

Discover

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: Discover

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

Discover God's Word!

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

Members Can Discover How God Changes Lives!

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

People Are Interested in the Bible

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



15 Biblical Concepts in LifeWay Curriculum

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

Get People Involved in Learning

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

The Group Can Help or Hinder Discovery

Strengthen Open Groups

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

together for more than a couple of years. Because Sunday School classes are open groups, choose curriculum materials that support keeping them open. Each Bible study experience should be self-contained. That is the primary advantage of ongoing (dated) curriculum resources. It allows learners to engage in a unit of study around a topic, character, or book of the Bible, but each lesson also stands on its own, providing a satisfying experience for the first-time visitor, the long-time absentee, the every-other-week attender, and the never-misses-a-Sunday member.

Create Better Learning Opportunities

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

Help People Discover God's Truth

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

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

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

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

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

Life Changing Discovery Doesn't Just Happen

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

Liven Up Lectures

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

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

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

What can learners do to help liven up lectures?

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

Discover through Discussion

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

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

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

What can members do to make discussion more meaningful?

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

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

Ask the Right Kinds of Discovery Questions

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

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

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

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

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

Use the Learner Guide

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

Discover Who Will Read and Pray Out Loud

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

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

Use the Room Set-up for Discovery

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

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

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

Respond to People: A Young Man's Testimony

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

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

More Insights from the Unchurched

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

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