



The value of a
VIBRANT
sunday school



by Sean Keith

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Forward

by David Francis, National Sunday School Director, Lifeway Christian Resources

As the Director of Sunday School for Southern Baptists, I'd like to be able to tell you a few things I disagree with in this book. But I can't find any! Although my friend Sean Keith wrote the book primarily to encourage Louisiana Baptist churches, it is worthwhile reading for anyone who cares about the advance of the Sunday School movement anywhere in North America.

If you've read any of my own books on Sunday School, you know that I value books that (a) are brief, (b) offer a memorable "path" for understanding Sunday School work and implementing it, (c) stimulate discussion and enhance training, and (d) are undergirded by an undying faith in the ability of every single Sunday School class to implement the principles it encourages. In *The Value of a Vibrant Sunday School*, Sean has accomplished all those things and more.

Though brief enough to read in one sitting, you'll not be able to implement all the great ideas in one week! But as you try a few of them, I think you'll find that your class is becoming a little more "vibrant" every week.

The path toward a vibrant Sunday School that Sean outlines is simply powerful. I think Sean would concur that each value along this path is never complete. Your class need not "graduate" from one step to tackle the next. In fact, it can't! There is room for continuous improvement in all five values.

This book will spark ideas that you have never thought of before. That's one of the things that makes this book such a wonderful catalyst for discussion and training. If you like the book; secure more copies of it, and ask others in your class to read it. Then plan a fellowship for the purpose of talking about how you can make your class more vibrant.

Here's perhaps my most important exhortation: Your class can do this! You can start right now! You don't have to worry about whether the class next door is practicing these values. Your class can become a vibrant, caring group of people that values Bible study, loves one another, expects guests every week, deploys the gifts of others in the Body, and makes a difference in your community. Maybe you just needed a little encouragement, or a few fresh ideas. This book will give you both!

Acknowledgements

⁹ *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.* ¹⁰ *Can one say about anything, "Look, this is new"? It has already existed in the ages before us.* Eccl 1:9-10 (HCSB)

I wish I could say that I have some new and clever idea that would instantly transform the work of the church and the people of God—but I don't. What I share in these pages is the compilation of my experiences and the wealth of wisdom of many who have poured their lives into mine. What I hope is that somewhere in these words God would speak to your heart, your life and your ministry just as many have been used of God to speak to mine.

A great big thank you to Louisiana Baptist for honoring me with the title of Sunday School/Discipleship Strategist. Kudos to the Evangelism/Church Growth Team, led by Wayne Jenkins, for allowing me the opportunity to work with such a great team for whom I have such great respect. I am grateful to Dr. John Yeats for his work and Kimberly Petrosky for her graphic designs. Thank you to Dr. David Hankins for his great love for God, Louisiana Baptist and those of us who serve as state missionaries.

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Thank you God for the privilege of being a father to the most beautiful and wonderful daughters any man could have. I love you girls. And to my wife Pam, you are more than a spouse to me—you are my best friend and partner. I love you.

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My Story—My Challenge

Something has got to change. In many of our homes sits a much loved recliner that has seen better days. There are stains, holes, and parts that don't work anymore. At some point, we will have some decisions to make about our well worn recliner. We can abandon it and look for a newer and better recliner. We can accept it the way it is now and just use it until it falls apart. We can fix it, but it will take some effort. There is nothing necessarily wrong with us just enjoying the comfortable, old recliner we love to sit in, but at some point, we are going to need to get out of it before it collapses under us.

This recliner reminds me of many of the people I come in contact with. Some know things are broken but they choose to just sit there until life collapses. Others have abandoned their old recliner, the things they once trusted, and are searching for the next latest and greatest thing. Others are trying to fix their lives by themselves. The problem is they are not capable of fixing their lives by themselves. Only God can give us new life. In fact, He wants to give us new life.

Paul described this new life God wants to give us in Romans 12:1-2. *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. ²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will."* (NIV)

The word *transformed* refers to the process a caterpillar goes through to become a butterfly. You know, life is good when you are a caterpillar. There isn't a lot of pressure or stress. Crawling along, enjoying life, eating leaves. Yet, something deep inside drives his desire for something greater in life. This desire moves him to build a cocoon and endure the painful process of change. The end result is something of magnificent beauty and grace.

Within each of us, God has placed a desire to do something great. I believe this is true for a church as well. When I served in my first full-time church, I remember the desire to take the city for Christ. I believed I could do anything with God's help. Those early days of ministry remind me of the story of Jesus with the children in **Mark 10:13-16**.

"People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them." (HCSB)

Sometimes I wonder what happens to our child like faith. Reality has a way of making us see that things aren't quite that easy. Do we have to stop dreaming just because reality hits us hard? A childlike faith can spur new ideas and thoughts about God and our world. I would be the first to admit how much I have learned from my own children. Their faith believes that anything is possible with Christ. It is a faith that believes lives can change, mountains can move, and miracles can happen.

When I was a child, I would lay on the cool concrete of my driveway so I could stare up into the sky and wonder what great adventures were ahead for me. I envisioned myself as a hero saving the world. I was the swash-buckling Sinbad on an adventure. My imagination would make me the general of a great army defeating the foes of my country. I had no problem imagining that I could do anything.

One problem with my dreams as a child is that most of them were selfish; I was always the hero with the action revolving around me. For many churches we have become selfish and impatient in our dreams. We want instant success. We want it to happen in our church right now. Next week is too late.

We see that in how most churches evaluate success. The questions we ask focus on how many we baptized last year and if we are on a pace to top that this year, or comparing attendance from last week to this week. We believe that dreams have to be realized in our lifetime.

Most real change in this world happens over generations. For example, when the signers of the Declaration of Independence added their names to that document, many knew this was only the start. In the Bible, many in the Old and New Testaments would never see their dreams fulfilled in their lifetime. Moses led his people out of Egypt, but He didn't make it to the Promised Land. The disciples saw only a glimpse of what the gospel would do in our world before they died.

There is nothing wrong with setting goals that we can enjoy during our lives. But at some point, that is a tad shortsighted. I care what the future has for my children and my children's children. I want my life and ministry to count not just for now, but for generations to come. Too often we spend most of our time focused on accomplishing short term goals or personal goals and rarely go beyond ourselves. We forget that this world doesn't revolve around us and what we want to experience here and now.

A Challenge to Change

Most of us start out with dreams of grandeur. Then we encountered the dream-killers of life. They come in the form of difficult people, tragedies we can't explain, and people wounded by life who want to make sure everyone else suffers. There are too many to list. The dream-killers haunt us and put fear into our lives that fool us into never dreaming again. We settle for things that are good, but we forget about taking on the great things that only God could do.

In too many churches and too many Bible study ministries we settle for good when God wants us to accomplish the great. That has got to change. I believe change happens for lots of reasons. Sometimes change is forced on us. In my own life, I was 14 years old when my mother died of a cerebral hemorrhage. That change was thrust on me. What 14 year old would willingly subject oneself to that reality?

Other times, change comes out of necessity. Every new job I took required that I uproot my family and move. We had to buy a new home, make new friends, and learn a new city and culture. We had a choice. But that choice forces a lot of other decisions and impacts a lot of other people. Now that I have a wife and two children, the ramifications of that decision are thought through much more carefully these days.

Then, sometimes change comes out of boredom or a desire to do something different. Sometimes we get tired of life happening around us. We decide that now we want to make some decisions about our own lives. This feeling is what adds fuel to a mid-life crisis. But the best change comes as a result of a God-given passion or desire. When these kinds of change happen, there is a fresh urgency and willingness to take the risk.

It Takes Hard Work...

Remember our recliner? It will take some effort for us to fix it. Suppose I offered you a free car and then explained that all you would need to do is go to Canada to get it. What would you say? Some of us would say no thank you. Others would want to know all the details of what kind of car it was and what kind of shape it was in. Still others would figure out how much it would cost to get to Canada, factor in the value of the car, and see if the benefits outweigh the cost. Lastly, there would be those who desperately need a car and would make whatever sacrifices necessary to go to Canada to get the car. All of the options are viable, but your response basically boils down to how desperate you are for a car.

In life, I meet too many people who don't know desperate. They don't want anything bad enough to go to great lengths to get it. We live in a culture where we feel we are owed something. If it is too much effort to get, we either complain about how unfair life is or we simply don't even try. Unfortunately, the church is not immune from this lack of desperation. Too many churches are either apathetic to what God wants them to be and do or they simply are too lazy to make it happen. They would rather sit and complain than get up and get after it.

When I played high school football, my father used to talk about the "killer instinct". That was when you wanted something bad enough, no matter the obstacles, you ran over or through them. That was how you made the great plays. That's the running back who gains 5 yards even when he was hit behind the line of scrimmage. That's the defensive end that makes it through two blockers to get to the quarterback. These players are motivated by something deep within them to go after it at all costs.

Let me ask you some hard questions that I have been asking myself. How badly do you want to see people reached for Christ? How desperate are you to see God use you to help everyone around you to be involved in kingdom work? Do you desire to see God truly worshipped in spirit and truth? What keeps you from doing the hard work that will last beyond your lifetime?

Join Me...

I want to invite you on a journey. This journey will involve looking at our purpose and focusing our attention on the things that help us accomplish great things for God in this lifetime and beyond. As with any journey, it will take some effort and adjustment. Our journey will be about more than leaving a legacy or feeling good about life. It will be about bringing God glory as we intentionally use our gifts to accomplish things beyond ourselves. It will require all of us doing this work together. It's time to move forward.

Introduction

Jesus gave all believers and the churches to which they belong the assignment of making disciples. Whether you have a Sunday School, Small Group, or hybrid organization in your church—the goal is still the same...to make disciples. Historically, as Baptist we were taught to assign the responsibilities of the disciple-making process to multiple programs like Sunday School, Discipleship Training, Missions and more. Unfortunately, the dynamics of today's church is very different. Sunday School and Small Groups now play the primary role in the disciple-making process.

In Matthew 28:18-20, we see a clear picture of the disciple-making process.

- We have the POWER - Verse 18 reminds us that the power and authority to do Kingdom work as a church, small group or an individual is available through Jesus Christ.
- We have a PURPOSE – Verse 19 states that we are to *go* and *make disciples*. Our purpose is to make disciples as we are going.
- We have a PROCESS – these verses describe our method for making disciples: which is to *baptize* (connect people with God and a local body of believers), *teach them to observe* (teaching believers how to live, act and worship like Christ), and to *go* (we are equipped to serve and minister as we go).
- We have a PRESENCE – Jesus reminds us that He is with us—always. If He is with us; He is IN us and working THROUGH us. We are never alone.

(NOTE: See Appendix A for a greater explanation of discipleship and a quick survey to evaluate how well you are doing.)

Jesus' intent was for us to do more than make converts. He wants us to make disciples who will in turn also make disciples. In order to do that we must lead them to Christ and make them a part of a vibrant community of believers who will assimilate and nurture them. Then we are to “teach them to observe everything I have commanded you”. Put another way: we teach people the Bible in order that they might love Christ and live like Christ. In today's world, it is not enough to simply believe. It really has never been about just believing something to be a true fact. We also have to live, be, and do as Christ would have us to. Jesus tells us in verse 20; “and lo, I am with you, even to the end of the age”. Christ has arisen, but He has sent His Spirit to dwell in us. In His power, we represent Christ in this world. We are to be a city on a hill, a light in the darkness, and salt to season the earth that it might see Christ as Savior.

As leaders in this movement we call Christianity, we must ask ourselves what we are leading others to do. How is our disciple making going? Are the folks we are leading becoming more like Christ? What is expected of them? Do we anticipate or expect something to happen in their lives? If so, what is it and how do we describe it?

NOTE TO PASTORS: See Appendix B for some more thoughts on this issue.

If we can describe what characterizes a disciple maker what is our **plan** for that to happen? How will we make disciples through our Sunday School, Small Group or Hybrid organization? How will we connect people with God and a local body of believers; teach them how to live, act and worship like Christ; and equip them to serve and minister for the Kingdom of God as they go? In order to do that we must have not only the right priorities but the right focus. The Bible reminds us that we should *keep our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith* (Heb 12:2, HCSB).

In these next few pages, we will consider the value of several elements of the smaller community we call a Sunday School class or Small Group. Maybe we have focused so much on the technique and tools of our work that we have lost sight of the very people and resources that make our small community so wonderful. Our emphasis may have been more about keeping people happy than about making fully devoted followers of Christ. Building a Sunday School is NOT easy, but nothing worth doing ever is. We will look at the need to prioritize our Sunday School and develop a simple but realistic plan to move forward on purpose.

In order to build an effective Sunday School, the key focus must be on **people**. Christ died on the cross for people and our planning can't lose sight of that reality. We will look at five key values that will help us get a handle on building a place where people can discover Christ and develop into disciple makers. These five values are:

- Chapter 1 - Value God's Word
- Chapter 2 - Value One Another
- Chapter 3 - Value The Guest
- Chapter 4 - Value the Body of Christ
- Chapter 5 - Value your Community

Chapter 1: Value God's Word

Hebrews 4:12

Probably the strongest attribute of most Sunday Schools today is Bible teaching. However, Bible teaching does not always translate into life change. The Word of God can change lives with or without a good Bible teacher. *For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as to divide soul, spirit, joints, and marrow; it is a judge of the ideas and thoughts of the heart.* (Heb. 4:12 HCSB) God's Word is powerful. The very reading or verbal expression of this text can impact people's lives. But imagine what could happen if we intentionally begin to teach the truths of God's Word in such a way that people can see the transformation in our life and allow the teaching experience to challenge them to "observe or obey" that truth (remember Matthew 28:19?).

For many years I worked in student ministry. During some of those years as an employee of an SBC entity, I had the privilege of teaching a youth Sunday School class. Every week as I prepared the next Sunday's lesson, I prayed for the students who were members of my class. I prayed that God would help me lead that experience so that each one would understand in their own context the power and work of God's Word in their life. I prayed for life change in the lives of those people I met with each week. I didn't want them to just hear God's Word; I wanted them to *know* and experience God personally.

One year I taught ninth grade. It was a difficult assignment because of the uniqueness of the members of that class. One student possessed an extremely high IQ. Another young man was mentally challenged. On the other side of the room was a kid that by his very posture exhibited that the last place on earth he wanted to be was in that class (his parents made him come every week). Lastly, there was the Pastor's daughter. These four students along with a few others came every week. How do you prepare a lesson for such a diverse group of students?

During these days is when Hebrews 4:12 came alive for me. I prayed that verse every week in my heart that somehow I might connect with this diverse group through God's Word. I not only prayed it, I believed it would happen. It did. Along the way each student began to value and appreciate one another and we found ways for such a diverse group to work together. Lives were changed not because of me, but because of God's Word and His miraculous work in their lives.

It would have been easy to just "teach the Bible" to this group. The problem with teaching is there are always other people in the room. We are to teach *them* to obey all that He has commanded. Too often we intellectualize the knowledge (know) of God's Word when it needs to transform our character (be) and practice (do) as a Christian. A well rounded, balanced, complete, lacking nothing, maturing believer is someone who is more than a Bible scholar who "knows" a lot about the Bible. A maturing believer is taking on the character and attitudes of Christ.

There are groups in our churches just like that group of ninth graders. One has to wonder if we believe and expect God to do a life changing work in the individuals sitting in our classes every week. If we

believed it, wouldn't it make a difference in how we prepare a lesson every week? We need to value the Word of God and its powerful work in people's lives; especially ours.

There are at least three ways we can demonstrate that we value God's Word, believing it will change the lives of people. These three ways are through spending daily time with God, how we prepare, and prayer.

My Daily Quiet Time

If we truly value God's Word, then it becomes something we experience in our lives on a daily basis. It simply amazes me how many Christians confess they don't read their Bible on a regular basis. Even more so, what about those of us who are Bible study leaders? Does your life reflect the fact that God's Word is a daily part of your life? Is God's Word having an impact in your teaching?

Years ago I learned a valuable lesson. The preparation I do for a Bible study lesson is what I do to help others study God's Word. However, that preparation doesn't replace my need to discover truth that impacts my personal life. If all your study is done only to prepare to teach others God's Word, when do you open your life to the truths of Scripture? If you are listening to God for what others need to hear, when are you listening for what God has to say to you? It is easier to prepare to speak to others than it is to hear God's Word challenge or convict us about things in our own life.

In a recent survey, it was discovered that the individual in a local church with the most spiritual impact in the lives of church members was the Sunday School teacher. Even more so than the pastor. How can we have significant impact in the lives of the members of our class if we do not regularly spend time in God's Word ourselves? People are watching and listening to what we do and say. Certainly we need to prepare each week for our classes, but we must also prepare our own heart and life as the Spirit of God works in us through His Word. It does matter what we do and not just what we say.

Are your members reading their Bible on a regular basis? How are you challenging those you lead in their own personal Bible study? How are you equipping them to "feed" themselves spiritually?

The old adage states it well: Give a man a fish and he has food for a day; teach a man to fish and he will have food for a lifetime. I am thrilled that you take the time to "feed" the members of your class. How much more could God use you and me if we also taught them **how** to "feed" themselves? If we VALUE God's Word we not only teach God's Word with excellence, we also inspire those we teach to read and study God's Word on their own.

Paul reminded Timothy of this when he wrote *"And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also"* (2 Tim 2:2 HCSB). Do your best to equip others so they can mature in their faith and one day themselves teach someone else. Multiplying ourselves as teachers is really the ultimate privilege we have as a teacher.

My Lesson Preparation

We are not just preparing a Bible study lesson. We are preparing to lead a life-altering, eternity-impacting experience between God and His people. You may think I am over-selling my point here, but I have been a part of too many class experiences where God showed up. We never know exactly what God is doing in the lives of the people sitting in the circle facing us. We can't predict exactly what a person in our class might hear or when they will experience something that forever changes their life. I know that was true for me.

I was raised Catholic. My family went to church most weeks but I never attended an ongoing Sunday School class or small group. While in college, I started dating a Baptist girl and attended church with her. She invited me to her college Sunday School class. I don't remember much of what we talked about or what was taught, but I remember the people. I remember Chris Elkins who taught the class. I remember Paul, Michael, Wanda, Sandra, Marty, Mark, and many others who were members of that class. They became my family in a way that I had never known before.

In that context, I heard for the first time that I could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. When Chris prepared the Sunday School lesson every week, I'm not sure that he thought about me specifically and how that lesson might impact my life, but it did. I am grateful to that church, its staff, and that Sunday School class. My life was forever changed because of it.

The next time you sit down to prepare your lesson, remember you teach *people* the Bible. The Bible is the most important book for the Sunday School lesson. However, your target is the people in that class and how their lives can be changed by the powerful impact of the Word of God. Pray that people will see, hear, and experience the Word of God in such a way that lives will be forever changed as a result of it. Revival doesn't have to happen just in a worship service, it can happen in a Sunday School class or small group.

Prayer

What boggles my mind is the inattention we give to prayer. Prayer is the most intimate experience we can have with God this side of heaven. Depending on my need at the moment; prayer is like an intimate conversation with my father or mother, my best friend, my teacher or mentor, my boss, my protector, my healer, my leader... well, you get the picture. God, through prayer, is able to fill the void of any need in our lives. He is all things in all situations to meet all of our needs.

If we want to be the very best leader we can be; much of it hinges on our obedience and attention to our prayer life. It's not about us. We need to be talking to the One that it is about—God Almighty.

Your effectiveness as a leader is undergirded by prayer in your life. You have not, because you ask not. Consider this, power to an electrical object is not possible until a switch is turned on. At that moment, all that is needed to power that object now has unlimited potential—at least until the power is turned off or interrupted. I know you understand this, but has it become your practice?

Prayer is more than casual conversation with a passerby. It is a cry from the lips of an individual in their most desperate hour of need when you realize that without God all is lost. It is the equivalent of someone gasping for breath when air is in short supply. It is the cry of the hungry when there is no food. It is the desperation of the thirsty in times of drought. Prayer is like breathing or finally finding a drink of water. Without it, we could not survive.

Prayer is more than a necessity; it is critical. How dare I prepare to lead if I have not prayed! How dare I teach if I have not spent time with the Author and Subject of the greatest book in the world! How do I read the words if I have not asked the Spirit for insight, wisdom, and understanding!

The Word of God is a vital ingredient to a life-changing, vibrant Sunday School. I hope we not only understand but practice a healthy habit of daily Bible reading and prayer. From that can come rivers of living water that God uses to powerfully impact those we teach and lead. The time and focus we give to lesson preparation can not be under estimated in its importance to a transforming encounter with God's Word that becomes the foundation to a healthy, functioning Sunday School ministry. Combining a daily quiet time, personal preparation, and effective prayer creates the potential of a dynamic Sunday School class or small group.

Chapter 2: Value One Another

John 13:34-35

³⁴ *"I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."* John 13:34-35 (HCSB)

Do all the people in your community know that you are Christ's disciples? How would they know it? The Bible tells us, they will know it by our love for one another. Lots of folks have told me their church is a loving church. They say, "we all just love one another". If that is so, maybe you need to ask the people who don't go to your church if that is true. People in the community are watching and listening and often times what they hear is anything but love. In other words, do we love one another 24/7 and not just when we are at "church?"

I am a member of an adult Sunday School class. I'm rarely there because I am teaching or preaching most Sundays in churches throughout Louisiana. My family has been through a lot over the last several years. What has been incredible has been the love and friendship offered to me in the midst of those difficult days.

All of my adult life has been committed to serving and ministering to others. When "life" happens to me it can be difficult for me to accept ministry from others. What I hear often is; "if you need anything, just let us know". I am sure they mean it when they say it, but my Sunday School class is different. They didn't ask; they acted. They showed up with a meal, called me to pray for me, offered to take my daughter to her scheduled events, sent me a card, and more. What is significant about my class is not only that they care but that **they show up**. They inconvenience themselves to take care of me.

Sunday School can easily become routine. We sit around the same people and they just become a part of the scenery. One Sunday somebody shows up and announces that they are separated from their spouse. We are surprised by the announcement. Why didn't we know? It is because Sunday School has become a routine. We show up every week and go through the motions of caring. Often times we ask, "how are you doing?" But, do we really want to know? If we knew, we might have to do something about it. That could affect our lives and possibly inconvenience us.

I know I am not talking about you personally. It's all the other folks in other churches. But could some of what I am saying be true for you and your church. I am convinced that the number one problem in most Sunday Schools is that we really don't care about people. We say we do. We really want to care. But when we get to the nitty gritty of life, we don't.

Now I know there are many people that you care about. Just like in my Sunday School class, they cared for me. But, does everyone on your Sunday School class list get the same treatment. If they do, your class is the exception and not the rule. Many of our members are neglected if not outright ignored. How can we be a church that loves one another even to those people we know will rarely attend?

Investing in and caring for people takes time. Back at the end of the last century a term was used to describe the suburban culture—cocooning. Decades earlier, many homes had front porches. We knew our neighbors. We knew their faults as well as their strengths. We “knew” one another. We took time to visit and check on people. We were nosey. Then we began to cocoon. Just like today, we leave work, get in the car, drive into a garage, close the door and enter our home without one hello, much less a wave to a neighbor. Do we even know our neighbors’ name? It is not only a disease that affects the suburbs, now it affects cities and rural areas alike.

Make a quick mental picture of those in your Sunday School class this past Sunday. Do you know everyone’s name? If they missed a Sunday would you miss them? If they missed two weeks would you be concerned? If they missed three weeks in a row would you call them, send them a note, or better yet, drop by to check on them?

We know that if a person misses four weeks in a row and is not contacted, they will stay home or look for another group that will notice they are not present. Our churches are filled with stories of non-attending members who were at one time active in a Sunday School class or Small Group. When asked why they don’t attend, many simply say they didn’t notice I was gone!

My point is not to beat you down, but to challenge you and me to love everyone in your class. Take the time to care. Get in the habit of calling them, sending a personal note, or dropping by to see how they are doing. Don’t do it only when they miss, do it every week. Why not contact every member every week? That way nobody gets left out. When you do, don’t talk about their attendance or non-attendance. Talk about them. Pray for them. Love on them. Invite them to upcoming special events or class functions. Send them a “personal” email with a verse or personal thought you had about something you read in your quiet time or bible study. Write them a card telling them how much you appreciate their faithful attendance. Send them a birthday card. Drop by for a brief visit and give them a candy bar, cake, soda, card, invitation, Sunday School member book, etc. Do something. Take the time to personally touch them.

Contact Every Member Every Week...Somehow

To me, it is interesting that different age group leaders usually contact in the same way very well. Spend time observing some of your older adult classes. Many of them habitually stay in touch with their members. Older adult classes tend to be well structured and organized. They tend to stay in touch more often and know more of the issues their members are dealing with than other adult classes. Most youth classes are highly relational and have lots of events where the leaders can get to know the students in their class. They will also send an occasional text. Children’s workers are usually the best at sending cards or notes. Preschool leaders tend to be the best at calling the house and talking to Mom and Dad and sometimes the preschooler themselves.

All of these approaches are great, but the secret is to use a variety of methods to stay in contact with your members. Remember to contact every member every week. Different people use different acronyms to help us remember ways to make contacts (MTV for mail, telephone, visits; MPV for mail,

phone, visits; PVC for phone, visit, card just to name a few). Regardless of which acronym you want to use, there are some basic principles to follow.

Make the Mail Personal

The first basic principle is to make the note, birthday card, email, text message, or letter personal. Typing and sending an email addressed to everyone is not a personal email. Forwarding an email is not a personal note unless you put a personal note to the person you are emailing. Sending someone a card is fine if you add a personal note to it. Sending a group text to everyone in your class is fine if you are trying to get out a quick announcement, but not for keeping up with the people in your class. Send a personal text message to a specific person.

One idea I have found helpful is to make a list of each member I am responsible for contacting each week on a master prayer list. Every day, select two or three names from the list and pray for them. On that day, send them a personal note letting them know you prayed for them. This note could be a preprinted card with a special note written and hand addressed, a personal text message, or a personal email.

During chapel service each week at the Baptist Building, we pray for folks in ministry in our state. One particular day, our chapel leader gave us the cell phone number of each person included on the prayer list. While praying for them, we texted them a brief note to let them know we were praying for them that day. How cool is that. When I have received those kinds of text messages, it has encouraged my life at times when I needed it most. Who knows what was going on when they actually received the message and the impact that prayer text might have had at that specific moment.

When I get a preprinted, non-personalized advertisement or brochure in the mail, my usual response is to throw it away without even reading it. Rarely have I received a hand written letter or card that I threw away without reading it. If an email comes with a great subject line or personal note, I'll read it right away. A quick text message is easy to read and respond to. I block senders who continue to send me text messages that went to lots of people. Remember, a personal note to a specific person (brief is best), regardless of the medium used, will always be read and appreciated.

Use the Phone Wisely

Next to being there in person, you can't beat a conversation on a phone. Face it; an email, text message, card, or letter conveys words but not emotions. Only by hearing their voice can you read through the words. If you can't be there in person, a phone call helps you know what a person is really saying and not just the words they choose to use. We can use this powerful tool to impact the lives of people who are members of our classes.

The often repeated message of phone calls is we missed you last week and hope to see you this Sunday. As grateful as I am that we are at least doing that, there might be a better way to connect with people through the phone. Realize that when we call an absentee and all we tell them is that they were missed,

we are communicating that we value only attendance. It comes across as caring about a number more than an individual. I know you care about them, but that is not what they are hearing in that phone call.

Instead, call them and never mention attendance at all. Ask them questions about how things are going in their life or about any recent developments in situations you have previously discussed. Follow those questions by asking how you and the class can pray for them this week and if there are needs in their life that the class or group could meet. After that, inform them of upcoming events that the class or group is planning over the next several weeks, remind them of what the next lesson will cover, and share class prayer requests (without gossiping!). Always end the conversation by praying for and with them.

When you take this approach, you are communicating that you care about them and not just their attendance. Don't misunderstand me, we want them to attend. But they need to know we care about them, what's happening in their life, and how we can minister to and with them. It's about more than filling a seat.

A phone call is a great way to connect with someone at your leisure. BUT, make sure you act on any information discovered during the phone call. Earn the right to have people trust you with stuff from their personal life. If we don't act, that could be worse than not calling at all.

Before we move away from making phone calls, let's take some time to look at contacting guests by phone. You can use your phone to set an appointment to visit them, give them a warning that you are on your way, or to follow up after a visit. Resist the temptation to only call guests. While a phone call is better than nothing, a personal visit done right speaks louder than a card or a phone call.

Go Face to Face

To show that you care about someone as an individual, the highest form of contact is a personal visit. I am a member of a church that visits the homes of guests and prospects in our community. It is mostly a rural community and it is in the south. That being said, I can't tell you the number of times I have been welcomed by families into their home. When I leave, they usually thank me for the visit. When some of these families have joined our church, they share that one of the reasons they did so was because we were the only ones to visit them. Visits still matter. They still work.

My church uses the FAITH strategy for making visits. During the Fall and Winter/Spring Semesters of our FAITH ministry, we may have as many as seventy-five people in teams of three visiting in homes in our community. Our church averages just a little less than seven hundred in Sunday School. Doing the math, that means every week one out of every ten people in my church is making at least one (usually more) personal visit with guests, newcomers, prospects, the elderly, the homebound, students, and families. We do it for one reason. Because it works.

Something like that doesn't happen overnight. As a matter of fact, our pastor would say it took years. The truth is, it doesn't matter how large or how small your church may be. It all started small and then grows from there. Every church and Sunday School class can make personal visits to its prospects,

members and guests. It has to start somewhere and that could be with you. Put together a plan and begin to work your plan.

Did you notice that every class can visit every member? Consider establishing a goal to make a personal visit to every member once a quarter. That's four visits a year. If that is a struggle, how about twice a year? Once again, the key is to have a plan and work that plan. These types of visits don't even have to be in someone's home. You can meet for lunch during the week, at their work (make sure that is ok with their boss first), or at a social or sporting event. Find a way to spend time with them. Don't talk about just Sunday School while you are with them. Focus on them.

More Ideas for Making Contact

Fellowships – Lead your class to plan a fellowship at least once every quarter. Some may want to plan them as much as once every month. Vary the location and type of fellowship. Sometimes it can be just for fun like a progressive dinner or to watch a ball game together. For preschoolers and their parents, consider a play date. For children, you could rent a jumper and put it in your backyard. For youth, it might be a scavenger hunt. Be creative and get the class involved in the planning. The class that plays together stays together.

Ministry Projects – Sometimes a fellowship can be centered on a ministry action. You could plan a special Bible study about a topic that continues to be an issue with many in the class. You could also plan a special ministry project to a family in your community that has great need. It doesn't have to always be about fun and games. Sometimes it can be more powerful to see people informally interacting with one another about issues they are facing or working side by side with someone replacing an entry deck for a trailer occupied by a distraught or needy family.

Dinner clubs – Another way to build relationships is to assign all the members to dinner clubs. Encourage the clubs to host each other in their homes and enjoy a meal together or to meet at a local restaurant. After they have completed one cycle, reshuffle the groups so that people can get to know each other better without becoming too cliquish. This works with students as well.

It starts with you...

It starts with you. All it takes is one person to start caring and wait for God to work. Your attitude will be contagious. Don't accept your present reality. Make the change in your life that would help you love others in a way that you want to have others love you. Remember Sunday School is not about fulfilling job responsibilities. Sunday School is about people.

Imagine a church where people genuinely cared for one another and took the time to show it. God's Word tells us that the community in which we live, work, and minister will know we are His disciples, by our love for one another.

Chapter 3: Value Guests

Matthew 25:35

Just for fun, let's imagine that a guest shows up at your church or your Sunday School class. Let me ask you a few questions about that guest. Did you expect them? Did anyone in your class know they were coming? Where would be the best place for them to park? Will they know where to enter the building and how to decide where to go once they are inside? What do you do with them once they have found a class? Would you enroll them? Where would they sit? What would happen after Sunday School or worship? What kinds of contacts will be made and by whom? Do you call them, write them, or visit them after they attend? Do you invite them back? What information do they need in order to join your Sunday School or Church? All of these questions are relevant. Unfortunately, most churches are not prepared for a guest much less expecting one to actually show up.

When guests are invited to my home, it's a big deal. My wife plans the evening from the moment they arrive until they leave. The whole family gets involved. I get to vacuum the floor, take out the trash, clean my office, put up clothes, and a few more things as assigned. When the guests arrive, they get the royal treatment. That is how my family treats guests.

Sometimes we have visitors. They are unexpected, catching us off guard. Now, when they arrive, we do our best to make them feel welcome, but we are not prepared for them. The house may be a mess. I may be in my pajamas and my office may be spread out in the family room. We may be in the middle of something and have to stop. It's awkward. Even though my family loves people, visitors get treated differently than guests.

Which scenario do you think would best represent the experience of a first time attendee who shows up at your church this Sunday? If you want to build your Sunday School you need to value those who are not there yet. What is your plan? How will you prepare for a guest and direct them to the right Sunday School class so they can be cared for? Who else should be involved in this process?

Every church and Sunday School class must think through the steps a first time attender takes as if you were that first time attender. As a matter of fact, you may find it helpful to visit another church like yours and actually experience it. Once you understand what it feels like, then develop a plan chronologically from the point they are looking for a church until they become a part of a vibrant, caring Sunday School class or small group.

To help you get the process started, let's look at some of the most common steps a first time attender must take and we will do it by asking the big questions.

How will they know your church exists?

I know you are not responsible for the marketing strategy for your church, but you and the other members of your class are the best strategy your church has. It begins with you personally and

intentionally praying for, inviting, and developing relationships with the hope that they might one day become a Christian and/or decide to join your local church. The responsibility of reaching people in your community for Christ and your church is yours. We all share that responsibility. We tend to think that it is the Pastor's job. Certainly he leads the way, but it is just as much your responsibility as it is his.

For many people, their first exposure to your church will come through the Internet. They may be invited by someone, but most will check out who you are and what you are about behind the privacy of a computer screen. Handing people you interact with during the week a card with your church's website address could be a great way to encourage them to take a look at your church.

We can't assume that everyone knows you are there. People drive past things all the time and never realize what is on the path they travel every day. What makes you think they are paying attention to your church? Word of mouth is the greatest advertising tool your congregation has. If the members of your church don't speak positively about your church, that's bad advertising. If they don't say anything at all that's not good either. When something great is happening at your church, everybody starts talking about it including those in the community who are not yet in your church.

Where will they park?

We assume that because we know where to park, everyone else does. Imagine one Sunday, you pull into the church parking lot and somebody is parked in "your spot". Then you enter the building and notice someone sitting in "your chair" in Sunday School. Amazingly, when you get to Worship the same person is sitting in "your pew". How dare them. Didn't they see your name plate? Oddly enough, guests think about these things. They want their first experience to be anonymous and as comfortable as possible. They are there to check you out with as little awkwardness as possible. However, they don't want to be ignored.

Take the guess work out of parking and label some parking spots for guests only. Make sure church members don't park there. Enlist someone to watch those spots and greet everyone who parks there as if they were first time attenders of your church. By having a parking spot labeled for guests and a team of greeters welcoming them to your church, it will say volumes about how your church values people.

How will they enter the building?

I have not been to your church, but I imagine there is more than one way to enter your buildings. On top of that, some doors are rarely used to enter the building. They just are not convenient. You know exactly where to enter. As a matter of fact, you don't even think about it. But, the first time guest does. When they exit their vehicle, their eyes quickly scan for "the" entrance. If it is not obvious, their hope for a stress free experience is shattered.

It may sound like a silly thing but it's not. Have you noticed that most Wal-Mart stores have two entrances? One is for food and the other is for retail products. I know before I park the car which entrance I am going in so I can park accordingly. When I enter the building, there are signs indicating

similar categories for the products I am there to buy. I usually head for electronics or sporting goods. Occasionally I head to men's clothing or automotive.

Where I park and where I enter matters. It matters to a first time guest too. If you truly value the guest, then prove it by making it obvious where he or she will enter the building.

Do they go to worship or a Sunday School class first?

What is the entry point to your church where people can check you out? If a guest attends your church on a Sunday morning, would they most likely attend Worship or Sunday School first? In many churches, the Worship Service is the first step for many guests. The second step would be attending a Sunday School class or small group. Regardless of which one is your primary first and second step in your process, your church must be able to communicate the steps clearly to guests. Those who are responsible for the greeter ministry for your church must be able to help a guest understand your church's first step and then accommodate them when they arrive to check you out.

How do they "know" which class to attend first?

A few years ago, my wife and I visited a Sunday School class at a prospective church we were thinking about joining. The greeter brought us to a room that had our ages on the sign outside the door of the class. When we entered, it was obvious that very few people in that room were anywhere near the age on the sign. The next week we tried a different (nice way of saying younger) class.

If a guest shows up at your church, do you know where you would take them first? Do you have a brochure that identifies the age-groupings and the rooms they are assigned? Even one better, does it have a map? A guest-friendly church has a place for anyone and everyone. The class age or life-stage assignment may not fit perfectly, but it is as close and as clear as you can make it.

Here is where many of you may want to stop reading. Get ready because here I go with that age-grade our Sunday School message. Until someone can identify a better way to assign a first time guest to an existing Sunday School class, I will lead the crusade for age-grading Sunday School. It obviously works for preschool, children, and youth. They are grouped like that everywhere they go. The problem is adults. That is why some have tried to organize the adult Sunday School by life-stage (newlyweds, parents of preschoolers, empty nesters, etc.).

The key to remember is that age-grading (or life-stage grading) is done for the guest, **not** the existing members. The members know what class they are members of and where it meets. It is the **guests** that we are trying to help find a class that would best suit them.

If your church does Small Groups that meet in homes during the week, I would like to suggest some thoughts. Small Groups tend to be organized by lots of things including age, age of children, geography, etc. Many churches using small groups will start new groups in the Fall and Spring. The design is to create new groups so new members can then get involved in one of those groups. Members of other groups that have dissolved for whatever reason can join these new groups as well. This is an opportunity to help the guest be in an environment that everyone is new and will have less difficulty becoming a part

of the community. My question is: what do you do with guests at other times of the year? Do they have to wait until the next group starts or do you have a strategy to get them involved immediately into a group? Something to think about.

Who will follow up on guest?

After a guests finally gets through their initial experience, someone in the class and church must be responsible for making sure a newcomer or guest is enrolled, assigned a care group, involved in ministry opportunities, and is given the opportunity to become an active part of the class. Who is responsible for following up with a first time guest? What is your procedure for making sure a guest gets a sufficient number of contacts so that they will know you care about them, not just their attendance?

The real key here is caring about those folks who are not a part of our congregation...yet. There are lots of people in your community who dream of having a "family" like you have. Remind yourself of the great value church is to you. I know you attend and love your church for lots of reasons. Chief among those reasons is that those people are there for you. When life hits you hard, they are there to pick you up and pray you through. There are people in your community who want that as well. What is missing is your invitation and your attention to make them a part of the family. With a little effort and planning, you can become a class that offers that family to them.

Value the guest. Take the time to think like a guest and make sure you treat them better than you would want someone to treat you. That's how Jesus did it.

Chapter 4: Value the Body of Christ

1 Corinthians 12:27

At my last church, Kevin was a young adult who had great leadership potential. I was constantly on the lookout for new leaders when he first caught my attention. Other young adults looked to him for leadership. I asked him to be a Sunday School teacher, but he didn't see himself as a teacher. Instead, he became a class coordinator. The class began to grow and we started a new class and then another. Now we needed even more leaders. I asked him to be a "large group coordinator" (don't tell Kevin, but I was asking him to be a department director). I told him his two greatest tasks were to enlist and train new leaders, and start new classes and ministries. He was phenomenal.

One day I mentioned that he might need to train someone to do his job so I could give him another one. A few months later he came to me and said, "I did it." In a Baptist church, that could mean a lot of things and most of them are not good. When I asked him what he had done, he told me he had trained someone else to do his job and wanted to know what I wanted him to do now. Honestly, I had forgotten and I didn't have anything else for him to do.

I quickly asked Kevin to be my division director, challenging him to do the same thing he had done with this class with all of our young adult classes. At the time, we had grown to three Sunday School hours and about eight or nine young adult classes. He later trained someone else to do that job and he went to work in the youth ministry.

I pray there are lots of Kevin's in your church. All people have a gift, ability, talent, uniqueness, etc. that God can use to further accomplish the ministry of your church. People will take on positions of responsibility. The problem is we are not very good at enlisting, training, and assisting leaders in our churches.

When people are asked why they are not serving they give lots of responses, but here are the three top answers. **Number one** is nobody asked me. **Number two** is I don't know how or don't feel comfortable doing it (this includes those who point you to someone else who can do it better). **Number three** is I have served my time and I'm just burned out. All three of these things relate to poor enlisting, training, and assisting.

Everyone who is a born again believer and a member of your church is a potential servant-leader. The Bible is clear, everyone has a gift. Peter reminded his readers that *Based on the gift they have received, everyone should use it to serve others, as good managers of the varied grace of God.* (1 Peter 4:10, HCSB) With that settled, let's talk about how all of these gifts are designed to work together. Read Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and you will see a theme—one body. We are all members of one body. Many members and lots of parts, but one body. I don't know if I am the tip of the toe nail on the left big toe, but I am a part of the body of Christ. As the toe nail, I'm so important that if I hurt, it impacts the whole body.

God has so intricately woven us together as a body that we are dependent upon one another. So much so that when one person hurts, we all hurt. If one person suffers, we all suffer. If one person doesn't do their part, the whole church suffers. While speaking at Sunday School week at Glorieta Conference Center, Ed Stetzer declared that one of the greatest sins of the church today is not that 20% do 80% of the work in the church, but that 80% of the people do little or nothing. How do we engage every member to be a part of the mission of the church?

Where are you leading them?

Take some time to write in the margin of this page the purpose and mission statement of your church. If you as a Sunday School leader don't know where you are headed, it is hard to lead others to follow you. What is your church trying to accomplish? How does your class fit into that purpose? If I could at least give you some thoughts to begin to articulate your vision for your class, I would tell you:

- Give them something that is bigger than themselves
- Tell them that in order to accomplish it, you will need others involved to help you
- So that, we can accomplish things for God that we never thought possible.

I recently did a Minister of Education Interim at Summer Grove Baptist Church in Shreveport, LA. Senior Pastor Rod Masteller has a great vision for his church. The statement reads: *We exist to glorify Jesus Christ by loving God, loving others, and making disciples one home at a time.* It is so clear and compelling. The best part, the vision is so simple every member could pull out a napkin and draw the vision and purpose of the church. If your vision is clear, simple and articulate; people can follow it. If you don't know where you are going or what you are doing, people can't follow you.

William Carey once said, "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." If my church has a vision to attempt great things for God and expects great things from God, I am going to follow that. People want to be a part of something like that. They may not join right away, but once the momentum starts, people can't stay away. Dr. Waylon Bailey, Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church of Covington calls it the "Big Mo." He proposes that once you get it, do everything you can to keep it going.

Your task is to make disciples. You hope and pray that those you are discipling will one day become disciple-makers themselves. Jesus started with twelve. One of those failed. Yet those other eleven turned the world upside down. This is God's plan. There is no plan B. Our task is to disciple others that we pray will one day become disciple-makers themselves.

What is your gift?

I have the spiritual gift of encouragement. I have other gifts but this is the primary gift many people have affirmed in my life. I hope and pray that God uses me to encourage you in your journey of service and ministry for the Kingdom of God. God has found lots of ways to use me to encourage people in various ways. I am sure God has lots of ways He has yet to use me and the gift He has given me. But my

gift is not for me. It is for the church. It is for the Body of Christ. I am a member, a part of the Body of Christ. What is your part? What is your gift?

There are lots of tools that can help you identify your gift (you can find some free online tools at www.lifeway.com/spiritualgifts). You need to take some time to discover your giftedness. But there is so much more to your service and ministry than just your gift. God uses all of us differently. You may share a common gift with lots of people in your church and yet God chooses to use each of us differently. Our personalities play a role in this. The life experiences God has allowed in your life has prepared you for future service and ministry for His kingdom as well. Your vocational skills can be used for the service to God. God also gives us a passion for a ministry or target group. There is much to understand about yourself in order to become the person God intended you to be.

We don't have to know everything about ourselves to make a difference. Much of what I learned about myself happened after I volunteered for the first time. It starts with your willingness and then God will take it from there.

Will you serve?

I told you I was raised Catholic. When I encountered the Baptist church, to be honest, I thought everyone was nuts. Nothing made sense to me. The one uniqueness that struck me was a term I later understood as the priesthood of the believer. Not only did I discover that I could have a personal relationship with Christ, but I also discovered that I was uniquely created to serve and worship God. After I joined and was baptized, I did what people told me to do. When someone told me to join a Sunday School class, I did. When someone told me about tithing, I did it. When someone asked me to work with boys in RA's, I did it. (*RA's stands for Royal Ambassadors a missions program for elementary age boys*). I didn't know better. I thought that was what I was supposed to do.

Over time, I began to realize that I was expected to play a role in the ministry of that church. My task was not to find a spot and squat and sit and soak. I was supposed to serve. (I have since realized that the best time to recruit someone as a servant-leader is soon after they join. They don't know better). Two years after joining the church, I was asked to serve as their part-time Summer Youth Director. I said yes because I didn't know better. Fortunately, Chris Elkins (my college Sunday School teacher) was also my Minister of Education and supervised my position. Fortunately, he knew a few things that I didn't.

In spite of my ignorance, inexperience, and immaturity, why would they choose to give me opportunities that carried great ministry responsibility? Why did they ask me to teach RA's? Why did they ask me to teach the youth? Why did they hire me as their Summer Youth Director? I'll tell you why. They saw something in me that they believed was worth the risk. They saw potential!

Someone saw that same potential in you. Are you able to see that in others? Are you willing to take a risk like those who took a risk in enlisting, equipping and empowering you for ministry? We are **all** gifted. We are **all** called. Allow God to use you to help others realize their potential.

Take some time to think about the people in your class. In whom do you see the potential for ministry and service for God's kingdom? What is your strategy for involving as many people as possible in service and ministry for the Glory of God?

I have two daughters. God didn't bless my wife and me with two wonderful children to serve us or to please us. He gave them to us so that we could prepare them to be used by God for His great Glory in their own unique way. My oldest is in college now. I miss her, but she is smart, capable, and loves God. She will do fine. My youngest will soon follow her sister's path. God knows what He is doing and He will use them mightily.

God has given you the privilege of leading a Sunday School class or Small Group for the purpose of preparing them for ministry beyond your class. They are not meant to stay. We would love for them to stop by and visit, but we are preparing them for something more. Let them go and send them out.

Chapter 5: Value your Community

John 4:4

When was the last time you did something in your community with the expectation of receiving nothing in return? Now don't misunderstand me, we all want people in our communities to come to a saving knowledge of Christ. But when we head into our neighborhood, we need to earn the right to be heard. People need to know that we care about them even if they never attend our church.

In John chapter 4, we are told of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. In verse 3, we find Jesus leaving Judea to go to Galilee. The most direct route was through Samaria and yet most Jews would go around it (there was some history there). In my opinion, Jesus didn't go through Samaria because it was the most direct route. I believe He went through Samaria because He was headed to a certain well to talk to a certain woman. The outcome of an encounter at a well that day changed not only that woman, but an entire village.

God desires for our church and class to be about more than just us. Our faith is about so much more than attending a worship service and Sunday School class or small group and whatever else our church schedules every week. God wants us to make a difference in our community, our state, our country, and our world.

Southern Baptist are known for our Disaster Relief Ministry. After Hurricane Katrina, communities in south Louisiana and Mississippi came to understand that in a personal way. Thousands of men, women, boys, and girls from all over the country poured into these areas to help restore, repair, and rebuild. Behind them were hundreds of thousands of people who gave and prayed for those impacted by Katrina. It happened again in the aftermath of Hurricanes Gustav and Rita. All the while, they asked for nothing in return.

Everyday in our communities there are people who experience personal disasters. Divorce, loss of a loved one, job loss, victims of crime and so much more happen to people on a daily basis all around us. Most of them are not regularly attending a local church. Many have no family around to comfort them through the crisis either. Unknowingly, we show up at their door inviting them to a special event at our church. Yet what they need at that moment is someone to stop and just listen.

At a recent associational event, Dr. Chuck Kelley (*President of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary*), stated that "we are a Harvest oriented organization in an unseeded generation." We are so focused on getting bodies in our buildings and money in our budgets that we look right past the person and their need. It should be the other way around.

The community around us is looking for a Savior. I pray that our churches would be more known for what we do during the week than what we do on Sunday morning.

How is YOUR Sunday School class making a difference in your community? What projects are you planning to impact someone's life? Who are you partnering with to help someone who is less fortunate than you? How can your class impact a family in your community that is going through a difficult time right now? Who can you help right now (don't just wait until Thanksgiving and Christmas)? Together you can change someone's life. Then you will have earned the right to tell them about a Savior that changed your life for all eternity.

In every church I have served, the one experience every year that had the most profound impact on my life and the lives of those I ministered with was a mission trip. To hear men, women, boys, and girls talk about how God used them to make a difference in someone's life was life changing. Yet, when we were home, it was hard to get someone to go across the street to mow the yard for an elderly widow. Does that not just break your heart?

It is so easy to drive down our street, pull into our driveway and close the garage door behind our car, shutting out the world. As I write this, I am convicted of my own busy, selfish life that secludes me from the world that hurts right outside my door. I can see it in the faces of the waitress at the restaurant, the owner of the dry cleaners business, and the checker at the grocery store. They all have names and stories and desperately need a Savior. I could have said something but didn't. If I had just taken the time, who knows how this paragraph would have been different.

Let's face it. There is more need than any of us have the time to meet. But, our classes can at least do something. If your class will join my class, together we can get it done. What if we could get in the habit of regularly focusing our efforts, our attention, and our money on something other than ourselves? Don't ask for money from the church to do a project. Don't wait for the pastor to assign your class a ministry. Take it upon yourselves and decide what you can and will DO together, and do it!

Not only is personal involvement a key to a community focused Sunday School class or small group, but so is cooperation with other local churches, associations, Christian organizations, and denominations. For example, this resource is paid for and provided by the Louisiana Baptist Convention. I am a State Missionary. My salary and ministry funding comes from the **Cooperative Program** gifts given by cooperating Louisiana Baptist churches.

My friend Bob Mayfield who works at the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma introduced me to the terminology of a Missional Sunday School. Most of us tend to attempt to accomplish things in our world as a church. Bob helped me first realize that each Sunday School class could be a Great Commission Sunday School class. We all must believe that a class or small group could accomplish great things for God. Imagine the potential your class has. Imagine the resources, giftedness, uniqueness and passions of those in your class and how that can be honed and directed at needs in your community, state, country and world.

Enlist someone in your class to be a project coordinator and plan something to impact your community. It doesn't have to be a big thing. Just do something. It doesn't have to be everyone in your class. Take the ones who are willing and start with them. Just go and make a difference together. But go with the attitude that you are expecting nothing in return. When they ask you why you are doing what you do,

simply point them to the love of Jesus. Do it with no strings attached. Loving people requires that we love them unconditionally, giving all we have and expecting nothing in return.

Conclusion

History is a great judge of our intentions and actions. If someone was to write a biography of your life, what would they say? Some things in my life I would not want to be in print much less told about me. But this I know, I love Jesus. I have committed my life to serving Him. I have my good days and my bad days. Some days I just want to crawl into my Heavenly Father's lap and just stay there. Other days, I sense that God is using me to make a difference. When I am weak, He is strong. When I am foolish, He is wise. I know He loves me regardless of what I do or don't do. I know He will use me, sometimes in spite of myself. But the one thing I crave to hear one day is, "Well done my good and faithful servant. Now enter into my Kingdom."

We are the leaders, so let's act like one. You are God's plan to accomplish the ministry He has for you. No one can do it for you or like you. You are a one-of-a-kind. God loves you, has chosen you, and desires to use you. The choice is yours.

My prayer for you is that you realize God wants to use you to impact the world you live in today and also the world our children and grand-children will grow up in. We are not only living to reach the world today, but we are seeking to leave a legacy of faith that we will pass from our generation to the next.

My prayer is that you will focus on God's Word, one another, the guest, the body of Christ, and your community. How you do that will be your choice. If we want to see a life-changing, dynamic, authentic revival, it will have to start somewhere. Maybe God wants to use you and your class to get it all started in your church. You'll only know if you act.

Discipleship

Our Purpose – “To Make Disciples” Matthew 28:19

Our Mission – To lead unbelievers to Christ; to raise fully devoted followers of Christ that will ultimately become ministers and missionaries in every aspect of our world and be disciple-makers.

Our Vision – To multiply and mobilize mature believers who are called and equipped to go and make disciples.

Our Strategy

- To train and equip believers to be disciple-makers
- To evangelize the lost and assimilate them into a local body of believers
- To develop believers who are mature in their faith and knowledge of Christ and the Word of God
- To develop servant ministers who understand their call to service and their giftedness for service and ministry

A mature believer is someone who...

- Has a personal relationship with Christ and an active member of a small group or community
- Is a faithful student of God’s Word in their personal life as well as the corporate life of the church
- Understands their uniqueness and spiritual giftedness and has put it into action in their life of service and ministry
- Is personally discipling one or more people on a consistent basis in their life

Steps to a maturing believer:

1. Evangelism and Assimilation
2. Growth and Maturity
3. Service and Ministry
4. Disciple-making

Questions for Evaluation:

Rate your agreement with each statement below on a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being “that does not define me” and 10 being “that statement defines me.”

AREA	Question	Circle your choice
1	I am sure of my personal relationship with Christ as my Lord and Savior.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	I am an active member of a small group or community that encourages and supports my relationship with Christ.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2	I have a regular, personal time of Bible study and prayer that impacts my daily life.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	I am regularly involved with other believers in a time of Bible study and prayer.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3	I have a clear understanding of my spiritual giftedness and unique abilities and experiences for service and ministry.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	I regularly use my giftedness and abilities for service and ministry with little or no expectation of anything in return.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4	Other believers are personally discipling me and holding me accountable.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	I am intentionally discipling someone so that they will disciple someone else in the future.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

This survey is designed to help evaluate the maturing process of the believer based on four key aspects of the Christian life. They are:

1. Evangelism and Assimilation
2. Growth and Maturity
3. Service and Ministry
4. Disciple-making

Special Note to Pastors

Pastor, building a Sunday School requires at least 3 things of you.

1. Give your leaders **direction**. This is more than delivering a message from the pulpit. You must meet with your leaders regularly, giving them a clear path to move forward and encourage them. ***Sunday School is the largest “lay lead” organization in your church.*** Equip them and give the responsibility to them. But you need to lead it.
2. Keep the plan **simple**. Lay leaders don’t think about church 24/7. At best, most of them think of Sunday School as 52 independent events. They need a simple, yet comprehensive plan to guide them. Then, remind them of it often. The simpler it is and the more you remind them, the better they remember and execute.
3. Stay **focused** on the plan. At one church I have worked with they have a phrase “90 day wonder.” It simply meant that every great new idea would have the focus and attention for ninety days before the attention of leadership would wane and move to the next great idea. After awhile, people simply quit putting forth the effort to make something happen because they know that soon the emphasis would change. Stay on track. Just when you get tired of it is when the congregation starts to get it.

Sunday School, when given direction, focus, and resources, can accomplish almost anything the pastor leads it to accomplish. (Caution: that also means it can be used to accomplish too many things and become ineffective). Sunday School, at its best, has always been good at reaching, teaching and ministering.

Let me end with a series of questions to help you process the general direction of this booklet.

- What do you believe your Sunday School or Small Group ministry is “known” for?
- What do your Sunday School or Small Group leaders say your Sunday School or Small Group ministry is “known” for?
- What do the members of that organization say your Sunday School or Small Group ministry is “known” for?
- What do the members of the community say your Sunday School or Small Group ministry is “known” for?
- How are the responses of each group different?
- What changes do you need to make to change any negative perceptions?
- Are we producing in the lives of our members what we believe God wants us to present to our community?
- In what ways is your Sunday School organization light and salt to your community?
- What changes need to be carried out for your Sunday School organization to become more pleasing to God?