

Bonus Chapter: Mobilizing for a 3-D Sunday School

The 3D Sunday School

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

David Francis



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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 leadership team starts with three key leaders, each of whom assumes primary responsibility for one of the three dimensions.

- The teacher is the "CDO" or Chief Discovery Officer.
- The outreach leader is the "CIO" or Chief Invitation Officer.
- The inreach leader is the CCO, the Chief Connection Officer.

The principles that are the focus of this book are true for every adult class. In reality, they are true of every preschool, children's, and student class as well. In preschool and children's classes, one person leads the work (the director) and takes the lead in discovering, while others (teachers) help with specific aspects of the group learning experiences and the work of the department. One worker takes the lead for inviting and other workers lead in connecting with members and their parents. Each will assume responsibility as a group leader to care for five to seven children on the ministry roll. In student departments and classes, the students themselves can assume some of the leadership roles. The official titles of these positions is much less important than making sure the work is accomplished.

Administrative Leaders in the 3D Sunday School

Who Administers the Work of Your Sunday School?

If your Sunday School has more than three classes, you need someone who directs the work of the Sunday School. A Sunday School Director leads in focusing the work of discovering (by enlisting and training workers), inviting (by knowing the possibilities, enlarging the organization, providing space and resources, and going after the people), and connecting (ministering to members and prospects). This person works with the pastor and/or assigned staff members and gives general oversight to all three dimensions of the Sunday School.

In each age group, if you have more than two classes, consider enlisting someone to guide the work of these classes. In preschool and children's departments, the director also becomes the *discover* leader (lead teacher) and helps with ministry to members. In adult departments, the director coordinates the 3D work of the classes and may lead a time of fellowship and worship as classes assemble together. It is wise to enlist a director to manage the work of several adult classes, even if those classes do not assemble together (or only do so for fellowship and training opportunities). Once you have more than five or six departments in any age divisions, consider enlisting someone to direct the work of that division.





Ideally, department and division leaders have the spiritual gift of administration (managing). His or her gifts complement the spiritual gifts of the other leaders, and free them up to use their gifts effectively without having to worry about organization and processes. Some large adult classes may want to have an administrative leader as well, who works with the teacher to manage the work of the class. This also frees the teacher to shepherd the class and prepare to teach. I have seen these positions called director, coordinator, and class administrator. Carter Shotwell, education pastor at Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, Texas, uses this approach with his adult classes—called Adult Bible Fellowships—and compares the relationship between the teacher and the class coordinator with that of a pastor and minister of education.

Responsibilities of Leaders

Sunday School is a team effort. Teams work best when each member clearly understands his/her role and understands the responsibilities of other leaders on the team. That can be accomplished by preparing brief job descriptions. Some sample job descriptions and organizational approaches are available at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.

Stay Focused on the Role and Expectations of Members

Assuming all leaders understand their responsibilities, what role should members play on teams? For starters, they should participate as often as possible! In addition:

Discover: Prepare for and engage in personal and group Bible study experiences using whatever curriculum material has been provided. If your church provides a learner guide, at least read the lesson content and Scripture passage each week. Passages often are printed in learner guides. Read the commentary carefully. Give thought to any questions. Jot down insights and applications you’ve discovered or questions you’d like to ask. You will discover that the group experience will be enhanced if you prepare for the session ahead of time.

Invite: Every member should look for opportunities to invite to and enroll family and friends (FRANs) in Sunday School. Be prepared to tell others about your Sunday School class. Be prepared to share how someone can have hope through knowing and serving Jesus Christ.

Connect: Every member should take part in helping newcomers connect with the class by wearing their nametags and being friendly. Pray for and seek to minister to at least one other person every year through the strategy of the class. A 3D Sunday School is a team effort.



Organize and Resource a 3D Sunday School

Suppose one or more guests visit your church. Perhaps they are new in town, received an invitation in the mail, or saw the church sign. Perhaps no one invited them; they just showed up. Grateful for the designated parking for guests and the warm smile of the greeter at the door, they approach the guest information desk to find out where they should go for Sunday School. Perhaps they visited the worship service first, and were responding to the pastor's invitation to connect with a Sunday School class or small group. Whatever the circumstances, they now stand at the information desk feeling eager and nervous. Thoughts that might run through their minds might include: *Will we be able to get clear direction on what department or class to attend? Will we receive a menu of vague options?* I visit a lot of churches, and while there may be a menu, often it is not very clear. So what are some solutions to that dilemma?

Consider the Positives of Age-Grading

Most churches understand the simplicity and overall comprehensive approach of age-grading in the Sunday School: at least one open Bible study group for persons of any age. Some churches have one department for all preschoolers, for example. Other churches have multiples departments for bed babies, crawlers, and toddlers—based on the age and developmental stages of the preschoolers. If you choose this approach, make sure the organizational structure is very clear to parents and to volunteers who help them at the guest desk or preschool reception area. A helpful way to do this is to create a grid for the preschool classes, listing birth years across the top and the 12 months down the left side. In each block, put the class designation and room. Parents and greeters select where to take preschoolers based on the year and month in which the children were born. This chart must be updated regularly, but is well worth the effort.

Most churches also age-grade school-age children and students. Well, actually, they “grade-grade” them, using the school grade they are currently in (or, in the summer, the one they just completed) regardless of age. Some churches have one department for all children while other churches have multiple departments for each grade. Likewise, students are assigned to classes based on school grade. Age grading is also a proven strategy for adults, but there are other strategies for grouping adults. Children, students, and their parents almost never complain about “Promotion Sunday.” In fact, they look forward to going to a new room with a new teacher. Age grading works great for most churches.



Grouping Adults—by Age or Weight?

In reality, age grading is still a very effective way to group adults. It certainly beats some other possibilities—such as shoe size, IQ, or weight! Some leaders have tried geographical approaches to grouping adults, basing groups on the area of town in which members live. Churches that conduct off-campus small group ministries often try this approach with disappointing results. Most adults prefer to be grouped with people with whom they have something in common besides a zip code! So age grading remains a good system for gathering people into groups. The key is to make sure the chart at the guest information desk has the accurate age groups for each department or class. If you do not strictly enforce annual promotion for adults, you need to make sure that you at least reflect accurate ages on the grading chart. It is just a matter of truth in advertising. If a newcomer decides to visit a class for adults in their 40s, most of the people in the class need to be in their 40s! If there are a few people in their 30s and a few in their 50s, it won't matter as long as most of the people are in their 40s. At First Baptist Church in Carrollton, Texas, the average age of the class is provided to newcomers to help them make a decision about which class to visit first. Also, decide how you are going to deal with couples with different ages. A popular way is to group by the age of the younger spouse. If there is a large difference in ages, those couples may want to "split the difference." Just do your best to make it very clear.

Life Stages—An Alternative for Grouping Adults

Grouping adults by life stage is an emerging trend that holds promise for helping adults *invite, discover, and connect* more effectively and meaningfully. It provides the same benefit as age grading in helping newcomers get to the right class. When they actually get to that class, not only are many of the people likely about the same age, but they will be experiencing some of the same life issues. I have observed for many years that when given the freedom, adults tend to group themselves based on the age of their oldest child. Why? Because it represents their "parental frontier." They may have a 5-year old, a 9-year old, and a 13-year old, so they could of course choose a class for parents of preschoolers, children, or teens. Most of the time, they'll choose the parents of teens because they've never been the parent of a teenager and may feel they need all the help they can get! Also, they will tend to be hanging around other parents of teens—both veteran and rookie parents who seem much like themselves. So it's natural to work this Sunday School testimony into a conversation: *"Our Sunday School class is really helping me deal with this being a parent of a teen thing. Most of the people in our group are parents of teenagers, and we really enjoy studying the Bible together and discovering how it applies to this time in our lives. I think you might enjoy it, too. If that sounds interesting to you, I'd enjoy helping you get connected with our group."*



***Bible Studies for Life* Materials Supports Life-Stage Grouping**

Beginning in September 2006, LifeWay is offering an exciting new series of Bible study curriculum materials to support a life stages approach to grouping adults. *Bible Studies for Life* provides resource choices specifically designed around adult life stages. The following chart will give you an idea about how you might group adults in a new way, and the resource titles designed for each life stage. It will also show you which curriculum materials might be the best fit if you would prefer grouping by age.

Life Stage	Bible Studies for Life Title	Typical Age Group
Young Single Adults (unmarried; starting careers)	<i>Christian Single Plus</i>	20s-30s
Married Young Adults (including parents of preschoolers)	<i>Life Answers</i>	20s-30s
Parents of School-age Kids (elementary children and students; married or single)	<i>Life Truths</i>	30s-50s
Empty Nest (kids are grown; careers are peaking; parents are aging, etc.)	<i>Life Values</i>	50s-60s
Vocationally Retired (more discretionary time to enjoy the twilight years of life)	<i>Life Ventures</i>	60s-up
All Stages (uses same passages as the titles above)	<i>Life Words</i> (KJV) <i>Life Lessons</i> (HCSB)	All Ages

This approach to grading does not depend, of course, on the use of this series of curriculum materials. In fact, you can use this series and still use an age-graded approach. The main idea is to consider whether this approach to organizing adults might help you reach and teach adults more effectively. (Note: *Bible Studies for Life* series is also available for students,



using the same Scripture passages as the adult material: *Life*² for younger youth, *LifeFX* for older youth, and *Life Focus* for all youth meeting together, including a KJV option.)

Bible Teaching for Kids Helps Parents Reinforce Foundational Bible Stories

LifeWay’s major line of childhood curriculum materials reflects significant changes beginning in Fall 2006, emphasizing foundational Bible stories that preschoolers and children love to learn and teachers love to teach. One of the foundations of LifeWay curriculum material is a belief that the home is the primary source of Christian education. If you are the parent of a preschooler or elementary aged child, you will want to pay attention to the take-home sheets sent home with your child. Take-home sheets include highlights from the Bible story and other activities you can use to reinforce what your child is learning in Sunday School. If your church uses curriculum resources from another publisher, there may be a similar type of take-home piece. Take time during the week to use it with your child. You may discover that you learn some things, too! For an overview of the next three years of stories and concepts, as well as details on LifeWay’s many Bible study resource options, visit www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.

Important Characteristics of Resources

Since a 3D Sunday School class or department is open—both to new members and to sending people out to serve—Bible study resources must be designed so newcomers and people unfamiliar with the Bible can participate, yet all participants can experience life-changing Bible study opportunities. Resources must be appropriate for the age or target group, provide sound Bible explanation, assist the teacher in preparing for and leading a life-changing Bible study session, and engage learners in meaningful age-appropriate learning experiences and application.

Biblical Solutions for Life

LifeWay Christian Resources provides a wide variety of Bible study resources that are intentionally designed to help open Bible study groups discover God’s Word and that help leaders and members focus on inviting and connecting persons to the Sunday School. Adults can use ongoing dated resources (*Explore the Bible* and *Bible Studies for Life*) that can be used primarily on Sunday morning. Other appropriate resources for Sunday School and off-campus Bible study groups include *LifeSource* (a DVD-driven Bible study experience), *Masterwork*, the *40-Day Experience* series, and *Serendipity* resources. *Life Connections* is designed especially for larger classes that use a master-teacher approach. These and other resources for students, children, and preschoolers are described at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.



The Marks of a 3D Adult Class

Release and Reproduce

The adult class or group is the key to developing a 3D Sunday School. Members of a 3D adult class make an intentional commitment as a group to support one another in the three dimensions: *invite*, *discover* and *connect*. Its members hold each other accountable for inviting others, preparing to discover biblical life truths, and connecting with one another and with opportunities for service. There are two additional marks of an adult class that are developing a 3D culture: releasing and reproducing. A 3D class embraces the strategy of starting new Bible study groups. Participants and leaders understand that a huge part of that strategy will be starting new units for preschoolers, children, and students. So a 3D adult class celebrates every time a member is called to serve outside the class.

An additional benefit of sending members to serve in other areas is that when members leave, this provides space within the class for new people. So *release* is one healthy mark of a 3D class. The other mark is *reproduction*. A 3D Sunday School Adult Sunday School class has an intentional goal to reproduce itself.

Coaching Apprentice Leaders—The Key to Reproduction

A class deliberate about reproducing itself will intentionally develop new leaders. Such a class will develop at least three new leaders, one for each of the dimensions of a 3D Sunday School. One leader will be coaching one person to lead the *connect* dimension. Another leader will equip someone to direct the *invite* dimension. The teacher may be the leader who will mentor an apprentice to lead a class in the *discover* dimension. An apprentice is not the same as an associate teacher who serves as a permanent substitute, with little or no intention of leading a class independently. In fact, this model has the potential of blocking a class from developing a reproducing culture.

Instead, consider a different process. A teacher notices someone in the class who seems to have the gift of shepherd-teacher. So that person is asked to substitute a time or two. Then the teacher discreetly asks some of the members for feedback. If the feedback is positive, the teacher has identified a potential apprentice. So he/she approaches this prospective apprentice with a plan. The apprentice will teach occasionally a small portion of the session—such as reporting on some specific biblical place or word or leading an application activity. Then the apprentice will teach occasionally during at least part of the class session when the teacher is present. Every time the teacher must be away, the apprentice could teach. The teacher will provide coaching throughout the process.



Eventually, the apprentice will become a teacher and both will repeat the process. Other leaders can follow this process. When a team is ready, a new class can be started. In some cases, the new team will start a new class. In others, the existing team will leave to start a new class, with apprentices taking over the responsibilities for leading the existing group.

It’s Not *Just* About Your Class Either: Start New Bible Study Groups

The irreducible law of church growth is this: *start new units*. From a kingdom perspective, that means starting new churches and missions. Inside a church, it means starting new ministry teams, new discipleship groups, new music and worship groups, and new Sunday School classes. Each new Bible study group needs a minimum of three workers: one to lead the focus of discovering, one to lead in inviting, and one to focus on connecting. In addition, each worker is to build relationships with and minister to about five to seven group members. New groups can be started anytime during the year, meet any day of the week, and at any location where the target group can connect. Remember, new groups grow at a faster rate than existing groups. For some very practical help in starting new groups in your church, visit www.lifeway.com/newunits

Prayer Requests Are Different in a 3D Class Culture

Prayer time has a remarkable focus in a 3D class. If your class decides to develop a 3D culture, you’ll start noticing a change in prayer requests. You may hear less about praying merely about medical needs and more requests that sound like these:

- We have a new neighbor. We’re going to invite them to dinner. Please pray for them, and pray that God will give us the opportunity to invite them to church.
- I have invited a co-worker to come to Bible study with me. She said yes and is coming with me next Sunday. Please pray that she will discover what a great class we have.
- We have been asked to serve in a preschool class. After praying about it, we have agreed. I’d like you guys to pray for us and help us stay connected to the class.
- Our pastor has asked us to set a goal of starting a new class. Let’s begin to pray about a target date. Pray that God will help us raise up leaders for a new group.

You’ll Never Be the Same

A 3D class develops a culture in which everyone understands and practices *“It’s not just about us.”* Not surprisingly, these classes also enjoy wonderful fellowship. Why? Because



people who are intent on helping one another fulfill the Great Commission are doing much more than just loving one another. They are on mission together to help each other *invite* others to Jesus and the fellowship of His followers, to help others *discover* Jesus and the power of His Word, and to help everyone *connect* with Jesus and the mission of His church. My prayer is that your group will decide to become a part of a 3D Sunday School. Your class will never be the same again.

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 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—including any denominational label—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)