even say it’s hurt the culture because we aren’t engaging enough.

Dan:

Let me share an analogy from my recent reading in “Come, Follow Me.” In 3rd Nephi, after the catastrophic destruction, the people experience grief beyond description. Then they hear the voice of Christ in the darkness, and their grief turns to inexplicable joy. What do they do next? They go to the temple to gather. It specifies that they gather to “marvel and wonder and show each other the great changes that had been taking place.”

That hit me—that’s the natural order of church. Not the institution of Church, but the idea that those affected by Christ naturally want to gather in Christ. They want to find others and say, “Hey, if you haven’t heard, let me show you the great changes!” They want to marvel and wonder together. If you’ve had these changes, I want to hear you marvel. If you haven’t, you can “bask in the light”—if he did that for you, what could he do for me?

I’m currently Stake Sunday School President and have been for about 18 months, so I think a lot about the nature of teaching. When I read that, I saw the contrast between what we experience in typical church settings and that spontaneous, dynamic exchange of witness in Christ. Those who’ve experienced Him can come and marvel to others, and those who need it can bask in that light. It’s very different from our typical, organized, scripted experience.

Everything the Brethren have done with changes over the last 10 years has been about opening up—giving more choice and flexibility, but also greater responsibility and higher expectations for leaders to actually lead out, create structures and patterns that reinforce these new goals. By and large, we haven’t done that work as local leaders, so the culture comes back in and defaults to the old way. Sunday School looks like it always did—not fundamentally changed.

Kurt:

So, let’s make that practical. For some, following that example—everyone gathering to marvel and wonder—might feel “loosey-goosey.” We like our structure: this is the time for sacrament, then someone speaks, then we have Sunday School. How do we, as local leaders, create space for openness, give people the chance to grow, but not surrender all control?

Dan:

Let’s go back to another part of 3rd Nephi. Jesus gives His sermon to the people. First, He talks to the leaders, then He addresses the general gathering, giving doctrine. But then He says, essentially, “I have a script from the Father, but I can’t get through it all because you’re too weak.” So He’s willing to deviate from even that script. In chapter 17, He really deviates: He

calls together the sick, heals, brings children—all the things we say church should be. He's led by the Spirit, adapting to needs. That's the paradox: having a script, but being inherently flexible.

When you institutionalize church—set a time and place, meet every week at 9 a.m.—you create valuable systems. But when the system falls out of line with the objectives, it's the leader's job to dismantle and adapt those systems. Before doing anything practical, you have to ask: What is the actual purpose? What are we trying to accomplish? I've grappled with this for 18 months, attending as many as five Sunday School classes every Sunday, and what I can say is the typical Sunday School class is broken. It's not achieving its objectives. Before you can fix that, you have to start with its purpose.

Kurt:

The best part is, people may think this is trying to “make people rebels” or be “renegades” in the culture, but it doesn't require that. We've been given so much flexibility. Many of us have keys—the authority to drive, direct, and innovate. It's not about blowing up the system and starting from scratch. Even our own experience in Elders Quorum and the Stake Sunday School have given us ways to try these principles and get traction.

Dan:

You don't have to look further than the Book of Mormon, or even than Jesus. These are examples of people showing that when systems, processes, and culture aren't aligned with objectives, you have to break down the “traditions of our fathers”—ancient language for “culture.” When those traditions or systems work, great. When they no longer get us where we need to go, leaders must replace them. That's what Jesus did—He brought in the new, did away with the old. Sometimes local leaders feel like only the Brethren can do that, and it's not safe space for us. But go back to Jacob 5. The Lord said, “You are instructed to transform the way Sunday School and ministering and the youth program works.” That is now your labor, to figure out how to transform them in line with true principles.

“Teaching in the Savior's Way” and “Come, Follow Me” are full of principles of transformational teaching, but we often only pay lip service. The effectiveness of a Sunday School class now depends almost entirely on the individual gift and talent of the teacher. Anyone can be called, and most will do something very similar to what has always been done—a bit more lively, a better PowerPoint, but it's still knowledge transfer. But the gospel is about becoming. Elder Oaks has said, unlike other institutions or forms of preaching, the gospel isn't about knowing, it's about becoming. That's what these Church changes are begging us to step into, but we don't always know how.

Kurt:

This is when people ask, “So what are the five steps? What's the new, reinvented Sunday School? Just tell me what to do and we'll do it.” But at Leading Saints, we try never to present the one right way. We give you a selection—what's this person doing, what's that group doing, where are you feeling guided? The beauty is your Stake Sunday School doesn't have to look like the one down the street. Each group can find different revelation and direction.

Dan:

Right, just like laboring in the vineyard—different laborers in different areas, all acting on the same instructions, but adapting locally. So, what our stake has been trying to do: I spent the first 12 to 15 months just observing. As a professional, I do a lot of teaching, though I'm not a trained teacher. As a leadership development professional, my goal is transformation and character change—not teaching a ten-step model of leadership, but creating conditions where someone is more likely to develop as a leader.

Similarly, in church, my focus is on teaching for becoming, not knowledge transfer. How do you do that at a stake level? You can't just walk in and say, "Here's what great teaching looks like." I've been in those stake meetings before, where someone tried to model great teaching but actually violated half the principles they were preaching!

In the Church, most of us called as teachers haven't experienced real transformational teaching—we don't even know what it looks like, or how to recognize it. At best, we think of Socratic methods, role playing, or experiential learning, but even those are often used for knowledge transfer. It's really about the instructional intent. What do you actually want to do? If you're just trying to get people to know something, you've limited yourself. What if you empower students to become something? That's where you start restoring the "natural order"—removing things from typical Sunday experiences that unnecessarily reinforce didactic, classroom-style learning.

For example, Jesus rarely taught in synagogues; and when He did, it was usually to shake things up. Most of His teaching was on the hillside, in the plains, on the seashore, or on the road. What if church was out walking and talking? It's not impossible—we've done it. In my class, if weather permits, we walk around the church building a few times while we talk. Even inside, you can change the physical cues—don't have everyone sit in rows facing you. Make a circle. Involve everyone. We've done this with 30 people, I've seen it with 60. Or at times, the room is packed and people are shoulder-to-shoulder, but transformational teaching is happening.

Kurt:

Yeah, I've heard it said people are often in "beta state"—passively listening. But if you do something, even something small, to shift their mindset ("alpha state"), suddenly they're engaged, participating. Whether it's a walk outside, rearranging the room, or just going someplace they didn't expect. It's a challenge sometimes, as we have to work with the space and logistics of a church building, but there are always creative ways. The principle is: disrupt the beta state, get them into a new state of mind, and then you can really work with them. If you only ask more poignant questions, sometimes people still just blink at you like before.

Dan:

If you say, "I'm going to ask a question, give you 60 seconds of silence, and then each of you will have a chance to vocalize what you're thinking," people realize, "Oh, I'm going to be involved. I have to participate." It changes the engagement. There are a thousand techniques to

increase engagement, and I'm no expert on all of them, but the most important thing is experimentation.

Recently, Elder Kearon spoke in General Conference about the "Church of Joy." It was a moving description, but that's not what most church experiences look like—they're not joyful. You can either try to engineer behavior ("Make church look joyful," which risks becoming inauthentic) or ask yourself as a teacher, "Are my people truly engaged? Am I willing to deviate from my script to experiment?" Maybe it's not the script I brought, but the cultural script—am I willing to break a norm, try something new, in order to bring people into this experience?

Look at Jesus again in 3rd Nephi: He says, "I perceive that you are weak. Something needs to change. I'm leaving." But, in reality, that's not what they needed! They needed Him to stay. When He realizes it, He stays and does miracles, then brings the children, stops to pray. He's adaptable, reads the energy of the group, changes course.

Recently, we held a gathering at my home to introduce transformational teaching concepts to people in our stake. The whole focus was on energy—managing room energy and engagement is the teacher's responsibility. You can say, "It's this new generation, it's technology," but if people are on their phones, that's a barometer of how engaged they are. The second they pull out their phone, I know I need to change. I don't tell them to put them away. I know I need to do something different.

Kurt:

That's powerful. So, as Stake Sunday School President, how do you keep the purpose of Sunday School in front of people's minds?

Dan:

We like to go to the Handbook, and those answers are there, but there's also lots of room for creativity within those guidelines. The Handbook says the purpose of Sunday School (or Relief Society, or Elders Quorum, etc.) relates to the work of salvation and exaltation. But then each organization has a more specific purpose: Sunday School exists "to help members learn and live the gospel of Jesus Christ." But what does that actually mean?

If you don't have a clear, disruptive, or provocative vision for what "learning and living the gospel" means, you'll default to what you've always known—usually a passive, "sit and listen" approach, just for the transfer of information.

There's another way to approach purpose—what Aristotle called the "self-evident purpose." To know the purpose of something, you don't ask its creator or read the manual, you look at its unique characteristics. Over the past 18 months, I see three primary characteristics unique to Sunday School.

First, the **membership**: We're all members or affiliates of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, coming with a spiritual need—everyone, every time. We may have different intellectual desires, but what unites us is a need to understand our lives through the gospel, get help and guidance, and make sense of things spiritually.

There's also no gender separation (like in Relief Society or Elders Quorum), but we do separate by age, which tells us that spiritual development is connected to age-related life experiences.

Second is the **teacher**: In Sunday School, teachers are unskilled, untrained, often unmotivated lay members—peers, not experts or professional instructors. Therefore, the purpose cannot be religious instruction from a position of expertise or authority—we are peers on a shared journey.

Contrast this with seminary or institute, where the expectation is more for good, didactic instruction.

Third is the **gathering aspect**: Even as individuals on individual journeys, there's a reason for the gathering. Spiritual development is communal. People in 3rd Nephi needed each other to understand what had happened in their lives. In Sunday School, we need each other to make sense of our personal journey, and in helping each other, our own journey makes more sense.

So, even though we enter and exit as individuals (unlike Relief Society or Elders Quorum, which have an identity beyond the class), Sunday School is about individuals coming together for collective engagement—introspection and dialogue, not passive learning or knowledge transfer.

Kurt:

That's fascinating. So, the role of the teacher is to facilitate engagement—introspection and dialogue. Not just sharing expertise, but creating authentic exploration and meaning-making together. What's the practical application for teachers who want to escape the old habit of being anxious, over-prepared lecturers?

Dan:

I'd challenge any teacher to spend time exploring the true purpose of Sunday School, developing their own vision beyond what I've said. If they imagine a highly engaged Sunday School—not just “fun” but people introspecting, dialoguing, exploring and sharing their personal journeys—they'll understand their role differently. The teacher's job is to facilitate engagement.

It can take weeks, months, even years to gain real mastery, but like Jesus, be willing to watch for engagement and adapt as needed—even from the script you wrote last night, or from the “unwritten order” of church.

I challenge you to read “Teaching in the Savior's Way” with this lens. You'll find not only permission, but constant encouragement for you to experiment, innovate, and do something different, based on principles that—through this lens—will speak much more powerfully.

If I simply give you a list of 20 possible things to try, and you don't go on your own journey, you'll just show up and revert to old habits and knowledge transfer. You have to go on the journey yourself to become the type of teacher who can facilitate true character development and spiritual transformation.