

Connect

The 3D Sunday School

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

David Francis



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3D Sunday School: Connect

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

The Importance of Hospitality

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

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

Connecting Starts with First Impressions

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

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



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

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

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

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

Greet and Register All Guests

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

Nametags: A Symbol of Faith That Makes Connecting Easier

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

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

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

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

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

Enlist Leaders Who Connect

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

Organize Care Groups and Enlist Group Leaders

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

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

Give the Connect Group Leader a Concise Job Description

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

How Big Is Your Class?

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

Connect to the Work of the Sunday School

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

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

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

Where will these workers come from? Adult classes!

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

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

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

Connect through Prayer

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

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

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

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

Connect through Fellowship Activities

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

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

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

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

Connect through Food

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

Connect with Absentees

People have a lot of reasons for dropping out of active involvement. The number one reason, however, is that they had some crisis in their lives and did not feel like anyone responded. To be sure, sometimes we didn't know about a crisis. I painfully remember an

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

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

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

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

Connect through Affinity Groups

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

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

Connect Newcomers to Worship Experiences

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

Connect with Families

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

Connecting to the Discipleship Ministry

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

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

Connecting through Small Discipleship Groups

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

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

The Awesome Power of a Connected Sunday School

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

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

The Unchurched Next Door Are Eager to Connect

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thom S. Rainer
The Unchurched Next Door