

Invite

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 Invite

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

The Group Must Be Open

A 3D Sunday School class is an open group. An open group intentionally seeks to involve and connect with people who are not currently members and encourages new people to join the group anytime. An open group also celebrates when members leave to serve in other age groups. Unlike a closed group—a study group with a fixed membership that does not accept new members once the study begins—an open group is ongoing in nature. New people can join or visit an open group anytime—whether the group is meeting for Bible study or having a party. This strategy impacts how the group approaches these activities.

The Members Enroll People

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

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





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

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

The Invitation Must be Intentional

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



The Enrollment Impacts Attendance

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

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

Open Doors of Opportunity to Invite

Share your Sunday School Testimony

Every Christian should be equipped to give a personal testimony about his or her relationship with Christ: his or her life before meeting Christ, how he/she was introduced to Him, and how her/his life has been different since she/he decided to follow Jesus. But sometimes that's awkward. So a Sunday School testimony may be the tool you need to help you invite someone to give your class a try. There's no set formula. Just share a word about how your class or group has helped you understand the Bible and discuss God's Word without feeling inadequate. Talk about how something you learned in Sunday School helped you cope in a specific situation, how others prayed for you when you faced a tough challenge, or how the class rallied around you during a crisis. Then invite that person to come as your guest!

Respond During Crises and Life's Frontiers

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



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

Invite Whom?

Invite FRANs

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

Invite Worship Attenders

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



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

Invite the Kids

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

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

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

Invite How?

Make Face-to-Face Invitations

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



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

Leave Something with Them

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

Distribute Literature

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



Stay in Touch

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

Provide an Empty Chair

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

Enlist an Invitation (Outreach) Leader

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

Never Forget:

Your Invitation May Be the Answer to Someone's Prayer

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