

# The 3D Sunday School

A Three Dimensional Strategy To Help Members  
and Leaders Fulfill the Great Commission

David Francis



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# A Lay-led Movement

Sunday School is a member-led movement. Yes, a movement! For over two centuries, God has used the Sunday School as an effective tool for fulfilling the Great Commission. If you are a member of a Sunday School class or small group Bible study, this book is for you. Most books about Sunday School are intended only for leaders. While this book has lots of ideas leaders can use, it is also written to equip members to fulfill the Great Commission.

Has your Sunday School become just a program? Unfortunately, people in many Sunday Schools have lost their Great Commission passion. Would you like to be a part of a movement? God is at work among people who seek Him. *The 3D Sunday School* is an effort to bring renewed focus and purpose to Bible study classes and groups across North America as they partner with God to bring people to Himself.

## It’s for You . . . but Not *Just* About You!

Millions of people have been challenged by Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Almost every reader remembers the jolting introduction, “*It’s not about you.*” Is that true of Sunday School? Let’s just say that Sunday School is not designed to be *just* about you! To be sure, there are enormous benefits to being a member of a Sunday School class and tremendous blessings from serving as a Sunday School leader. But it’s not *just* about you!

Let me be clear about the primary purpose behind *The 3D Sunday School*. It is to focus members and leaders across North America on life-changing opportunities to be engaged in Great Commission work through Sunday School. This book intentionally focuses on three simple dimensions of Sunday School work to motivate you to commit to become a 3D Sunday School class or group. If you are okay with an inward-focused Sunday School or are satisfied with a Sunday School that just meets for one hour a week, you won’t like this book. But if you’re interested in discovering how you can be part of an effective three-dimensional strategy to turn your class into a balanced Great Commission team, then this book is for you!

## What if We Don’t Call It “Sunday School”?

Some churches use a different name for Sunday School: Bible Study, Bible Fellowships, LIFE Groups. A few churches operate their Bible study ministry on days other than Sunday, using names like Home Teams, Community Groups, or simply Small Groups. We will use the term “Sunday School” throughout this book to refer to any type of ongoing Bible study or small-group ministry that functions like a Sunday School.

Sunday School is not limited to doing Great Commission work on Sundays, and it is certainly more than a school. So why do we still call it Sunday School? Simply because



Sunday School still has remarkable name recognition across our country. It is ingrained in American culture. Like brands such as Coke™ and Kleenex™ that have become generic expressions for soda pop and facial tissue, Sunday School is understood widely as a Bible study activity many people enjoy in addition to worship services. While Sunday School is a term that is recognizable to churched and unchurched persons, whatever you call your Bible study ministry, it can be “3D” too!

## The Three Dimensions of a Balanced Sunday School

A 3D Sunday School helps people **invite**, **discover**, and **connect**. If you are a veteran Sunday School leader, you may see a parallel to the three terms *reach*, *teach*, and *minister*. Those classic terms make up another excellent framework for achieving a balanced and focused Sunday School. *Reach*, *teach*, and *minister* are three tasks for leaders. They indicate what leaders do. But remember: This book is first of all for members. *Invite*, *discover*, and *connect* are three dimensions that benefit and involve every member.

Members	Leader
Invite	Reach
Discover	Teach
Connect	Minister

Members of a 3D Sunday School class view the class as more than a group of friends enjoying Bible study and fellowship. They see the class as a Great Commission team. 3D Sunday School class members covenant together with prayerful and strategic intent to execute all three dimensions of a balanced Sunday School.

- Members enter into a kingdom “conspiracy” to work together to make their class a safe and hospitable environment that motivates members to **invite** unchurched **F**riends, **R**elatives, **A**ssociates, and **N**eighbors (FRANs). In a 3D class, members invite people not merely because the class is responsible for getting people to attend Bible study, but rather because the class is responsible for attending to the lives of those people.
- Members in a 3D class covenant together to create small group experiences in which people **discover** the great truths of the Bible and the faith stories of believers.
- Members in a 3D class work together to provide people the opportunity to **connect** through fellowship and ministry.



## How Sunday Schools Get Out of Balance

Let's consider for a moment how Sunday Schools get out of balance. The good news is that getting unbalanced is seldom intentional; it just sort of happens over time.

The three dimensions get out of balance when one dimension becomes more important than others. The three dimensions express the Great Commission's charge: go, baptize, teach. Jesus commanded us to take the good news to people, to assimilate them, and guide them into lifelong discipleship. All three Great Commission dimensions are important.

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." Sound okay? But this reflects a misunderstanding about the intent of Sunday School to reach and incorporate—*invite and connect*—new people. Remember: It's not *just* about you!

If assimilating people—getting them connected and involved—is the primary function of Sunday School, just the opposite may happen. Intentional discovery of Bible truths and how they apply to life may take a back seat to fellowship. Many churches have adopted a view that the worship service as the "front door"—the place through which people are first exposed to the church. The Sunday School is viewed primarily as the assimilation strategy for those who have come through worship. It's where people get connected. But if the Sunday School surrenders evangelistic outreach, a class may turn inward. Participants find it increasingly difficult to sustain a passion for reaching out—even to new church members.

Others have attempted to lift up outreach and evangelism as the most important dimension of Sunday School. This mindset is probably a reaction to the reality that outreach and evangelism seldom become the most important dimensions in practice. I have never heard a Sunday School leader share this problem: "We are inviting so many people that we cannot get them connected and help them have a good Bible study experience." Wouldn't it be wonderful if this was the primary challenge of your Sunday School? I am confident that if classes will make the *invite* dimension more deliberate, they will figure out a way to keep the *discover* and *connect* dimensions in balance!

*Invite, discover, and connect* are intentionally interrelated—like the three sides of triangle. The key to having a 3D Sunday School is balance. The three dimensions actually should be viewed as three strands of a rope or cord. The third strand always gives strength to the other two. Which of the three strands is most important? Each of them and all of them! The same is true with a 3D Sunday School.



## Sunday School Gets High Marks in Growing Churches

In his book *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (1999, Broadman and Holman), Dr. Thom Rainer reported on what made some churches more effective at “closing the back door” than others. One important characteristic was a commitment to Sunday School. Here are a few quotes:

Sunday School is neither neglected nor accidental in the churches that are closing the back door. To the contrary, the churches that we surveyed were highly intentional in their approach to Sunday School. . . . What we learned from these churches is that no organization in America today provides more opportunities for ministry than the Sunday School. (pp. 39-40)

Virtually all of the higher-assimilation churches in our study used a comprehensive plan to teach the Bible to all age groups. For most these churches, the denominational Sunday School curriculum served this purpose well. (p. 42)

The new Christians who immediately became active in the Sunday School were *five times* more likely to remain in the church five years later. And those churches that were emphasizing evangelism through the Sunday School were most naturally seeing new Christians involved immediately in Sunday School. (p. 45)

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)

We have known that Sunday School is a vital component of the past for American churches. Its history is almost as old as our nation itself. But more and more the research indicated that Sunday School is not only our past, it is our future as well. (p. 47)

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr Rainer, well-known for the type of research cited in this book, became President of LifeWay Christian Resources in February 2006.

# 3D Sunday School: *Invite*

Much research has been done on why people come to church. Are people attracted by a dynamic worship experience? a great children’s ministry? an exciting student ministry? special events? direct mail? Actually, 80-90 percent of people surveyed say they first came to the church they currently attend because someone invited them. Everything we’ve mentioned can provide the reason to invite someone to Sunday School or church. But programs and ministries alone seldom magnetically attract people. People who are being blessed by their experiences at church invite other people to experience that blessing. There is not a more powerful outreach tool than the personal invitation. Invite people into your circle of friends. Invite people to church. Invite people to become a follower of Jesus. Invite people to become involved in ministry and missions.

## **The Group Must Be Open**

A 3D 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.

## **The Members Enroll People**

Leaders and members alike in a 3D Sunday School class invite any person—indeed, every newcomer—to enroll at any time. Will people enroll in Sunday School? Yes! But leaders and members must invite them to enroll! I have founds it remarkably easy to enroll new members over the telephone. For many years as a minister of education, my goal was to enroll at least one person in Sunday School before leaving the office on Wednesday evening. The conversation usually went something like this:

“Hi, Jim, this is David Francis from First Baptist Church. I’ve seen you and your family visiting our Bible study, and wanted to know if you would like to be enrolled in Sunday School?” Typically, they would respond with something like “We’re not really ready to make a commitment to the church yet.” I would reply, “You don’t have to make a commitment to church membership to become a member of the Sunday School. We have a lot of people who attend our church who enroll as Sunday School members while they are considering whether to become church members—or Christians. If you choose to enroll in a Bible study



group, you'll enjoy most of the benefits of church membership. We'll put you on the permanent mailing list to receive our church newsletter. We'll even send you offering envelopes! About the only things you can't do is hold a leadership position or vote in business meetings. And the best thing is that you won't have to fill out any more visitor forms!"

After some brief laughter, almost everyone agreed to enroll. When they asked what they needed to do, I assured them they didn't need to do anything. When they came Sunday morning, they—and their children—would be members of the Sunday School class they were attending. People want to belong. *Invite* them to enroll!

## The Invitation Must be Intentional

Inviting unchurched people to enroll is the primary way a Sunday School class grows, too. But it seldom happens unless class members decide to enroll newcomers "on purpose." Many churches are re-learning the need and priority of engaging members in making weekly visits to prospects and inviting them to Sunday School. Churches using *FAITH Sunday School Evangelism Strategy*®, *G.R.O.W.*, and other intentional evangelism and contact strategies are finding success as inviting becomes intentional. Burnt Hickory Baptist Church, in Powder Springs, Georgia, is an example of a growing church with a vision statement that makes their intention clear: "Passionately Pursuing People." Sunday School classes—called LIFE Groups at Burnt Hickory—are given the opportunity to commit to be "3P" classes. To be designated 3P, the class must agree to (1) make a contact with every visitor within one week of receiving a prospect assignment and (2) assign every new church member to a care group leader, who will have face-to-face contact with that member within two weeks of receiving the name. Minister of Education Marty Godfrey will only make such assignments to 3P classes because he knows he can trust them to invite prospective and new members.

## The Enrollment Impacts Attendance

Nationally, Sunday School attendance averages about 50 percent of enrollment. Some churches have a higher percentage, but 3D Sunday Schools don't pay too much attention to percentages. Members simply make a habit of inviting every newcomer and guest to enroll in Sunday School, not because of the commitment the new member makes to the class, but for the commitment the class makes to the new member!

Historically, there is an almost inexplicable correlation between enrollment and attendance. If enrollment grows, attendance goes up. If enrollment drops, attendance declines! So 3D Sunday Schools understand the importance of enrollment and attendance as a gauge for how the work of inviting is going. 3D Sunday Schools don't drop absentees from the ministry roll. They just keep inviting them!

## Open Doors of Opportunity to Invite

### Share your Sunday School Testimony

Every Christian should be equipped to give a personal testimony about his or her relationship with Christ: his or her life before meeting Christ, how he/she was introduced to Him, and how her/his life has been different since she/he decided to follow Jesus. But sometimes that's awkward. So a Sunday School testimony may be the tool you need to help you invite someone to give your class a try. There's no set formula. 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. Then invite that person to come as your guest!

### Respond During Crises and Life's Frontiers

People are very receptive to an offer of help or expression of concern when they are experiencing one of life's big transitions, challenges, or frontiers (things they've never experienced before). Satan may whisper to us, *"Give them some space; that's all they need."* As usual, he is a liar! People need people during life's crises. Sometimes we need to *"weep with those who weep"* (Romans 12:15b) when death, disease, or divorce strike. Sometimes we need to *"rejoice with those who rejoice"* (Romans 12:15a) with the birth of a child, a wedding, an anniversary, a promotion, or a new home.

Take new residents, for example. Those who have made a new home in a new place are unusually receptive to invitations from neighbors. Some young adult classes watch the newspaper for announcements of weddings and births, and follow up with an invitation to their class. One class had members who would hang out in the baby food aisle for a few minutes when they were in the grocery store, creating conversation with new parents and seeing if God presented an opportunity to invite the parents to Bible study. As I write this, the news is filled with the stories of thousands of families who evacuated the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. Churches and individuals opened up their hands, hearts, and homes to show hospitality and share hope with people in crisis. *Influence* people by the way you live. Give them hope through words of comfort and encouragement. *Invest* in them through acts of kindness. *Invite* them to join your Bible study group. The formula works, especially when people are facing a new frontier in their lives.

## Invite Whom?

### Invite FRANs

I first heard this term used by my friend and mentor Bill Bryan, who served successfully as a minister of education in several churches and influenced Sunday School work in countless other churches across our nation. FRAN is an acronym that stands for Friends, Relatives, Associates, and Neighbors. While strangers respond to invitations to church or Christ, the most responsive people are those in your existing social networks. People you play with, care for, work with, or live near. They're watching you. You have the opportunity to be a positive influence on them by the way you live. You invest in your relationship with them through acts of kindness and words of encouragement. Maybe you've dropped hints about church. That's great . . . but not enough. You need to *invite* them. The percentages are on your side that they'll say yes!

### Invite Worship Attenders

In most churches with a Sunday School related to their primary weekly worship experience, 70-90 percent of those attending worship on any given weekend will also attend Sunday School. Who are the 10-30 percent who don't? Some are visitors, just checking out the church. Others are regular attenders who have not joined. Still others are members who have not seen the value of smaller group membership. While these folk are often encouraged from the pulpit and in print to find a group, the reality is most people will respond only to something else: an invitation! And they are already attending the church. The possibilities are more pronounced if your church—for space or philosophical



reasons—operates its small group ministry at a day or place apart from the worship service. In this environment, typically only 20-40 percent of worship attenders will be in attendance in a small group each week. That means that over half the people in worship may be candidates for your small group! Find out who they are. Get to know them. *Invite* them!

### Invite the Kids

Children and students will invite their friends to Sunday School. They just need to be encouraged to do so. Perhaps the primary advantage of an on-campus Sunday School ministry is that there is a class for everyone in the family—all at the same time. A preschool minister in the Houston area related this story:

A young couple visited the church, which operates a “flip-flop” schedule (simultaneous worship and Sunday School followed by simultaneous worship and Sunday School). After returning from the late worship service to retrieve their preschooler, a staff member asked if the newcomers had had a good experience or had any questions. They responded, “Yes, we noticed that when we were going into worship, people were leaving, and looked like they were headed someplace. And the people who were coming into worship looked like they had all come from the same place. What’s the deal?” The staff member informed them that about half the folks went to Bible study first, and then worship, while the others attended worship first, followed by Sunday School. They replied, “Cool. And what about the kids?” She explained that preschoolers were cared for and taught during both sessions, while children and students attended worship with their parents. With a great deal of excitement, they responded, “Wow! You have worship and your small group on Sunday mornings, and don’t have to worry about what to do with your child or what they’ll be learning. That’s cutting edge! You should tell some other churches about this!”

Cutting edge? Hardly. Make sense? Absolutely! Whole families will come . . . when we invite them!

### Invite How?

#### Make Face-to-Face Invitations

An invitation by mail—especially email—is efficient, and a phone call is yet more personal. But there is nothing more effective than a face-to-face invitation. “Visitation” still works. And it’s hard—yet rewarding—work. A 3D Sunday School has a plan for following up with



guests through personal contact. In metropolitan areas, driving distances can make visiting in homes challenging. But nothing beats looking into someone's face as you invite them to your class or witness to them about Christ. Just knock on the door; introduce yourself; thank the person for visiting; give them printed information, a gift, or an appropriate magazine; and invite them to your class. Once you've seen their face—and they have seen yours—you can make contacts by mail, email, or phone. When they do come to class, they'll see a familiar face.

## Leave Something with Them

It's always more comfortable to make a visit when you have something to deliver. Some churches have a "baker's ministry." Breads or cookies prepared by members are delivered to first-time guests. Other churches prepare a gift bag, with information about the church and a mug, ballpoint pen, or some other "ad specialty" item. You could take an appropriate magazine such as *ParentLife*, *Living with Teenagers*, *HomeLife*, *Mature Living*, or devotional guide. When Vickie and I visited Neptune Baptist Church while on a trip to the Jacksonville, Florida area, we each received a bag. One was blue, the other pink, with items specific to male and female guests, including a copy of *Stand Firm* for the men and *Journey* for women. Many preschool and children's teachers deliver take-home sheets to families, with a note of encouragement.

## Distribute Literature

Offer prospective members a copy of the Bible study materials used by the group. Sunday Schools have emphasized delivering new Bible study materials to newcomers, members, and at the beginning of each quarter. This approach remains an effective reason to drop by for a quick "at the door" visit with active and inactive members. If the task is divided among leaders and active members, it's a very achievable way to invite people to get involved. Whether you make it a group or individual effort, people can use Bible study material as a tool for inviting FRANs. Imagine the conversation: "We are studying something very interesting in our class right now. I think this might be something that would interest you. If you'd like, I'd be happy to get an extra copy of the Bible study material for you." If your FRAN responds positively to the offer, you've got a reason to continue the conversation later. And—of course—invite them to attend your group! They will feel more comfortable attending because they can look ahead and know what the class will be discussing.



### Stay in Touch

One invitation is seldom enough. It may take at least 20 touches of some kind to get a person to respond to an invitation the first time. Many previously unchurched people testify with thanksgiving to the persistent—but gentle—efforts of a Christian who did not give up on them. Wrap your invitations in love. Back them up with genuine care and sincere prayer. Be creative. Just don't give up!

### Provide an Empty Chair

One key symbol of a 3D Sunday School class is the empty chair. Lyman Coleman, founder of small group resource pioneer Serendipity House ([www.serendipityhouse.com](http://www.serendipityhouse.com)), popularized this concept. The idea is to always have an empty chair (or two if yours is a couples class). What if the room is packed full? Find a way to have an extra chair! Any empty chair is a constant reminder that the class is not just about us! The chair also can spark conversation about who could be sitting in that chair: absentees. inactive members. prospects. church members not yet connected to a small group. unchurched FRANs.

### Enlist an Invitation (Outreach) Leader

Inviting people is the job of every Sunday School member. But we need someone responsible for encouraging and equipping others to reach and enroll. Many classes call that person the outreach leader. Some use other titles. Regardless of title, this ideally is someone with the spiritual gift of evangelism. Yet any person with a passion for helping the class stay true to the Invite dimension of the 3D Sunday School is a good candidate. This person maintains the class prospect file, makes outreach assignments, and leads the class to participate in visitation efforts. In preschool and children's departments, one of the leaders can accept primary responsibility for outreach in addition to other duties. In student classes, an adult or student can assume this role. Allan Taylor, in his book *The Six Core Values of Sunday School*, recommends an approach used in First Baptist of Woodstock, Georgia. Outreach is so important that the outreach leader has a dedicated time during each adult class to promote outreach and prepare members to do it. And this time is scheduled *before* the lesson!



## Never Forget:

### Your Invitation May Be the Answer to Someone's Prayer

I'll close this chapter with a personal story. While serving in my first church, a smaller congregation in a transitional community, we were frustrated by the lack of fruit from our efforts with a well-known evangelism program. I was personally struggling with the whole concept of "confrontational evangelism." We had few worship visitors to follow up on, and found ourselves doing a lot of surveys. Going door-to-door in our transitional community was just hard work. At the time, I was praying for one of my uncles. One morning, as I asked the Lord to create some circumstance in my uncle's life so that he might hear the gospel, He whispered something into my spirit I shall never forget: "Do you mean like someone knocking on his door to do a survey?" My perspective changed immediately. That night, as we prepared to go out after our training session, I shared this experience with the visitation teams. We went out that night with renewed passion. If someone slammed a door in our face—which almost never happened—we would just move on. We were on mission to be an answer to the prayer of a mother, brother, cousin, or friend. Anytime you hesitate to invite someone to Sunday School or church, remind yourself—if the Holy Spirit doesn't—that your invitation could be God's way of answering someone's prayer. He has chosen to use us. And He helps us! "Listen! I (Jesus) stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20). "Both the Spirit and the Bride (Jesus) say, 'Come'" (Rev. 22:17). Will you allow God to partner with you through the incredible anointed vehicle of the invitation? Inspire. Invest. *Invite!*

## Unchurched People Share Some Surprising Things

- Most of the unchurched prefer to attend on Sunday morning if they attend.
- Most of the unchurched feel guilty about not attending church.
- Eighty-two percent of the unchurched are at least “somewhat likely” to attend church if they are invited.
- Very few of the unchurched have had someone share with them how to become a Christian.
- Most of the unchurched have a positive view about pastors, ministers, and the church.
- The unchurched would like to develop a real and sincere relationship with a Christian.
- Many of the unchurched are far more concerned about the spiritual well-being of their children than of themselves.

Thom S. Rainer  
*The Unchurched Next Door*  
Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan (2003)  
pp. 23-30

# 3D Sunday School: Discover

As a Sunday School leader, I have observed an almost immutable law of small group dynamics: Regardless of how much you encourage members to invite others, they won't do so if the class environment and group experience are not inviting. They may attend very loyally themselves, but they won't invite others. This is not because they are being willfully disobedient to the Great Commission; rather it's because the dynamics of the group don't support including new people. In this chapter, we'll consider some ideas for intentionally creating group experiences that help people *discover* the truths of God's Word in an environment of acceptance by God's people.

## **Discover God's Word!**

A 3D Sunday School celebrates its intentional focus on studying and applying God's Word. Every member discovers truths from God's Word through personal and group experiences. This is not just about teaching; that is the teacher's job. It's about discovering!

## **Members Can Discover How God Changes Lives!**

Every person in the group can discover the remarkable and life changing power of God's Word. Every person in the group can discover and share ways God is at work in his or her life and the lives of other people. Every participant is compelled to discover God's Word individually as well as in the group. Every person is encouraged to discover and read the Bible study materials (learner guide) prior to the Bible study session. Every person is challenged to discover ways God's Word applies to his/her life. Every person discovers people who need ministry, hope, fellowship, prayer, discipleship, and a fresh encounter with the Living God. Every person is called to discover ways to engage in the "kingdom conspiracy" we call Sunday School.

## **People Are Interested in the Bible**

People in survey after survey continue to express interest in understanding the Bible. This desire is both innate and cultural. Even today, we can read in editorial and sports columns the occasional reference that suggests the writer is familiar with a biblical character or concept. In 2005, any number of reporters, commentators, and politicians used the words "biblical proportion" to refer to hurricane devastation. A 3D Sunday School operates with a plan for helping members and leaders cover key biblical concepts in a balanced and comprehensive way. The LifeWay Sunday School curriculum plan is designed to cover biblical concepts appropriate to each age group. Whatever curriculum materials your class uses, choose materials that help people *discover* "the whole counsel of God" over a period of years.





15 Biblical Concepts in LifeWay Curriculum		
Preschool and up:	Older Children add:	Students and Adults add:
God	Salvation	Discipleship & the Christian Life
Jesus	Holy Spirit	Ethics & Morality
Bible		Reason & Faith
Creation		Rebellion & Sin
Family		Time & Eternity
Self		
Church & Kingdom		
Community & World		

### Get People Involved in Learning

An important thing many adult classes could learn from observing preschool and children’s departments is how kids are encouraged to *discover* truths about God, Jesus, the Bible, family, creation, and other biblical concepts. They *discover* these concepts in a classroom environment that provides a choice of activities and recognizes a variety of learning styles. While a preschooler pretends to prepare a meal in the home living area, a teacher may share a Bible thought about God’s plan for families. Two or three others are busy with an art activity while a teacher sits with them and connects the activity to a Bible story. Some observers might think that the relatively brief group time, when the teacher *tells* the Bible story, is the only time preschoolers are learning. The reality is that they may be learning—discovering—more during other activities than while they fidget, squirm, and touch and talk during group time. What’s the point? Adult and student classes could take some lessons from younger groups about getting members involved in discovery activities.

### The Group Can Help or Hinder Discovery

#### Strengthen Open Groups

Remember that a 3D Sunday School class is an open group. Sunday School—when practiced as designed—is an *intentional* mix of believers and unbelievers, the saved and the unsaved, the churched and the unchurched, the biblical scholar and the biblical novice. How intentional that mix is depends on you, your class, and your Bible study leader. It’s a team effort. And it will take effort to keep your group open, especially if it has been



together for more than a couple of years. 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.

## Create Better Learning Opportunities

Jesus was the Master Teacher. He modeled the best kinds of teaching. He also modeled the best dynamic of working with groups. Although He often taught large groups, He focused on a small group of 12. Moreover, He spent most of His time with three from that group. We have much to learn and apply about discovering and about discipling people in our groups. I'll sometimes hear a teacher with a class of 30-50 attenders tell me they have good discussion. Most likely, a half dozen members may be talkers, but it's hardly reasonable for 30-50 people to participate in discussion. Thirty people who each spoke for one minute would consume more than 30 minutes. Sometimes space requires large classes. Buzz groups within the large class can involve more people. The "Master Teacher" approach calls for small-group leaders within the larger class, with members in assigned groups with a discussion leader. The teacher alternates between periods of lecture and small group discussion. LifeWay's *Life Connections* curriculum material is designed specifically for this approach, although any materials can be adapted this way.

## Help People Discover God's Truth

The teacher (or discover leader!) is the person responsible for leading the class to consistently experience the *Discover* dimension. What is the ideal spiritual gift for a 3D Sunday School teacher? The obvious answer might seem to be teaching. But that may not be the ideal gift. Not everyone has received this gift from God. Few churches have enough people with this gift to staff every preschool, children, student, and adult class.

Actually, I believe the ideal spiritual gift for this role is the gift of shepherding. The person so gifted does a good job helping people discover the truths of God's Word *and* does a good job of caring for—shepherding—group members. It's likely there are more people in your church with this gift than with the gift of teaching. I also feel this helps redefine the role of a teacher from a presenter of information to a "shepherd-teacher," someone who loves, cares for, and guides members of the group as they discover and apply God's Word in their lives. In the 6-week study, *Spiritual Gifts: A Practical Guide to How God Works through You*, I describe

the difference between the gifts of teaching and shepherding by describing how two people might respond to the following: *"I hear you're teaching Sunday School at your church this year. What are you teaching?"*

- A person with the gift of teaching might respond: *"I'm teaching a 6-month study on the first 12 chapters of the Book of Genesis. I believe it is foundational to an understanding of the Bible."*
- A person with the gift of shepherding might say: *"I'm teaching 7th grade boys again. Ryan invited his friend Josh to come a few weeks ago and he accepted Jesus last week. Josh is being baptized Sunday!"*

Shepherds balance their love for God's Word with a love for God's people. This makes the gift of shepherding an ideal gift for those who lead people to *discover* God's Word in small groups. This does not mean that persons with the gift of teaching would not be concerned with learners' needs. Indeed, a good teacher should be aware of needs and organize efforts to minister to those needs. But persons gifted as shepherds may be especially sensitive to ministry needs.

## Life Changing Discovery Doesn't Just Happen

Every class member should be engaged in discovering! Every open Bible study group should involve members and guests in life-changing Bible study experiences. If learners are to discover God's Word, then the discover leader—teacher—helps learners focus on actions that help them discover and apply God's Word. Members can help by enthusiastically participating in meaningful learning opportunities.

## Liven Up Lectures

The lecture method is an effective teaching method when used appropriately. Despite years of encouraging teachers to use a variety of teaching methods, however, teachers often rely on just this teaching approach. Is the lecture a bad teaching method? Of course not! Many people are verbal learners who prefer lectures to other teaching methods.

If the lecture is your preferred teaching approach, here are some ideas for adding life and energy to that learning experience.

1. Make an assignment to a class member to research a particular word or place and give a brief report in class.
2. Use visuals such as maps, posters, and teaching pictures.
3. Participate by asking questions, allowing learners to provide responses.
4. Use appropriate humor.

What can learners do to help liven up lectures?

1. Ask questions!
2. Accept assignments from the teacher when asked.
3. Read the lesson before class, marking it up for areas of interest or discussion.

## Discover through Discussion

Is discussion always better than lecture? Actually, no. As a pre-K teacher, I know discussion doesn't work well with that age group! At times I also have sat through adult "discussion" classes and longed for even a halfway-interesting lecture. Discussion can be a wonderful method to *discover* Bible truths; but if poorly planned and executed, it can be a pooling of uninformed opinions.

Effective discussion requires a safe environment for our intentional mix of believers and unbelievers. Good discussions also require planning and guidance. Members need to understand some ground rules for discussion, such as:

1. Write out discussion questions for learners to see. You might print the question on a board or a large sheet of paper.
2. Find great questions. Writing good discussion questions is hard, so use good resources for ideas. One excellent source of great discussion questions is the family of Serendipity Bibles for groups. (see [www.serendipityhouse.com](http://www.serendipityhouse.com))
3. Use buzz groups, especially in large classes. Form small groups of 4-6 people for a period of discussion. Groups can be assigned different questions, or all groups can be given the same question to discover how different groups respond. Print questions on index cards.
4. Set and maintain time limits. Appoint a timekeeper.

What can members do to make discussion more meaningful?

1. Be ready to participate!
2. Express your thoughts.
3. Don't dominate the discussion.

Take notice of people who are not participating and draw them out: *"I'd be interested in what Kelsey thinks about this issue."*

## Ask the Right Kinds of Discovery Questions

Maybe we should call discussion questions discovery questions! *The Serendipity Bible* lists three types of discovery questions for each passage: Open, Study, and Apply. That's a pretty good process to help participants have a balanced Bible study experience.

**Open questions** help learners *discover* things about others—and themselves. I just randomly opened my copy to the questions for 2 Chronicles 8: (1) What do you hope to be doing 20 years from now? (2) If you won a million dollars, how would you spend it? Such questions help people know one another and provide a transition to exploration of the passage.

**Study questions** help participants *discover* Scripture truth. One question for the same passage is: (3) Does Solomon's treatment of his wife seem right to you?

**Apply questions** help learners help one another *discover* the "So what?" of the passage.

Regardless of the resource your class uses for questions, don't neglect any of these three levels.

## Use the Learner Guide

Ideally, every person in the class will have a copy of the member curriculum resource during the class session. Isn't that a little old fashioned? Maybe. But it still works! It makes members feel more confident and guests feel more comfortable. A 3D Sunday School class communicates an expectation that each participant will do some preparation for the session. The minimum level of preparation is reading the Scripture passage. Since the passage is printed in most LifeWay curriculum materials, guests need not be embarrassed by trying to find the passage in their Bible—if they even brought one. Often, the learner guide will have discussion questions, photos, and other activities teachers can use during the session to enliven the lecture or provoke discussion. Learner involvement elements in the learner guide help create a mindset that the curriculum resources are invitations for participation. And having everything they need right in the learner guide helps create a climate that feels "safe" for a newcomer.

## Discover Who Will Read and Pray Out Loud

One very common and real fear among many participants is that they will be called on to read out loud. Leaders of a 3D Sunday School class establish an atmosphere in which newcomers can attend without worrying that they will be asked to speak out loud.

Participants should be asked whether they would be willing to read before the class begins. If they agree, hand them an index card with the passage written on it so they can look it up ahead of time, and mark their place. The same principle holds for prayer. Ask a person ahead of time if she/he would be willing to pray. Sometimes even people who would normally not hesitate to do so are dealing with an issue that makes them uncomfortable about praying that day. Honor that. Before you take prayer requests, say, *“I have asked Shirley to lead us in prayer this morning. Let’s take about five minutes for requests before she leads us.”* Members can then focus on the needs presented rather than worrying about what to say if called on. These kindnesses create a climate that communicates this is a safe place for learners to discover who they are and what they believe.

## Use the Room Set-up for Discovery

The appearance and set-up of your room sends messages. Clutter on shelves or tables communicate something quite different from a neat and clean room. Colorful visuals on a focal wall or bulletin board related to the Bible study create interest. Posters and maps included in leader packs help communicate a freshness to what will be taught that day.

Chairs arrangement influences group interaction. Chairs set up in rows—especially if there are a lot of rows—signal that the teacher will do almost all the talking. Chairs set in a semi-circle, with the teacher sitting among the learners, indicates that the teacher will be seeking interaction with participants. Chairs in a circle, with the leader sitting in one of the chairs, signals that the teacher seeks interaction among the participants. A really creative teacher might sit in a different place each week. The same principle applies to a home group: Try to make sure everyone can see and hear everyone else.

If you use a video-enhanced resource (such as LifeWay’s *Life Source* for adults or *FUEL* for students), make sure everyone can see and hear the monitor. Use tables as appropriate for the age group you teach, but remember some key basics already established: arrange the room for comfort and personal security; be sure learners can face one another; provide an empty chair; provide appropriate equipment based on space, arrangement, and teaching plans.

## Respond to People: A Young Man's Testimony

The teacher is the lesson most people will “read” first. Listen to one young man's description: “First, I fell in love with my teacher. Then, I fell in love with my teacher's Bible. Then I fell in love with my teacher's Lord.”

Each learner is a partner in an experience. Learners prepare for the session using the learner guide or other material. They attend regularly and contribute to the discovery experience in your group. In discussions, learners participate but try not to dominate. They stay alert to new participants. Members participate as part of the team to create a great learning experience by *discovering* the dynamic power of God's Word in the caring presence of God's people. They know they must be “on their game” every week because every week may be someone's first week, and that a poor learning experience may mean it could be the newcomer's last week. A 3D Sunday School class works as a team to help every member and every prospect *connect*. To that third dimension we'll turn our attention next.

## More Insights from the Unchurched

- The unchurched are not antichurch.  
(4 of 10 have a friendly attitude; only 16 percent are negative.)
- Over 17 million Americans will accept Christ if presented with the gospel.  
Another 43 million are close.
- Most unchurched persons believe in the existence of both heaven and hell.  
(79 percent and 70 percent respectively)
- Unchurched persons are nervous but willing to talk about matters of faith.
- Most of the unchurched have a fairly high view of the Bible.  
(One-third believe it is totally true; another 46 percent believe it is generally true.)
- Most of the unchurched would rather talk to a layperson than a minister  
about religious matters.
- Easter is still a key time to invite the unchurched.
- Many of the unchurched wonder why their Christian neighbors and  
co-workers do not invite them to church.
- Most of the unchurched have a spiritual view of life.

Thom S. Rainer  
*The Unchurched Next Door*  
Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan (2003)  
pp. 44-55

# 3D Sunday School: Connect

People will come to your Bible study group and to church *if invited*. Many will receive Jesus as their Savior *if invited*. Unfortunately, a disturbing number of these people will drop out of active involvement *if not connected*. One researcher years ago conducted a study on assimilation. His findings include two important principles for helping people *connect*. The first is that people exposed to the gospel a number of times before accepting Christ are more likely to remain active than those who only hear the good news a time or two before that decision. Second, people who establish friendships with several people in their church within a few months of joining are far more likely to remain active than those who can name only one or two friends. Where would a person get connected prior to and after a decision for Christ? A 3D Sunday School class! 3D Sunday School classes focus on relationships. A 3D Sunday School class helps members and prospects connect with others in the group. They help newcomers connect to a specific ministry in which they are cared for and care for others. They help members connect to the work of Christ through His church.

## The Importance of Hospitality

Philadelphia is called the “city of brotherly love.” *Phila* in its name is from one of the Greek words for love (*phileo*). *Delphia* comes from the Greek word for brother (*adelphos*). Hence, “love of brothers.” The word *hospitality* is from the Greek word *philoxenia*, meaning “love of strangers.” Members and leaders of a 3D Sunday School class recognize the importance of creating an environment where all people—particularly newcomers—can *connect* and be cared for as someone special.

The Bible commands us to practice hospitality (Rom. 12:13, 1 Pet. 4:9). The spiritual gift of hospitality helps surface the remarkable importance of relationships that are at the center of our need to connect. This aspect of the 3D Sunday School may be so important that some classes may choose to have a hospitality leader who facilitates social connections among participants.

## Connecting Starts with First Impressions

Long before the pastor begins to preach or the congregation is asked to greet those around them, most first-time guests have already decided whether they feel welcome. Ideally, they drove into the parking lot and found convenient spaces clearly marked “First Time Guests.” They were greeted warmly, directed to the right door, and perhaps given a site map or brochure. The door was opened by a smiling greeter.

Inside, they found an information desk where someone obtained personal information and filled out a form that provided others with what they needed to help newcomers



build relationships. Then someone escorted each family member to the appropriate room, beginning with the youngest child. At each room, there were warm introductions. Preschool and children’s workers kneeled to be eye level with children to welcome them into the room. At the adult classroom door a greeter took over, introducing newcomers to a member or leader. This person took the registration form, learned more about the guests, and introduced the newcomers to other people in the group. At the beginning of the class, he or she introduced the newcomers to everyone, and shared something interesting about them as appropriate. After class, someone offered to accompany them to worship and help them retrace their steps to pick up the kids.

None of those actions had to do specifically with Bible teaching or evangelism. But each step laid a foundation for both to occur.

## What if Our Church Doesn’t Have All That in Place?

Every class that determines to be 3D may not enjoy the benefit of a well-organized first impression process such as the one I’ve described. Should you give up? No! You can encourage your church leadership to develop a hospitality ministry, of course, or you can just start where you are with your class.

## Greet and Register All Guests

Make sure you start the process from the point the newcomer gets to your door. If a guest or new member has not provided information on a form or card, you take care of that. Fill it out for them. Approach the task conversationally. Going to church for the first time shouldn’t be like going to a new doctor’s office!

## Nametags: A Symbol of Faith That Makes Connecting Easier

Nothing makes a newcomer relax more than a roomful of people wearing nametags. If you do only one thing to help people connect, do this. Make it fun, too! Everyone could print something different below their name each week, such as home town, high school mascot, favorite sports team, favorite restaurant, age of oldest child, anniversary, birthday, and so forth. This can help members *connect* with one another, too.

Recently, I visited Hope Fellowship Church, a new ministry in an old building in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As I entered the small foyer, I was warmly greeted by several smiling young people—perhaps students at Harvard or another university—all wearing stick-on nametags. They asked enthusiastically if I would like to make a nametag. Everyone had on a nametag. Complete strangers were greeting me by name, and I was able to return the greeting in kind. I felt so comfortable! This church has grown in just a couple of years from

less than 20 to over 160. It is made up not only of college students, but people from the surrounding neighborhoods as well. Wearing nametags is only one of the things Pastor Curtis Cook is leading this church to do well. From my experience, I suspect it may be a more important element than you might think!

Train members to optimize the nametag experience. Wear it on your right side, so it is easily seen when shaking hands. Print your first name large, with the last name in smaller letters underneath. This will help people see first names across the room and enhance discussion. Instead of saying, *"I agree with what she said,"* you can say, *"I'd like to follow up on Sharon's comment."* A nametag is a symbol of faith as well as personal identity and significance.

*It says, "I'm a unique and special person, and I expect to meet someone new today, maybe someone God wants me to help connect to Him."*

## Enlist Leaders Who Connect

The first step in helping newcomers connect to the class is asking him or her to enroll. Getting someone's name on the ministry roll is a great start, but it's not enough to get him or her connected. Every member needs to be connected to someone who will accept the responsibility for caring for him or her.

## Organize Care Groups and Enlist Group Leaders

Each member should be assigned to a caring group. A 3D Sunday School class needs one worker for every five members. These workers can be called care group (or Connect!) leaders. Some classes call these ministry groups. You might even call them connect groups! I have also heard the groups called CPR groups to signify the three purposes of the group: care, prayer, and reaching. It matters less what you call them than that you do them!

Each group is led by a group leader. Groups should have about five members, with a maximum of seven. Starting with fewer allows you to add new members. Seven is a good maximum because there are seven days in a week, which means a group leader could contact one member each day. Once several group leaders have seven members, enlist new group leaders so you can get group numbers back down to five. Can you assign couples as group leaders of groups of couples? You can, but I don't recommend it. Experience suggests that in such arrangements, wives contact wives regularly, but the guys seldom make or receive contacts. So I strongly encourage you to have separate groups for men and women with male and female group leaders. Not surprisingly, this sets up a perfect organization to communicate information related to women's or men's ministries, too—without creating a separate organization!

## Give the Connect Group Leader a Concise Job Description

What's the Connect or care group leader's job description? *To contact every assigned member every week.* Even if they were present Sunday? Yes! If you only contact people when they are absent, it may seem like you're checking up on them. Instead, contact (call, write, visit, e-mail) every member every week. At First Baptist Church in Woodstock, Georgia, member connection is a weekly experience for classes. Outreach leaders take about five minutes at the beginning of each session to promote outreach, make assignments, or get reports. Then members break briefly into groups, where they share and pray together for about 10 minutes. This ensures that the class keeps the three dimensions of a healthy Sunday School in balance. Connect or care group leaders will benefit from keeping a profile of each group member. A sample profile is provided in the back of this book or can be downloaded at [www.lifeway.com/sundayschool](http://www.lifeway.com/sundayschool). (Note: In large classes that practice a master teacher approach to Bible study, connect groups may sit together during class, with the connect group leader facilitating small-group discussion.)

## How Big Is Your Class?

When someone asks a 3D Sunday School leader how big the group is, he/she always qualifies the answer by saying something like: *"We have 23 people on our ministry roll, and average 10-12 in attendance each week. We also have 7 people from our class who serve as leaders in other areas of our Sunday School, so we actually take responsibility for ministering to 30 members. We have 6 care group leaders who touch base weekly with about 5 members each."* Now that's a 3D Sunday School class!

## Connect to the Work of the Sunday School

### Connect Members to Ministry in Preschool, Children and Student Sunday School

Serving as a group leader is a great first step into ministry for many people. Maybe that is a step God wants you to take! Other leadership and service opportunities exist in your class. Another great step is to release members—with your blessing and support—to serve in preschool, children's, and student classes. Two dynamics influence leaders in many churches today:

1. Reaching children and students is a needed priority and successful growth strategy.
2. Keeping preschool, children's, and student classrooms adequately staffed is a constant challenge.

Where will these workers come from? Adult classes!

A 3D Sunday School class develops a culture in which members are encouraged to serve—and are not forgotten when they go out to serve. In-service members are assigned to group leaders to stay in touch with as associate members. They always make sure to invite associate members to ministry projects and fellowship activities. Some classes even call these folk “missionaries.”

In a class with this kind of culture, you will see visual reminders in the classroom of the associate members. Some have posters with their names and places of service. Others devote a bulletin board to these missionaries, including photographs of each at work in a preschool, children’s, or student room.

In classes with this kind of culture, a leader might say something like this to attenders every week: *“We’re glad you are here. As you can see, we have a lot of members. But this isn’t all of us. We have a number of members who serve outside our class. This morning we’re going to pray for Bill and Melanie, who are missionaries to our 3-year-olds! They have two children, Mia and Peyton. Bill is a coach at the middle school. . . .”* 3D Sunday School classes strive not only to remember their associate members, they make celebrities of them!

## Connect through Prayer

Prayer is essential for every Sunday School class in every church. Prayer helps people stay connected with God and reminds us of our total dependence on and commitment to Him. Prayer helps people stay connected with other people, too. Prayer helps people stay connected to what God is doing worldwide through His people.

A 3D Sunday School class with a well-organized care group structure is set up to communicate prayer requests and praise reports. It is a ready-made “prayer chain.” Here’s how it works. An urgent prayer request is communicated to a class leader, who calls each group leader, who then call their members. Done! Who is the connect leader’s group leader? The teacher, who ministers to the others on the class leadership team.

A class leader may enlist someone to keep up with the class prayer list. This person could be someone involved in the church’s intercessory prayer ministry, and could keep members connected to prayer needs outside the class. A prayer leader also can keep learners aware of international and national missions efforts in which Southern Baptists are involved.

For years, many Sunday School members have used the devotional guide *Open Windows* not only as a help in their quiet times, but also as a way to pray for missionaries on their birthdays.

## Connect through Fellowship Activities

Fellowship is a spiritual discipline. So it must be planned. Class sessions simply do not have enough time for people to get to know one another. That requires time spent together in a more relaxed setting—usually involving food. If you read about the early church in the Book of Acts, you'll note that eating together is listed as a priority with prayer and Bible study.

In one church I served, we asked every adult department to plan an activity 10 times a year. For adult groups with children, we conducted "Adult Party Night," usually on the third Friday of the month. Child care—by reservation—was provided at the church (6:30-9:45 p.m.) for a dollar per child. We mailed out just one card with every department's party listed, along with a few details. The card was mailed to every member, associate member, and prospect.

It was fun to watch groups borrow ideas from one another from month to month! The whole department might have a party together. Sometimes classes met separately, and occasionally each care group had their own fellowship activity. Some groups would meet at a restaurant; others might attend a sports event together. Most would meet at someone's home or reserve a room at church. Older adult departments that did not need child care would usually have their activities on other nights so rooms would be available at church. Many prospective members connected through these activities. Most associate members stayed connected through these events. And the monthly card communicated: *"This is a fun place to go to church."*

The person who plans and leads fellowship activities has an important role in a 3D Sunday School!

## Connect through Food

Relationships can be built around having something to eat and drink when people gather informally. A member or leader needs to make sure this happens! While this may not sound particularly spiritual, it makes for a more inviting environment and a connecting experience. There is something about a cup of coffee or juice that helps people interact more easily—and discover each other's stories. One or more persons in the class can be enlisted to coordinate providing the goodies—and connect someone else in class to a ministry. Classes or care groups can rotate responsibility for bringing fruit, donuts, or other goodies.

## Connect with Absentees

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. To be sure, sometimes we didn't know about a crisis. I painfully remember an

episode when I was teaching a young adult class. We had worked hard to reach Ron, who attended faithfully for some time. Then he mysteriously stopped coming. We decided he was just “backslidden” again. About three months later, he showed up one Sunday, and reported that he had just recovered sufficiently from a lawnmower accident to be able to walk. Although that happened over 20 years ago, I shuddered again thinking about Ron. The lesson I learned: Never give up on anyone. Stay after them and maintain contact with them.

What’s the standard for connect group leaders? Simply this: Every member contacted every week. Every week? Yes! Here’s why. Eventually, everyone has a crisis. If you know about it, you can respond—with prayer, a card, a meal, your presence. Is this just to get them back to Sunday School? No; it’s to minister to them in the name of Jesus! You see, a ministry roll represents a commitment; but not a commitment for the member to attend the class. Rather, it represents a commitment for the class to minister to the member.

Is it ever okay to drop a person from the ministry roll? Only if they die, move beyond reasonable driving distance, or join another church. Some people declare they want to be removed from our Sunday School rolls. If that’s the case, we should try to talk them out of it! Say something like, *“We’ll be glad to do that, but we’d sure like to keep your name on the roll so we can continue to pray for you and stay in contact with you. Would you reconsider?”* Many people just want to know if we really care. But the bottom line is simple: Keep them enrolled so you can stay in touch!

Regular contacts need not be extended conversations. Put your group members in your cell phone, and give one a quick call each day. *“Hey, Lance, this is Jeff, your group leader from Sunday School. (You won’t have to say that part very long if you call every week!) Just calling to see how you’re doing this week.”* I recommend that you seldom say anything about their attendance! Don’t say, *“We missed you Sunday.”* If he attends regularly, he probably will tell you why he wasn’t there anyway—and let you know whether he’s going to be there next week. I would only occasionally mention the class session to chronic absentees. Invite them to a party, to dinner, or to a ballgame. The key is simply to stay in touch, to listen for an opportunity for the class to minister, and to report the need to the appropriate class leader.

## Connect through Affinity Groups

As you contact people, you will *discover* things about them: hobbies; interests; where they grew up; where they attended school; where they work; their family background. Connect people with common interests. Group leaders occasionally might swap members based on the affinity principle. Jim is a fisherman. Joe is a golfer. Both are group leaders in their

class. Jim discovers that one of his group members, Barry, is a golfer. Joe discovers that his new member, Mark, is a fisherman. So they switch, creating an opportunity for better connection. Some churches have affinity groups and events. Sunday School is a great place to make sure people know about them, and to help them get connected. Examples of such groups and activities are sports teams, bowling leagues, cooking or sewing groups, wild game dinners, crafts clubs, book clubs, golf tournaments, and mother's groups. Can you think of others? Can you think of ways to get members connected?

## Connect Newcomers to Worship Experiences

In many churches today, people first visit the worship services. But that is not always the case, especially if a Sunday School class is being intentional about the *invite* dimension. Class members and leaders can connect newcomers to worship by accompanying and offering to sit with them in worship. Members in 3D Sunday School classes also do the converse. They are observant during worship, watching for new people who may be prospective class members. For example, you see a young couple fill out a guest information card and place it in the collection plate. So you introduce yourself after the service and *invite* them to your class—or maybe even to lunch! Sunday School classes are also natural places to encourage people to plan and conduct personal worship each day at home. Sunday School is a great place to distribute devotional literature. Kids need to develop the habit of daily worship also, so consider providing them with age-appropriate devotional material, too.

## Connect with Families

Sunday School is the most family friendly ministry in a church. The Sunday School provides a learning experience appropriate to every life stage of every member of every family—every week! Many churches provide classes for children and adults with special education needs, too. (LifeWay is one of the only publishers committed to offering curriculum resources for learners with special needs.) In a 3D Sunday School, there are no babysitters—even for babies! Those who care for babies, ones, and twos are teachers, too! A young parent usually sees the room and connects with leaders of their child's class before they connect with an adult group. Leaders in 3D preschool, children, and student classes must take their jobs very seriously. They should arrive early to get the room ready. They must follow security and safety procedures. They have planned a learning experience appropriate for the age group. They follow up with phone calls or visits. They provide magazines that help parents, such as *ParentLife* and *Living with Teenagers*, available from LifeWay. These are excellent ways to connect families to the church and to supplement what they learn at church.

## Connecting to the Discipleship Ministry

Isn't Sunday School a part of the discipleship process? Yes. An important part of the Sunday School strategy is to provide foundational discipleship. Sunday School has changed in many ways since its origin some two centuries ago. But one thing that has not changed is the centrality of Bible study. The Bible is the textbook of the Sunday School. Curriculum materials are simply inexpensive ways to help members and leaders prepare for the group experience, and to provide a systematic and balanced approach to the scope of biblical concepts and characters over a period of time. But the Sunday School cannot do the whole job of discipleship. Over the past several decades, some churches have chosen to make the Sunday School their primary discipleship opportunity. Over time, however, they have discovered that they have lost the capability to connect new members and have tended to turn inward. So they have rediscovered the ministry we call discipleship.

Some churches still conduct age-graded Discipleship Training before a Sunday evening worship service. The most common expression of a discipleship ministry today is a "university" approach. A number of discipleship courses/groups are offered during two or three "semesters" each year on Sunday or Wednesday evenings or at other times during the week. Unlike Sunday School classes, which are open, these groups are closed groups. A closed group is a study group focused on a specific subject or topic for a defined period; and once the group begins, it is closed to new members. It is also typically primarily composed of believers, and often uses a study guide that each participant is expected to read and complete during and/or between sessions. The members enter into some level of covenant and accountability with one another, agreeing to regular attendance, preparation for the session, participation in the group, praying for one another, and so forth. Hopefully you see that Sunday School and discipleship are different—on purpose! But they are also complementary and interdependent ministries. Both are indispensable strategies for a church serious about connecting and discipling its people.

## Connecting through Small Discipleship Groups

An emerging trend is for discipleship groups to grow out of Sunday School classes. People who want a deeper experience of accountability and discipleship sign up in Sunday School to participate in a group that meets at another time during the week (or a couple of times a month). The groups are limited in size, typically 8 singles or 5 couples. Some churches have separate groups for men and women, which meet on different days, thus solving many of the childcare issues. Others break the groups into men and women, which meet on different nights so there is always a parent to care for the kids. The leader, who must be trained and approved, chooses study materials from a list of approved curriculum.

Associate members of the class who serve in the preschool, children, and student areas in Sunday School are also invited to participate in these groups. All these approaches to discipleship are good ones. Ideally, there would be a Discipleship Leader in each adult department or class to promote the discipleship ministry and encourage members to *connect* with it.

## The Awesome Power of a Connected Sunday School

A church with an effective 3D Sunday School need not create lots of redundant ministry “silos” that compete for attention and leaders, especially if a church adopts “universal enrollment,” a plan by which every church member is assigned to an open Sunday School class regardless of whether they attend. It’s just part of being a church member. Enrollment communicates expectation and ensures that someone is responsible for each person.

A growing trend is using the Sunday School as the strategy through which many other church ministries find their focus or connection. Some churches are strengthening Men’s and Women’s Ministries by using the connections through the Sunday School to get the word out about and mobilize ministry opportunities and events. How does the church identify needs for training and discipleship? Through Sunday School. How does the church strengthen its focus on discipling members and leaders? Through Sunday School. How does the church promote missions offerings and mobilize members in missions opportunities? Through Sunday School. A Sunday School class at Sagemont Church in Houston, Texas, adopted the faculty at a nearby elementary school, painting the faculty lounge, periodically providing snacks and lunch, and helping in classrooms. Would you be surprised that when some teachers decided to check out Christianity, they started their journey at Sagemont? Other churches have challenged every adult class to engage in at least one missions project every year, either locally, nationally, or internationally. A few challenge classes to adopt or support one in each category. A 3D Sunday School accomplishes foundational evangelism, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, worship, and so much more. It *invites*. It *discovers*. It *connects*. Purposefully. Intentionally. Strategically.

## The Unchurched Next Door Are Eager to Connect

Dr. Thom Rainer has conducted extensive research on the beliefs and behaviors of the unchurched. In his book, *The Unchurched Next Door* he introduced the Rainer Scale, which ranks unchurched Americans in five categories from least to most receptive to the gospel. Here are the rankings:

U5	Antagonistic	5%
U4	Resistant	21%
U3	Neutral	36%
U2	Friendly	27%
U1	Very friendly	11%

Just the U1s number over 17 million people! They believe in prayer and have a high view of the Bible. They are open to sharing prayer needs—if you ask about their needs and offer to pray. And they would like to know more about the Bible, and are wide open to an invitation to come with you to Bible study. Ninety-seven percent say they are very likely or somewhat likely to attend church. If they are invited!

Ninety-seven percent of the U2s also said they are open to an invitation to attend church. They are eager to study the Bible, desire to talk about eternal issues, are frustrated with their understanding of a works salvation, and are very interested in their children.

Many U3s have attended Sunday School and small groups in churches. Seven of ten attended Sunday School as children, and another two of them did so as adults. Only 9 percent of U3s have never attended either! Eighty-six percent of them say they are likely to respond positively to an invitation to church or Sunday School.

Dr. Rainer summarizes: *“Once again, the data seem to defy conventional wisdom. We are often told that it is almost impossible to get unchurched persons into a small group without first getting them to come to a worship service. Our research indicates that this common understanding may not be true.”* They simply need you to invite them and accompany them. They say they will come.

Thom S. Rainer  
*The Unchurched Next Door*

# Additional Help for Organizing a 3D Sunday School

The following are available for free download at [www.lifeway.com/sundayschool](http://www.lifeway.com/sundayschool), as well as the entire text of The 3D Sunday School. You have permission to reproduce for use in your class or church.

## **Bonus Chapter: Mobilizing for a 3D Sunday School**

A 3D Sunday School must be intentional, and must be organized. Ideally, a 3D class needs at least three leaders, each who assumes primary responsibility for one of the dimensions. An additional chapter is available online, addressing organizational and leadership issues for mobilizing for a 3D Sunday School.

## **Sunday School Kickoff Event Resources**

Many churches conduct an annual training event to kick off the new Sunday School year. Training resources for each leadership team (preschool, children, students, adults, and general leaders) are available for free download. Each training module includes a teaching plan, handout masters, and a PowerPoint presentation that support and supplement the concepts presented in The 3D Sunday School. These materials will be available in March 2006.

## **The Five-Step Formula for Sunday School Growth**

This book and training materials for the 2005 Sunday School Kickoff event remain available for download as well. Go to [www.lifeway.com/sundayschool](http://www.lifeway.com/sundayschool). Information about LifeWay curriculum resources as well as lots of free articles and links to other information are also available there. Add it to your list of Web favorites and visit often.

## **eSource Electronic Newsletter for Sunday School Leaders**

A monthly e-newsletter is available for anyone interested in growing a Sunday School Bible study ministry. Because LifeWay has a strict privacy policy, you must “opt in” to receive LifeWay electronic newsletters. To subscribe, visit [www.lifeway.com/newsletters](http://www.lifeway.com/newsletters).

## **Associations and State Conventions**

Your local Baptist association and state convention have people and resources to help you grow your Sunday School ministry. Check their website for contact information.

## **Life Webcast for Leaders and Members**

You are INVITED to a free, a real-time training event hosted by national Sunday School leaders. DISCOVER how to build a 3-D Sunday School. Learn how to CONNECT Sunday School members and leaders in Great Commission work through Sunday School and small group Bible studies. Webcasts are scheduled for April 4 and 6, 2006. For more information, go to [www.lifeway.com/learning](http://www.lifeway.com/learning).



# My FRAN Prayer List

The power of prayer should not be underestimated. Think of individuals in the four FRAN groups and list their names below. Then covenant with God to pray for these individuals daily. Pray for the opportunity to invite these persons to church or Sunday School.

**Name**

**Invited**

Friends

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Relatives

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Associates

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Neighbors

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# Care Group Members

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (H) \_\_\_\_\_ (W) \_\_\_\_\_ (C) \_\_\_\_\_

Birthday \_\_\_\_\_ Anniversary \_\_\_\_\_

Vocation \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

Christian?  Yes  No

Family Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Other Important Dates

Event	Date
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Prayer Needs \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (H) \_\_\_\_\_ (W) \_\_\_\_\_ (C) \_\_\_\_\_

Birthday \_\_\_\_\_ Anniversary \_\_\_\_\_

Vocation \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

Christian?  Yes  No

Family Members \_\_\_\_\_

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Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts \_\_\_\_\_

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Other Important Dates

Event	Date
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Prayer Needs \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (H) \_\_\_\_\_ (W) \_\_\_\_\_ (C) \_\_\_\_\_

Birthday \_\_\_\_\_ Anniversary \_\_\_\_\_

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Christian?  Yes  No

Family Members \_\_\_\_\_

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Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts \_\_\_\_\_

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Other Important Dates

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Birthday \_\_\_\_\_ Anniversary \_\_\_\_\_

Vocation \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

Christian?  Yes  No

Family Members \_\_\_\_\_

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Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts \_\_\_\_\_

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Other Important Dates

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Prayer Needs \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (H) \_\_\_\_\_ (W) \_\_\_\_\_ (C) \_\_\_\_\_

Birthday \_\_\_\_\_ Anniversary \_\_\_\_\_

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Christian?  Yes  No

Family Members \_\_\_\_\_

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Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts \_\_\_\_\_

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Other Important Dates

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Prayer Needs \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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Other Important Dates

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

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Phone: (H) \_\_\_\_\_ (W) \_\_\_\_\_ (C) \_\_\_\_\_

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Family Members \_\_\_\_\_

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Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts \_\_\_\_\_

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Other Important Dates

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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Vocation \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

Christian?  Yes  No

Family Members \_\_\_\_\_

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Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts \_\_\_\_\_

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Other Important Dates

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Prayer Needs \_\_\_\_\_

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# Bonus Chapter:

## Mobilizing for a 3D Sunday School

A 3D Sunday School doesn't just happen! It must be intentional, and it must be organized. Ideally, a 3D class needs at least three leaders, each of whom assumes primary responsibility for one of the three dimensions. An additional chapter of this book addresses some of the organizational and leadership issues for mobilizing for a 3D Sunday School. Just go to [www.lifeway.com/sundayschool](http://www.lifeway.com/sundayschool) for the additional material. You can find the following in the supplemental material on the Web:

### **Mobilizing for a 3D Sunday School**

#### Administrative Leaders in the 3D Sunday School

- Who Administers the Work of Your Sunday School?
- Responsibilities of Leaders
- Stay Focused on the Role and Expectations of Members

#### Organize and Resource a 3D Sunday School

- Consider the Positives of Age-Grading
- Grouping Adults—by Age or Weight?
- Life Stages—An Alternative for Grouping Adults
- Bible Studies for Life Curriculum Supports Life-Stage Grouping
- Bible Teaching for Kids Helps Parents Reinforce Foundational Bible Stories
- Important Characteristics of Resources
- Biblical Solutions for Life

#### The Marks of a 3D Adult Class

- Release and Reproduce
- Coaching Apprentice Leaders—The Key to Reproduction
- It's Not Just About Your Class Either: Start New Bible Study Groups
- Prayer Requests Are Different in a 3D Class Culture
- You'll Never Be the Same



### Still More Surprising Insights from the Unchurched

“Over the past decade or so a worship revolution has begun to take place in many churches across America.”

“Almost forgotten in these new emphases in worship was the two-hundred-year-old program called the Sunday school.”

“But our research has shown the resurgence of Sunday school in the more effective churches in America. Furthermore, we learned through this study that the formerly unchurched are positive about and attracted to Sunday school!”

“We were amazed to find that nearly seven out of ten formerly unchurched were active in Sunday school at the point of our interview. Approximately six out of ten transfer churched were involved in Sunday school. Those in both groups were much more likely to be in Sunday school than any other small group.”

“Interestingly, we did notice a slight transition from the nomenclature ‘Sunday school.’ Almost 20 percent of the churches in our study called their Sunday morning small group ‘Bible study.’ This shift was made because of the churches’ perception of how the name ‘Sunday school’ is received. *No formerly unchurched expressed concerns about the name.*” (Italics mine.)

Thom S. Rainer  
Surprising Insights from the Unchurched  
Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan. (pp. 46-47)

Note: Rainer’s research also indicated that 80 percent of the formerly unchurched said that the church name had little or no influence on their joining a particular church. Nearly two-thirds indicated that a denominational name had a positive influence on their decision. Only 4 out of 100 indicated that a denominational name had a negative influence. (pp. 38-40)