

Great Expectations

Planting Seeds for Sunday School Growth

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Introduction

What Do You Expect?

*You have been born again—not of perishable seed
but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.
1 Peter 1:23*

A student pastor is said to have asked the famous British preacher Charles Spurgeon how he could be more effective in bringing unbelievers to faith. Spurgeon reportedly asked the student, “Do you expect converts every time you preach?” The student responded that, of course, he did not. Spurgeon replied, “That is why you have none.”¹

What do you expect God to do through your Sunday School? Do you expect Him to send newcomers every week? Do you expect participants in your Sunday School to receive a fresh word from Him each week through a consistently dynamic Bible study experience? Do you expect members to say yes to opportunities to serve in His kingdom enterprise within and beyond the Sunday School hour? Do you expect your class to grow and plant new classes?

Sadly, the answer from many Sunday School leaders today is the same as Spurgeon’s student: “Of course not.” That’s probably one reason Sunday School is struggling in many churches. The purpose of this book is to challenge Sunday School leaders and teachers toward great expectations about what God can do through Sunday School. Before we do that, let’s acknowledge some of the challenges and pressures facing the movement. Sunday School may be suffering today from low self-esteem because of these factors, which in turn may contribute to low expectations.

Sunday School Not Cool?

One of the pressures facing the Sunday School movement today concerns its very name. I've often quipped that there are only two things wrong with the name *Sunday School*: (1) Sunday School is not just on Sundays, and (2) it's not a school. When the Sunday School movement began more than two hundred years ago in England, it was both. It was established to teach reading and writing, using the Bible as the primary textbook, to boys and girls on their one day off, Sunday, after laboring six days each week. When the movement first spread to America, it continued a similar mission of promoting literacy and good citizenship. The movement evolved over the years into a predominantly church-based ministry that is still practiced in most churches in the United States. Scheduled before or after the primary weekend worship service, Sunday School has taken on additional purposes in many churches that extend beyond the hour or so spent in a Bible study group. In fact, many churches expect Sunday School to be a 24/7/365 network of care, prayer, communication, outreach, and ministry. It could be argued that Sunday School is well suited to accomplish all of the purposes of the church except the purpose of worship. That's a great expectation!

But despite all the ministry Sunday School has accomplished, continues to accomplish, and can accomplish, the name *Sunday School* is no longer cool to some people. Guess what? I'm cool with that! Change the name to whatever you want! Just don't be surprised when people still call it Sunday School.

Brand Power

Why do people continue to use the name *Sunday School* to describe this ministry, even when the new, official name in their church is LIFE Groups, Bible Study, Bible Fellowship, or—as in my church—Connect Groups? I believe it's the power of the brand! Despite the fact that neither word in *Sunday School* is adequate to describe this multipurpose ministry, joined together they form a global brand that enjoys loyalty and equity all over the world. Curiously, at the same time some evangelical church leaders are creating new names for Sunday School,

others are discovering—or rediscovering—it. United Methodists, for example, have largely abandoned Church School in favor of a renewed emphasis on Sunday School while also promoting Sunday School as a multipurpose ministry that extends beyond the weekend occasion. Sunday School leaders will find some challenging and helpful ideas and resources at their Web site, as well as the sites of others who have not abandoned Sunday School. The Churches of the Nazarene and Assemblies of God are two other groups with robust Web sites and resources for Sunday School leaders.

Brand Extensions

I am currently following, with what I can only describe as troubled interest, the emergence of Sunday-morning programs for kids in Muslim mosques, humanist (atheist) centers, and Hindu temples. Such programs have long operated in Jewish synagogues, Mormon wards, Unitarian centers, and elsewhere. Perhaps conceding to the predominant Christian culture, as well as the strength of the brand, most of these programs are called Sunday School. Why are Muslims, atheistic humanists, Hindus, and others using the term *Sunday School*? Because that's what their kids' Christian friends and classmates call it, even if their church doesn't call it that. Why? Because it's the brand name of the movement. What Kleenex® is to facial tissue and Coke® is to soda pop, Sunday School is to Sunday-morning education. I recently overheard a conversation between two young moms who both referred to their Bible study groups as Sunday School, even though I know their two churches call the ministry by two different names. Just last weekend I had a delightful conversation with a young mom who kept talking about Sunday School, even though her church calls it Adult Bible Fellowships. The Sunday School brand—whether it has fulfilled or failed its brand promise in every church—is still incredibly strong.

Principles More Important than Labels

You may be asking, “Was there a point to the ramblings in that last paragraph?” At least a couple! First, let me clearly state that I don't care

what churches call their Bible study ministries. (By the way, unchurched people don't care what labels you put on your ministries either!) Second, I do care that churches subscribe to the principles of effective Sunday School ministry, whether they label it *Sunday School* or use another term. I will use the term *Sunday School* throughout this book to describe that ministry or its functional equivalent by any other name. If you call your ministry something else, just substitute that name. I think most of the principles—and great expectations—will still apply.

Pressure from Two Directions Influences Expectations

Let's get back to expectations. Before we can deal with the characteristics of a Great Expectations Sunday School, we must address some expectations that Sunday School probably cannot completely satisfy. The Sunday School movement is experiencing pressure from two other very significant movements: the small-group movement and the discipleship movement. It is important to note that all three are movements. Why? Because movements are bigger and more powerful than programs. At the heart of all movements are people. Lots of people. And leaders who advocate on behalf of the movements. With lots of passion! Both the small-group movement and the discipleship movement are exerting pressure on the Sunday School movement but from different directions. This pressure has caused some Sunday School leaders to question the principles on which Sunday School is based. And that can lead to confused expectations.

The Discipleship Movement: Deeper Content

The exhortation of the discipleship movement has always been to call Christians to deeper levels of commitment to Christ and the causes of His kingdom. Such parachurch ministries as Campus Crusade, InterVarsity, and Navigators represent this global movement. In Southern Baptist churches the discipleship movement has expressed itself through such programs as Training Union, then Church Training, then Discipleship Training. The occasion for this program ministry was

historically on Sunday evenings, just prior to evening worship, which became common in churches about one hundred years ago. As many churches abandon either the entire Sunday-evening program or just the discipleship ministry, the movement often finds itself looking for another occasion to fulfill its mission of equipping disciples in doctrine, apologetics, and deeper biblical and practical courses of study. Church members are also increasingly busy. So as churches seek to simplify their schedules, they sometimes consider using the Sunday School occasion—just before or after the primary weekend worship experience—as the optimal time to help believers go deeper in biblical content. Some individual classes may make this determination on their own. And they may still call it Sunday School. But it's not Sunday School. It's discipleship, even if it meets during the Sunday School occasion. I'll explain why in chapter 1.

The Small-Group Movement: Intimate Community

The pressure on Sunday School from the small-group movement is less about occasion than location. Whereas the discipleship movement places a premium on discovering biblical content, the small-group movement places a high value on experiencing biblical community. How does it view Sunday School, especially in regard to adults? Typically, it views Sunday School classes as too content-driven to develop the kind of deep Christian community envisioned for small, home-based groups. Some would therefore abandon both the Sunday School occasion and its traditional location. Others would abandon neither but instead advocate for making Sunday School classes more intimate communities. And there would likely be a name change—probably to something like small groups—which would be appropriate since it would no longer be Sunday School!

Sunday School in the Balance

Both of these admirable movements are putting pressure on Sunday School leaders from opposite directions. In order to establish a Great

Expectations Sunday School, leaders need to have appropriate expectations that take these pressures into account. Sometimes pictures are better than words, so let me propose a continuum.



Discipleship groups can be placed near the right end of the continuum, emphasizing deeper content. Small groups can be placed near the left end of the continuum, emphasizing deeper relationships. So where does Sunday School fit? Closer to the middle of the continuum, striking a balance between content and community. A Sunday School class may sometimes move toward the left, especially during times when there is a need to rally around a hurting member of the group. There may also be seasons when a Sunday School class may move toward the right for concentrated study. But to remain true to Sunday School principles, the class needs to move back toward the center as soon as possible, because to move too far in either direction can close the group—usually unintentionally—to new people.

Because Sunday School classes are designed to be open groups, they must concede to those who would criticize them because they are not deep enough, in content on the one hand or relationships on the other. Actually, I think most classes do a pretty great job of balancing those two. The strength of the Sunday School movement is found in this balance. Understanding this dynamic can both help Sunday School leaders absorb criticism from those on either end of the continuum and help them avoid criticizing those movements as well. All three movements make a valuable contribution to faith development. Each can and does influence the practice of the others. The Great Expectations Sunday School leader acknowledges this fact and orders his expectations with this understanding.

Sunday School for Step 2!

The research findings reported by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger in *Simple Church* have challenged many churches to establish a clear disciple-making process their members can easily understand. The primary goal of becoming simple is not to streamline the schedule but rather to identify and communicate sequential steps in a clear process so that members can identify where they are in the process and what they need to do next to continue on the path of spiritual growth. In most churches the first step in that process is worship in general and the primary weekend worship experience in particular.

Step 2 in most simple churches is participation in some sort of small group. We've just identified three such options. For some churches, notably newer church plants without permanent facilities or facilities that are inadequate to accommodate an on-campus Bible study ministry, Sunday School may not be an option. The same is true for churches that are philosophically opposed to the construction of multiuse/education buildings or are financially or legally constrained from constructing such facilities. Others can provide this kind of space for children only. Off-campus small groups are probably the best option in these situations.

However, where culture and circumstances make an on-campus ministry like Sunday School possible, it is hard to beat in terms of helping the maximum number of people move from step 1 to step 2 in a disciple-making process. Rainer and Geiger found that simple churches count horizontally rather than vertically. That means the effectiveness of each step in moving people through the process can be calculated as a percentage of involvement in step 1 (usually the primary weekend worship service). Step 2 divided by step 1 yields an assimilation ratio that measures the effectiveness of the step 2 strategy. For example, if your average worship attendance is 100 and your average small-group attendance is 50, your ratio is 10 to 5. In churches that utilize Sunday School as a step 2 strategy, that ratio is typically 10 to 7 or 70 percent and often much higher. That's one reason to vote for Sunday School for step 2!

Sunday School in Simple Churches?

When *Simple Church* was published, I became curious about whether simple churches were actually employing Sunday School as a step 2 strategy. With Dr. Rainer's encouragement, coauthor Eric Geiger and I analyzed the 400 churches identified as vibrant in phase 1 of the research (which included only Southern Baptist churches; phase 2 surveyed non-SBC churches). This sampling of churches was chosen because each had grown by at least 5 percent for three consecutive years, a hurdle that clearly separated these churches from the comparison group. With the list of these churches in hand, I was able to obtain information on the Sunday-morning schedules of 376 of the 400 churches. I was surprised to learn that among these vibrant churches, 87.5 percent employed Sunday School as their step 2 strategy. (The other 12.5 percent utilized off-campus small groups or a mixture of off-campus and on-campus groups, at least for adults.) Even more surprising was the fact that half of these simply called the program Sunday School. Vote for Sunday School for step 2!²

An Effective Assimilation Tool

Another reason to vote for Sunday School for step 2 is its proven effectiveness at assimilation. In research findings reported by Thom Rainer in his book *High Expectations*, new Christians who had joined a sample of churches were tracked for five years. Among those who attended only worship, fewer than 20 percent were still active five years later. However, among those who attended both worship and Sunday School, more than 80 percent were still active after five years. Vote for Sunday School for step 2!³

It is my view that one reason Sunday School is such an effective assimilation tool is precisely that it does not attempt to achieve the intimacy promised by small groups or the depth of content found in a discipleship group. Having defended Sunday School for many years on both of these fronts, I have conceded that Sunday School operates in social space rather than intimate or even personal space. I believe it is precisely because Sunday School operates in social space that it is a safe

place for people to find themselves in the second step of their disciple-making journey. I'll say more about that in chapter 1.

What Could Be Simpler?

Accomplishing the first two steps of your disciple-making process with every member of the family on one trip to the church? What could be simpler than that? Vote for Sunday School for step 2!

Three Great Expectations

After you have read this book, you should be able to identify three basic expectations of a Great Expectations Sunday School class:

1. A Great Expectations Sunday School class expects new people and a great Bible study experience every week.
2. A Great Expectations Sunday School class expects people to say yes to the total ministry of the class.
3. A Great Expectations Sunday School class always expects to plant new classes.

Whew! That was a pretty long introduction, but I hope it stirred up some great expectations for your Sunday School. Let's get started!

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
It is by his great mercy that we have been born again,
because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.*

Now we live with great expectation.

1 Peter 1:3, NLT

Chapter 1

Expect New People Every Week

The One who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will provide and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

2 Corinthians 9:10

Perhaps the most important distinction of the Sunday School movement is the practice of open groups. What does that mean? Long white papers have been written to answer the question “What is an open group?” One answer is: “An open group is not a closed group.” But that contrast requires explanation too (which I’ll try to provide below). After many years of struggling to come up with a compelling but short definition of *open group*, I think I’ve discovered one. Here it is:

An open group expects new people every week.

The practice of open groups is the foundational principle of a Great Expectations Sunday School ministry or class. If a Sunday School really expects new people every week, that expectation will drive everything else it does before, during, and after a newcomer experiences it. And it always expects new people every week!

No Throwaway Sundays

“We may have been off a little this week; but if you’ll give us another chance, I think you’ll like it better next time.” Maybe you’ve had that conversation with a guest. Perhaps you just wished you could have that conversation! A lot of Sunday School classes—and, for that matter, churches in general—seem to have the idea that people average out their experiences before making a commitment to regular attendance. That idea is a faulty one. For most people, their first experience will carry more weight in that decision than all of the experiences that follow it—if there even is another experience. Newcomers don’t average their experiences the way long-term attenders do. Here’s the reality. Every week may be somebody’s first week. If it’s not a good week, they may never come back for a second week to average or compare. A Great Expectations Sunday School class knows it cannot afford any throwaway Sundays—Sundays when they decide, consciously or subconsciously, to let things slide a little, put it on autopilot, or take a vacation—maybe because the leader is on vacation!

The Psychology of Invitation

In *I-6: A Six-Lane Strategy Toward an Inviting Sunday School* I describe six dynamics that contribute to the development of a *culture of invitation* in a church or Sunday School class: Invigorate, Incorporate, Intercede, Invest, Invite, and Involve.⁴ Underlying all six of these principles is the necessity of consistency. Consistency is essential to build trust in the minds and hearts of members. If your class is consistently driven by an every-week expectation that new people may be present, members will learn to trust in that consistency. The result is the removal of a significant psychological barrier that makes members less hesitant to invite new people to Bible study. That’s what I call the *psychology of invitation*.

Anyone Is Welcome Any Week

Well, of course, new people are welcome in our class every week! Who wouldn’t affirm that? That’s what I call the *theology of invitation*. Simply stated, we know the Bible exhorts us to compel others to come and to

treat them with honor when they do. We have it right theologically. But sometimes we do things that pit theology against sociology. Usually, these are not intentional actions. They grow from a sort of group subconscious. You see, there is also a *sociology of invitation*. The natural inertia for a small group, a class, or a church is to become a closed group. It takes almost no effort to become closed. It's the predictable course of group dynamics. It takes great effort, on the other hand, for a group to intentionally remain open.

- *Culture of invitation*: A willingness for class members to invite people to Sunday School
- *Psychology of invitation*: A mind-set that class members expect new people to be present any given Sunday
- *Theology of invitation*: A conviction that God wants believers to invite others to Bible study
- *Sociology of invitation*: A group's intentional effort to remain open to newcomers

Are Closed Groups Bad?

Closed groups are not bad. They're just closed! Closed groups are, in fact, superior to open groups for helping people go deeper in discipleship or relationships (the polar ends of the continuum shown on p. 9). Whereas open groups are ongoing, closed groups are typically short-term, meeting for a prescribed number of sessions. Whereas open groups employ a curriculum plan ensuring that each individual lesson or session provides a complete and satisfying study of a Bible passage, closed groups typically use a curriculum plan that is sequential: each lesson or session builds on the previous ones. While members of an open group may be encouraged to prepare ahead of time for the session, there is limited accountability for actually doing so. In a closed group, however, members are typically expected to prepare for the session to participate fully in it. Personal accountability is also typically higher in a closed group. Members of a closed group are more likely to get involved in one another's lives.

Due to the nature of a closed group, it does not expect new people to attend and does not make any intentional effort to remain open, especially several weeks into an in-depth study. These principles of closed groups are the primary reason a church should not employ a closed-group strategy in an open-group Sunday School format. Using a closed-group philosophy or using closed-group resources would violate the psychology and sociology of invitation that are crucial for keeping a group open.

OK. You've decided your Sunday School ministry—or maybe just your class—will adopt an open-group strategy. You've decided to be the kind of ministry that expects new people every week. So what might that look like? Let's explore some possibilities.

Leaders and Workers Arrive Early

Many newcomers arrive early. Will you be ready for them? This is perhaps the foundational tactic of an open-group strategy. Sunday School leaders and workers are expected to arrive early. Just recently, Vickie and I took two of our grandchildren along on a visit to a church. We planned to attend the 9:30 service, so we arrived about 9:00 to make sure we had plenty of time. After checking the kids in and getting their security labels, we walked down to the room assigned to our grandson and waited, along with a growing group of other guests, who interestingly were all there for the first time also. Apparently, all of the guests were being assigned to an overflow room. So we all waited. The teacher, a substitute, showed up at 9:35. Then we took our granddaughter to her room and found a seat in the worship center about 9:50. I visit a lot of churches as I travel; and unfortunately, this story is not unique.

A Worst-Case Scenario

But I have a better story than that one! It's the true story of our first visit to the church we attend now. It was 1997, and we had just moved to the Nashville area. It had been more than two decades since we had looked for a church home. We visited several. Then one Sunday we decided to visit Long Hollow Baptist. We got there at 9:05, just a few minutes before

the published starting time for Sunday School, 9:15. At the time we didn't know that most members never liked the fact that the time had been moved back from 9:30, so that was the unofficial start time! I was initially impressed by a Welcome Center sign clearly directing guests up a sidewalk to a specific door. However, that door was locked!

We found our way in through another entrance, and a sweet woman named Cindy at the welcome desk (about the only other person in the building, as far as we could tell) directed us to our second-floor classrooms. We dropped off our son, a high-school freshman, in a room that was unfortunately typical in many ways: old sofas, a broken ping-pong table, and peeling posters on brightly painted cinder-block walls. Then we went to our room. It was empty. There was what appeared to be some sort of science experiment growing in the two coffee pots. I emptied and scrubbed them and made fresh coffee (they did have regular and decaf!). As we sat down to enjoy our coffee and wait, another couple came in. They weren't particularly friendly. Then I thought to ask, "Are you guys guests today?"

"Yes, it's our first visit," they replied.

I responded, "Us too. Have some coffee!" (I'm not making any of this up!) People finally showed up and were pretty nice. I think the teacher brought a fairly interesting lesson. We went to worship, where one of the deacons preached. The service was OK. But Long Hollow had made an *F* on first impressions!

Why We Went Back Anyway

So why did we go back? Two reasons, both important. The first reason is the same as the reason we visited Long Hollow in the first place: Ben, one of our son's high-school classmates, a fellow trumpet player in the marching band, invited him. That's the reason about 8 out of 10 people first visited the church or class they currently attend. As it turned out, "friend" was enough to overcome the lack of "friendly."

The second reason requires a little more background. You see, although we had visited several churches, not a single one had made a personal contact with us. Even the one we visited on Friend Day! Or the

one we visited five times! Maybe it was because we were living in some cheap apartments while building our house, and they decided our address did not match the culture of the church. Maybe things would have been different if I had written, “We are tithers” on the guest card! But I didn’t. And they didn’t contact us—with one exception. At 2:00 p.m. on the Sunday afternoon of our visit to Long Hollow, the phone rang. On the other end was one of my heroes, deacon Bill Garner. He thanked us for attending and asked about our story. He told me a little about Long Hollow’s recent story and said they were about to call a new pastor. He invited us back, and we went. We were the first family to join under pastor David Landrith’s tenure. We have watched with amazement as the church has grown from a struggling, hurting church to a healthy, growing, multisite congregation that regularly leads Tennessee churches in baptisms.

Why Most People Would Not Come Back

The previous story is fun to tell. I’ve told it to laughing audiences all over America. We know God wanted us at Long Hollow. But most people would not have returned to the church under the circumstances I described. We were the exception. I’m glad we were! What made our story different? We were church shoppers. We were going to join a church—whether they wanted us or not! That’s our commitment. It’s our lifestyle. In fact, we were not only church shoppers but also determined church shoppers. Most people are not.

The sad reality is that many churches—and individual classes—can fool themselves into thinking they are open and welcoming to new people simply because they reach their share of church shoppers each year. This is related to the concept of Churn that I introduced in *I-6*. Churn is the number of people in a class or a congregation who move, drop out, or die. To maintain the current attendance, a class or a church must enroll a certain number of new members each year. Most classes—and churches—can cover their churn (about 20 percent per year is typical) without a lot of intentional effort to be open. And this can fool them into thinking they are open. But they’re not. They’re reaching only the

people who are determined to be part of a class or a church. So what does it take to really be open—intentionally open—to people who are seeking, not shopping? People who do not come because they are naturally inclined but rather have responded positively—and perhaps a little anxiously—to being invited?

Show Some Teeth!

My friend David Apple, a LifeWay adult ministry specialist, tells a great story about a church where he was the interim pastor. The church had been through some trying times, and everybody in the church—and in the town where it was located—knew about the problems. A lot of anger over hurt feelings simmered just beneath the emotional surface of the church services. One Sunday evening David challenged members with what he described as the first step in a strategy to revitalize the church: SST, “Show Some Teeth!” He even suggested that gritted teeth can look like a smile from a distance! Under his interim leadership the church experienced a revival. It began to reach people and even began to see people saved and baptized regularly. It all started with a commitment to show some teeth!

I have already mentioned that I visit a lot of churches in my travels as the director of Sunday School for Southern Baptists. Sometimes I have been invited. Sometimes I just show up. Either way, the people in the church don’t know who I am. So I am particularly sensitive to the “You look like a stranger” stare. It’s very difficult to describe this particular gaze. The facial expression is not particularly negative. It is rather a look that communicates, “I don’t think I’ve seen you before.” Not a stare of disgust, just one of distrust. Or perhaps simply curiosity. And it is almost never accompanied by a verbal greeting. How refreshingly different it is in a church where people simply smile and greet me with a warm “Good morning,” a sincere “Hi,” or a genuine “How are you doing?”

It Starts in the Parking Lot

Especially if parking is at a premium at your church, you’ll want to make a good impression from the moment a newcomer pulls into your

parking lot. Make sure you have signs directing guests to parking reserved for them. My recommendation is that guests be afforded this privilege only on their first visit to the church with signs clearly indicating Parking for First-Time Guests Only or something to that effect. Why limit this privilege only to first-time guests?

1. You can pay extra special attention to these guests.
2. You won't need as many such spaces if people can use them only once.
3. You can discourage people from postponing enrolling in Sunday School or joining the church because they don't want to lose their guest parking privileges!

Let's revisit the first reason. Enlist a team of two or more persons to give a special greeting to everyone who parks in first-time guest parking. Provide guests with a simple brochure of basic information about the church and perhaps a map of the building. Mark the location of the door closest to where their car is parked, which hopefully is the door closest to the welcome desk, their next stop. What are the qualifications for a first-time guest greeter? They just need to have a nice smile and a warm handshake.

Welcome Desk

Even if yours is a small church, you need a welcome desk. Don't expect people to find their own way around. Help them complete the appropriate forms. Then escort them to their destination. If they have children, start with the youngest, the next youngest, and so forth until the adults reach their rooms. Talk along the way. Ask questions. Listen to their story. Tell things about the church building along the informal tour. "Our church isn't big enough for all that stuff," you may protest. Guess what? It will never grow if you keep acting as if it's small. Act big and watch what God—through the psychology of invitation—might do.

Signs, Signs, Everywhere a Sign!

A lot of churches could stoke the psychology of invitation among their members with one single, simple act: improving the quality of the

outdoor church sign. A sign says a lot about the way a church feels about itself. Congregational self-esteem, by the way, is the foundation of a culture of invitation. Internal signage is also important. It doesn't have to be airport- or hospital-quality signage. It just needs to be attractive and functional enough to help people get where they need to go. And if you have a cute name for a church program, make sure guests know what the signs refer to. For example, if you call the student area the Cellar, make sure signs to the Cellar also indicate grades 7–12. Or if the elementary kids go to Adventure Zone, make sure the sign also refers to grades 1–6.

The Importance of the Door

Pay special attention to the first door you expect first-time guests to walk through. And then every other door you expect them to walk through. A pastor in an Alabama church where I was speaking asked me, “After being here this morning, give me just one recommendation for making a better first impression.” My response was nearly immediate: “Get a new door.” The church had excellent guest parking and signs directing guests to a fine welcome center. But the door nearest the guest parking was in ill repair. In fact, it was probably the worst door in the entire building. No one noticed because almost nobody used that door except guests! I recommended that the creaky, wooden door with the peeling paint be replaced with a glass door on a metal frame. It was a simple, relatively inexpensive improvement that communicates, “We’re expecting new people every week.” The next most important doors are the ones families will send their kids through.⁵

Best Rooms for Kids

I seldom talk with a church leader who is satisfied with the number of young families his or her church is reaching. Here is a simple axiom:

*If you want to reach families with kids,
you’ve got to devote the best rooms to kids.*

Bright rooms. Clean rooms. Well-equipped rooms. With well-equipped leaders. Nothing makes a more positive first impression with a parent than workers who have arrived early, set the room up with appropriate activities that invite kids to learn, turned on a music CD, and then kneel to greet a new child at eye level and express how glad they are to see them. I've said plenty about this in my previous books, so I won't say more here. Do you have great expectations that new families with kids will come to your church every week? Then get ready for them!

Clearing the Clutter

Perhaps nothing squeezes against the psychology of invitation like clutter. Clutter is expensive! Wayne Poling, a Sunday School specialist at LifeWay and the compiler of *The Sunday School How-to Manual*,⁶ tells about using a tile square to demonstrate how expensive clutter can be. Let's say new construction is priced at one hundred dollars per square foot. Take the square foot of tile and carry it around the building with you. How much is the space under the broken pool table costing you? The space under the inefficient old sofas in the youth lounge? The space under the inoperable computers that people have donated to the church? The space under the old metal chairs stacked under the stairwell? The space under the bookshelf filled only with clutter itself?⁷

Expect a Great Bible Study Experience Every Week

Let's say everything has gone well for guests so far. They've parked close to the building and have been greeted warmly. They've been accompanied to their Sunday School classroom. Someone has completed the "Baptist paperwork" for them and has introduced them to the class. So far, so good. Now the moment of truth: the Bible study experience itself.

A Great Expectations Sunday School expects every class to have a great experience learning from the Bible every week. Every week? Yes, every week! For ideas to make every class session a great one, see the "Discover" chapter in *The 3D Sunday School*, the "Scripture" chapter in *The Discover Triad: Three Facets of a Dynamic Sunday School Class*,

and/or the “Class” chapter in *Connect*³: *The Power of One Sunday School Class*. All three books can be downloaded free or purchased at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool. If you use LifeWay curriculum materials, you’ll also find contemporary illustrations and supplemental teaching ideas to enhance the class experience at www.lifeway.com/extra. Posted a couple of weeks prior to the great class session you’re planning, these ideas often provide just the icing on the cake you need.

Bible Study in an Open-Group Philosophy

A commitment to keeping Sunday School classes open both impacts and is impacted by the approach to Bible study. The most important principle is this:

Every individual Bible study session needs to be a complete and satisfying experience.

The session may—and probably should—be part of a larger unit of study that connects the lessons together. Nevertheless, for a person attending the group for the very first time, it should also be a complete experience with—

1. introductory comments, questions, or activities;
2. comments, questions, or activities that encourage the discovery and application of the truths of the Scripture passage or story;
3. concluding comments, questions, or activities that bring the session to a satisfying conclusion that hopefully equips members to answer—or at least wrestle with—the question “So what?”

When members know they can count on this approach, it dramatically increases the likelihood they’ll invite someone new to class. It’s not just a sound educational model. It’s an important element of the psychology of invitation. And great expectations!

The seed is the word of God.

Luke 8:11

Chapter 2

Expect People to Say Yes

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed
that a man took and sowed in his field.
Matthew 13:31*

A Great Expectations Sunday School expects people to say yes! Yes to an invitation to attend Sunday School. Yes to an invitation to enroll in Sunday School. Yes to preparing for and participating in the class session. Yes to opportunities to serve in the class. Yes to the challenge of ministry and missions beyond the class. Yes to opportunities for training and development. Yes to starting new classes. Yes to new ideas—and maybe a few classic ones! Let's deal with each of these briefly. The more people say yes to these elements of a Great Expectations Sunday School, the more people you can expect to reach and teach through your Sunday School.

Yes to an Invitation to Attend

I talked in the previous chapter about creating a culture of invitation and paying attention to its foundation, the psychology of invitation. How will you know if you actually have a culture of invitation? When members regularly invite new people to attend! How will you know if you and your members have a healthy psychology of invitation? When you expect those people to say yes to your invitation! After all, why wouldn't they? Look at all the things you've done to get ready for company! You really expect new people every week, and it shows in

dozens of ways large and small. And when they come, the Bible study experience is a dynamic one in every class, from the youngest preschool department to the oldest adult class. You're ready! Now it's time to start inviting people to attend, expecting them to say yes, with great confidence that they'll say yes over and over again because of the wonderful experience they've had.

Yes to Enrollment

The most foundational principle of Sunday School growth is open groups. A close second is the principle of open enrollment. The short definition of an open group is that it expects new people every week. Open enrollment has a brief definition too.

*Open enrollment means people
can belong before they believe.*

They don't have to believe the Bible. They don't have to be a Christian. They don't even have to like God! They just have to say yes to an invitation to enroll as members of the class, to agree to have their names placed on the class ministry list. We call it a ministry list instead of a class roll because of the commitment each term implies. Being on a class roll implies that a member is committed to attending the class. Being on a ministry list implies that the class is committed to ministering to the member—whether or not that person attends regularly. That's a big change in thinking for some classes. But it's a healthy and necessary step toward becoming a Great Expectations Sunday School class.

Yes to Prepare for Class

A Great Expectations Sunday School class expects members to come prepared for the class session. That's one advantage of providing inexpensive printed curriculum materials or at least sending a weekly e-mail and/or attachment to members so that they know what Scripture passage will be explored, perhaps what teaching aim or life question

will provide the focus for discussion and application, and maybe some commentary or questions to think about ahead of class. (If you're interested in an electronically delivered curriculum option, check out www.lifewaylessons.com).

Can Guests Prepare?

How can the people you invite prepare? That's one of the great things about printed curriculum materials! Along with your invitation, you can provide a copy of the study material you are using. If you are using dated material—curriculum resources that label each lesson with “Week of [date]”—you can say something like this in conjunction with your invitation: “Here's a little booklet with the topics we're studying in our class now. Before you come, you might want to take a few minutes to read the lesson for that weekend. The Scripture passage is printed in the book, along with an author's comments about what it means. I think you'll enjoy reading it whether or not you come to class.” That doesn't sound hard, does it? And guess what? By that simple act, you have removed the number one barrier for adults: thinking they know too little about the Bible to participate. Don't tell them they may be better prepared than some of the regulars! But what if they never come? You've still provided them a valuable Bible study guide. If it's LifeWay material, it will usually include a plan of salvation on the inside front cover. It's an investment in eternity that costs about two dollars—plus enough love to make the invitation.

Yes to Participate in Class

Vickie and I teach preschoolers in our church. They don't have to be motivated to say yes to participating in class! Yesterday was one of our favorite lessons; we had purple Sunday with our class of pre-K kids. Our Bible story was about Lydia, the prominent businesswoman who dealt in purple cloth to whom Paul witnessed at the riverside. We had a purple art table with scraps of purple cloth, purple construction paper, purple markers, purple felt stickers, purple straws, and purple yarn. Another table had purple play dough with purple cookie cutters. I taped a “river”

to the floor and placed some boats there (that's how Paul reached Philippi). On a third table was a dishpan of water with purple sponges to wash river rocks. The song "Go and Tell Others" was playing softly on "repeat" on the CD player. Before we ever sat down for group time, the kids had already heard about Lydia and the day's Bible thought: "Go tell others about Jesus." So what does all that have to do with adult classes? If all your class experience is sitting in rows of chairs while listening to a lecture, it says plenty! Get adults involved!

Yes to Serve in the Class

I've had the following conversation with many teachers:

- Teacher: I don't have an outreach leader in my class.
 Me: Yes, you do.
 Teacher: I don't have a fellowship leader.
 Me: Yes, you do.
 Teacher: I don't have a ministry leader.
 Me: Yes, you do.
 Teacher: I don't have a missions leader.
 Me: Yes, you do.
 Teacher: *(Getting a little perturbed!)* And I sure don't have group leaders.
 Me: Sure you do.
 Teacher: *(On the verge of hitting me!)* Why do you keep saying that?
 Me: Because if you don't have any of those positions, *you* have those positions!

The reason many teachers don't have helpers is that they don't ask. The reason they don't ask is that they don't expect members to say yes. So ask people. And expect them to say yes. There is a proper way to ask. And many improper ways! The most improper way is to stand before the class and ask for volunteers. You'll get two responses, both bad ones:

1. No one will respond.
2. Someone will respond, but they're a poor fit for the job.

What's the proper way to ask people to serve? Ask a specific person to consider a specific job for a specific period of time. Pray about it. When you sense God has confirmed a name, make an appointment to talk with that person. Never go into that conversation with a second choice. This is the person God has impressed you to ask. There is not a backup plan. Spell out the responsibilities of the job. Neither oversell nor undersell the expectations. Tell them you won't take an immediate answer, even if it's yes! Ask them if they'll pray about it. If they say yes, assure them that whatever God tells them to do will be OK with you. Call in a few days to get their answer. Expect a yes!

Care-Group Leaders

A great entry-level leadership position is the care-group leader. In its most basic form, the care-group leader's responsibility is very simple: contact every member in the care group every week. Some care-group leaders can take it a step further by adding prospective members to their weekly contact list. Some class situations call for the care-group leader to perform additional duties. In an arrangement where the last 10 to 15 minutes of the class time are set aside for sharing and praying in care groups, the group leader will lead this time with his or her group. (I recommend single-gender care groups.) In large classes that employ a master-teacher/small-group approach that intersperses short lectures from the teacher with brief periods of discussion in small groups, care groups can sit together in semicircles with the care-group leader facilitating the discussion, typically utilizing questions provided before the class session. Occasionally, a care-group leader will step it up a notch on his or her own, initiating a caring response to a group member's need or planning a ministry or mission activity just for the care group. When you lay out a picture like this for potential group leaders, you'll be amazed how many God will lead to say yes. Expect it!

Kids and Students Will Say Yes Too

A Great Expectations Sunday School starts building a foundation for yes with its kids. Preschoolers will help if you ask them expectantly. We

almost always have an early arriver or two (maybe Mom is in the choir, or Dad needs to get to his Sunday School room early). Zachary loves to be first so that he can help “Mr. David and Ms. Bicky” (after a year Zach still can’t get that v sound!) get things set up. Some 5-year-olds are more advanced than their classmates and are glad to help a friend complete a puzzle. Clean-up time is an opportunity for everyone to pitch in, and everyone is expected to say yes to helping. This principle is also true in classes with elementary children, who can even rotate official duties like serving as a greeter or table leader. In student classes middle- and high-school youth can have official class roles, such as care-group leaders, if you ask them and have great expectations that they will say yes.

Yes to Serve Beyond the Class

Ed Stetzer, the director of LifeWay Research, encourages Sunday School classes and small groups to become small missional communities. Stetzer contends that if Christians are going to effectively engage the world around them, they are more likely to do it with a class or group as the base of operations than with a pew. He summarizes his vision as getting people out of rows, into circles, and engaged in service and missions. A Sunday School class is a perfect operating base for fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Most appeals to ministry and missions are either too individualistic or too global. Between “You personally give and go” and “Everybody everywhere cooperate to support this huge effort” is a sweet spot where a single class or small group, working together, can act “glocally” to accomplish a mission. I believe, along with Ed Stetzer, that this may be a pivotal time for the Sunday School movement. Will it turn inward, as so many movements do? Or will it—through the actions of thousands of individual classes—turn outward to do the things God cares about most, the things Jesus modeled when He walked on the earth, the things the Holy Spirit most enjoys empowering believers to do: seeking, serving, and saving the lost? It’s easy for our heads and hearts to say yes to such a challenge. It’s our hands and feet that have a harder time saying yes. Sunday School classes can combine our collective yeses into gospel action.

Associate Members as Missionaries

A chief indicator that an adult class is becoming a small missional community is that it rejoices when it releases members to serve as missionaries to preschoolers, children, and students. Many classes and small groups grow so inwardly focused that they seldom release anyone to serve with kids, much less rejoice over the fact. Great Commission classes create a culture that encourages people to leave the class to serve. They assign a top care-group leader to associate with members who have left to serve. Classes invite them to parties. They pray for them regularly. They treat them like what they are: missionaries to kids! They display photos of them on a wall or bulletin board, preferably candid shots from the rooms that are their mission fields. They lift them up as examples. When a class builds that kind of culture, a remarkable thing happens: people say yes to serving kids. What's so important about that? Simply this astonishing fact: virtually every person who will ever come to Christ as Savior and Lord will do so before his or her 18th birthday. Great Expectations Sunday Schools know they must redouble their efforts to reach kids and must expect kids and their parents to say yes to an invitation to Sunday School.

Out of Rows, into Circles, Engaging the World

I've already mentioned Ed Stetzer's challenge to groups and classes to rethink themselves as small missional communities. A Great Expectations Sunday School class recognizes that ministry and missions can no longer be segregated into a separate church program. Ministry and missions can no longer be something we just talk about, pray about, or give to. Ministry and missions must be something we do. Together. On mission. As a Great Commission team. Where to start? My answer may sound like a business cliché: discover a need and meet it. Maybe the need is in a nearby school, a benevolence ministry, a rescue mission, a hospital, an apartment building, a high-rise, or a street. And don't misunderstand me about the praying and giving. That's important too. Classes could start by contacting the International Mission Board (www.imb.org) and adopting an unreached people group to pray for. This

simple act may be just the right first step for a class to start thinking missionally. Or set a class goal for missions offerings. The key is doing something together, not just as individuals.

Yes to Evangelistic Prayer

Another possible first step in missions involvement might be to engage your class in intentional evangelistic prayer. Put up a tear sheet or poster board on the wall and start listing the names of people who don't know Jesus. Refer to it weekly as you get updates. Celebrate when you learn that someone on the list has said yes to Christ. The best way to tell whether a class is actually a small missional community is to listen to the prayer requests. Do they increasingly concern the thing God cares most about: seeking, serving, and saving the lost? Are they voiced with great expectations that God will hear and answer those prayers and that we can be part of the answer?

Yes to Regular Leadership Meetings and Rallies

Believe it or not, some churches still conduct a Sunday School workers meeting every week. And they expect leaders to be involved. I applaud them! My first Sunday School position was as a teacher in the Kindergarten Department at First Baptist Church in Lakewood, Washington. Unless I was working the swing shift at the 25th Air Command, I knew my department director expected me on Wednesday nights for the planning meeting. As far as I knew, it was just part of the job. The prevailing practice these days is the monthly meeting, often supplemented by quarterly rallies. These rallies are high-energy events, and leaders typically don't want to miss them. Leaders are also expected at the monthly meetings, which are also carefully planned so that they create great expectations.

By far, the number one reason Sunday School leaders don't attend leadership meetings is that their expectations about the value of those meetings have diminished over time. You shouldn't expect busy leaders to attend boring, announcement-oriented, poorly planned, low-

energy, unrewarding leadership meetings. But if they have great expectations about leadership meetings, confident they'll miss a scoop on the church's future direction from the pastor, exciting new ideas they can implement in their class the next week, a great new resource, or just a real feeling of being genuinely loved and appreciated, most will be there! Why should we expect leaders to attend these meetings? As my friend Alan Taylor asks, "Why does the choir director expect choir members to attend rehearsal?" Is Sunday School less important than the choir anthem? Not if you have a Great Expectations Sunday School!

Yes to Training

A Great Expectations Sunday School needs trained leaders. Unfortunately, many churches today don't really expect leaders to say yes to opportunities for training. Sadly, sometimes the reason leaders don't attend training is that pastors and Sunday School directors don't promote training opportunities offered by associations, state conventions, LifeWay, or others. That's why I encourage Sunday School leaders to bookmark their state-convention and associational Web sites and check them regularly for beneficial training opportunities.⁸

As I write this, I've just returned from Sunday School Week events at LifeWay's conference centers in Ridgecrest, North Carolina, and Glorieta, New Mexico. They are among the premier annual training events. It takes a lot of commitment to attend such an event, in terms of vacation days and dollars. But most people say it's worth it. Maybe this would be a great expectation for all Sunday School leaders: to make a pilgrimage to summer conference-center training at least once during his or her lifetime! Seriously, everyone can't afford this caliber of training. But most can afford to invest a Saturday and a few dollars to attend an associational or state-convention event. I think leaders will say yes to training if those responsible provide top-notch conferences, create great expectations, and deliver positively on those expectations.

Yes to a Variety of Methods for Delivering Training

Lots of opportunities are available for leaders to receive training at events. There is something special about an event: the mutual encouragement of people with similar roles—and problems—from other churches, the energy of a crowd committed to a common cause, the freedom to ask “dumb” questions of an expert who doesn’t know you! Yet the reality is that many leaders will not attend training events or will attend such an event only at their own church at a time they are usually there anyway. Some may not do even that. But they still need training! So what are some other delivery systems? For one, there are books like this one! But did you know this book—and several others similar to it—are only part of a complete training system that is delivered via the Internet? Visit www.lifeway.com/sundayschool to view the training possibilities, including age-group teaching plans, PowerPoint® presentations, webinars, and audiobooks (MP3). If you’re just discovering these assets, you’ll find enough training material for several quarterly training meetings. Several state conventions partner in an online training community called E-quip (<http://e-quip.net>), developed by the Canadian National Baptist Convention in an effort to deliver training to leaders across the vast expanse of that country. Many leaders are saying yes to this type of training, provided in the comfort of their own homes and at a time of their choosing. There are great expectations about what such a training system might become in the future.

20,000 Leaders Trained in One Afternoon?

An ambitious plan for summer 2010 is to train 20,000 Sunday School leaders in one Sunday afternoon, gathered in their own churches or the homes or offices of leaders, in a high-energy, live webcast from Ridgecrest Sunday School Weekend.⁹ The plan is to archive this training for future use. The prototype live event of this sort pitted LifeWay small-group specialist Rick Howerton against yours truly in a live debate with the theme of a boxing match: “Sunday School vs. Small Groups.” It was a lot of fun! You can still view the main event online

at www.lifeway.com/sundayschoolvssmallgroups or search for "Sunday School vs. Small Groups" at www.lifeway.com.

Yes to Responsibility and Accountability for Training

We should expect Sunday School leaders to be responsible and accountable for participating in a minimal level of training each year. One idea for accomplishing this expectation is to establish a system of training that attaches a certain number of points to each training opportunity. For example, you would establish the minimum expected training points at 1,000 (maybe call it the bronze level; 1,500 could be silver; 2,000, gold). Then you would provide a catalog, a brochure, or a list on the church Web site that identified various training options and the points available for each. Reading this book (or listening to it or viewing the webinar) might earn 100 points. Attending monthly leadership meetings might earn 50 and quarterly rallies 100. An associational, regional, or state event might earn 250. Sunday School Week at Glorieta or Ridgecrest might earn 1,000. The main point is to be clear about the expectation. Then empower each Sunday School leader to choose options that meet their needs in a way compatible with their schedules and learning styles. Great expectations!

Yes to New Ideas

The Sunday School movement has experienced many changes over the past two hundred years. It needs to remain open to saying yes to new ideas. Think changing the name to something cooler or more contemporary will help you reach and teach more people in your community? Go for it! Think offering Bible study groups that function like Sunday School but meet on a weekday or weeknight might help you reach people who can't attend on Sundays? Do it! Think setting up a Facebook group for your class will help people stay connected? Set it up! Need to utilize a large space by having table groups and a master teacher? Try it! Want to explore the possibility of a conference-call class for homebound members, an Internet chat (or Skype) class for deployed

military personnel, or a Twitter #hashtag class for college students away at school? Experiment with it!

When reviewing new products, *Wired* magazine uses the terms *wired* and *tired* to distinguish between what the editors consider truly innovative features and the ones that don't work well or between designs that are truly cool and those that don't function well. Some would say everything about Sunday School is tired. I would argue that they're wrong. Most features of Sunday School still work—and work well, especially if it's a Great Expectations Sunday School. But Sunday School needs to be open to saying yes to being wired too. I'm not worried about Sunday School surviving its third century. But I want it to thrive, not just survive! I don't know about you, but I have great expectations for Sunday School in the 21st century.

... And Maybe a Few Old Ones!

There are some ideas that are not particularly wired, nor are they tired. They've just been retired by many. It might be wise to rewire and retry some of these old ideas. All of these ideas were once considered innovative or ingenious—wired, if you will! Maybe we could say yes to some of them again. Let's explore a few of these classic ideas.

Literature distribution. This classic practice centered on a simple idea: take a copy of the Sunday School learner guide to every person on the class ministry list before the beginning of each new quarter. Isn't that a lot to expect? Exactly! It's a great-expectations practice! And a practice built on great excuses. You see, it gives a class leader a great excuse to drop by a member's home for a quick, at-the-door, "Don't want to come in" visit; say a brief word about the upcoming Bible study; and ask whether the member has any prayer needs. It helps overcome the main excuses people have for not attending Sunday School: they don't feel they're wanted, and they don't feel confident in their knowledge of the Bible. Organizationally, this practice provides a great excuse to enlist and deploy care-group leaders. Isn't that an expensive investment? If you use LifeWay materials, it's a couple of dollars a person. That's just eight dollars per person per year. I think I could talk even the stingiest

finance committee into considering this old idea if I presented it in the right way, not to spend more money on literature but to stay in regular touch with members and provide them Bible study material from their church—whether or not they attend. (By the way, I am absolutely confident that such an effort more than pays for itself—in attendance and giving. But then, I sort of operate on great expectations!)

Family responsibility and take-home sheets. Sunday School is an effective disciple-making ministry for people of all ages. But it's not enough by itself. Parents who delegate complete responsibility for the spiritual development of their kids to Sunday School or any other program are not taking seriously enough their most important responsibility as a parent: making disciples of their own children. That is the objective behind the take-home sheets that most churches provide. It's not enough, however, to simply give them out. Make sure parents understand that these simple pages, which typically include the Bible story and perhaps an activity, are provided to help them reinforce the Sunday School experience at home. There is also a possible bonus effect on many moms and dads. If they do not know the Lord, they will be exposed week after week to a Bible story. The take-home sheet is one of the oldest traditions of the Sunday School movement. But it's an old idea that's still a good one!

Door-to-door visits. Since the previous idea is based on the premise that at-the-door visits are still possible in our cocooned society, let's explore that classic idea as well. I hear a lot of people—even pastors—say, "You can't knock on doors in our community." But you know what? I keep hearing stories from pastors who are challenging that idea with remarkable results. I recently received the following story in an e-mail from Bill Taylor, who preceded me as the director of Sunday School for Southern Baptists and now heads an exciting ministry called Upward Partnerships. UP matches seminary students who are studying to be ministers of education with churches that can't afford one and provides financial and mentoring support from a sponsor church and its minister of education. Bill's e-mail describes a UP church in San Diego:

UP pastor Matt Smith started a new church in March 2008 in the La Jolla area, a very upscale area in San Diego, not known for churches but rather art museums, golf courses, beaches, and rich folks. The name of the church is Barabbas Road Church because of the location on Barabbas Street. It is a very young congregation, and God is blessing them greatly. We placed Paul Rochford as a UP Christian educator in this church in June 2008 because Bill Gambrell and Johnson Ferry Church stepped forward and provided a UP scholarship for Barabbas Road Church. Bill is Paul's mentor.

This is an upscale community. These two young ministers are on the cutting edge of ministry in one of America's great cities. They have started doing door-to-door evangelism in La Jolla. Reception and results have been positive. Recently at midnight they worked most of the night chalking San Diego with the message "Who is *barabbas.com*?" The city was covered with these chalk messages on the sidewalks, streets, etc. Already 10 new members have joined the church as a result of this activity, which seems pretty wild. In an area where you would not expect results from door-to-door evangelism, these two UP leaders are thriving in a city that does not seek the Lord. If you want to check out their Web site, it is www.whoisbarabbas.com.

Our UP class met last Monday in San Diego. It blesses me every time I travel to San Diego for this meeting because of young leaders such as Matt and Paul. They are truly on the cutting edge, but they are smart enough to realize that some of the old practices still have merit. You just have to work them.

Maybe door-to-door-visitation is an old idea we ought to say yes to again!

Visitation appointments. Here's sort of a strange great expectation. This strategy was developed as a compromise to a twin dilemma. On the one hand, it's sort of uncomfortable—and perhaps

counterproductive—to have someone show up at the door unannounced. Likely, the person’s house is not ready for company. So the solution some churches employ is to make appointments. The problem with asking for appointments is that it usually doesn’t work! I heard Elmer Towns say one time that the track record at Thomas Road Baptist Church was that 50 percent of the people they called to make an appointment with said, “No thanks”; and of the 50 percent who said, “Sure,” half of them would not be home at the time of the appointment. Thus the compromise: drop by a prospective member’s house unannounced, but announce quickly at the door, “We don’t want to come in!” You’ll see immediate relief on the face of the person you’re visiting, and you’ll accomplish what you dropped by for:

1. Thanking them for visiting and inviting them back
2. Delivering information about the church
3. Most importantly, seeing each other face-to-face

All without trying to get in. A different kind of great expectation, to be sure. But give it a try. It’s a lot better than not going at all!

Class meetings. This idea is such a classic that maybe you have never heard of it before! The class meeting has its roots in a day when Sunday School classes took seriously the tasks they had beyond the weekend Bible study experience. I have actually attended a few of these. My favorite was in my first church, where I was invited to the monthly class meeting of Dess Aldridge’s class (her husband, Sherman, was my first Sunday School director). She had invited me to challenge the class about the work of Sunday School. We enjoyed some wonderful finger foods while we talked. But the purpose of the meeting remained clear: to talk about ways the class could be more effective at reaching, teaching, and ministering to members and prospective members. I think they also had a devotional, but it was primarily a strategy meeting.

The closest thing I’ve experienced since then was just a couple of months ago in the home of the teacher of the class of which Vickie and I are associate members in our church. All of the class officers were there,

along with the newly enlisted team of care-group leaders, so I took the opportunity to instill the leaders with some great expectations!

Men's and women's classes. Recently I attended a Beta conference, an intense training experience for ministers of education with three or fewer years of vocational ministerial experience. One of the young leaders at the conference commented that he was trying something new he'd like to get feedback about. The new idea: separate classes for men and women! Maybe you remember when coed classes were the new thing. Apparently, it's now one of the old things! And some young leaders are discovering the potential for accelerating Bible-centered life change through the employment of single-gender classes. This leader expressed some great expectations about these classes, and we encouraged him to go for it. I was amused to see other participants eagerly writing down this innovative idea!

That turned out to be a perfect set-up for me to encourage the group to consider single-gender care groups, even in coed classes. I've given the reasons for that viewpoint in previous books. The basic idea is that if you have couple care-group leaders, the women call the women while the men neither make nor receive calls. Additionally, if your class breaks into care groups for the final 10 to 15 minutes of class for sharing and praying, men and women will be more transparent in single-gender groups.

Yes to Planting New Classes

The greatest expectation of all may be that classes will say yes to planting new classes. The entire final chapter of this book is devoted to that great expectation!

*If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will tell this mountain,
"Move from here to there," and it will move.
Nothing will be impossible for you.
Matthew 17:20*

Chapter 3

Expect Classes to Reproduce

*Those who sow in tears
will reap with shouts of joy.
Though one goes along weeping,
carrying the bag of seed,
he will surely come back with shouts of joy,
carrying his sheaves.
Psalm 126:5-6*

One of the great joys we've experienced with our grown children is hearing these words: "We're expecting!" We didn't have to ask for further explanation! We knew they weren't expecting to get a promotion at work, rent a new apartment, or buy a new refrigerator. With those simple words we knew they were expecting a baby! And from that moment forward, we were expecting a grandchild!

The Irreducible Law of Kingdom Growth

Ideas abound about how a Sunday School, a church, or the larger kingdom of God grows. All of those theories can be reduced to this most basic principle:

Start new units.

New preaching/teaching points. New missions. New churches. New ministry teams. New small groups. New discipleship groups. New Sunday School classes. According to Ed Stetzer, the director of LifeWay

Research, there is only one continent in the world where Christianity is not growing: North America. Why? Could it be that we are so huddled together in our Christian subculture that we've forgotten what our mission is? Stetzer challenged participants in the 2009 Sunday School Week events at Glorieta and Ridgecrest to move out of rows, into circles, and from those circles engage the world to serve and save the lost. One way to accomplish that mission is to multiply the number of classes and small groups, what Ed calls small missional communities.

How Long Should a Class Wait to Reproduce?

Most classes will max out at about two years. Classes that have existed for more than a couple of years typically do not continue to grow, because they tend to become closed groups. Not necessarily on purpose. It just sort of happens. "Wait a minute," you may protest. "New people join our class every year." That's almost certainly true. But is your class really growing? Or is it covering your churn? Most churches—and classes—will churn out about 20 percent of its members every year. As I've already mentioned, you can cover a 20 percent churn by adding your share of church shoppers—Christians who are looking for a new church or class. It is rare, however, for a class to continue to experience real growth after its first two or three years.

How Do We Know if It's Time to Reproduce?

There are several indicators that your class may be ready. One is that the growth of the class has plateaued. You may experience high-attendance days when attendance temporarily swells, but on average the class has a fairly predictable attendance. Another clear indication is that the room is full. In fact, when it is usually 80 percent full, you should consider it full. Another indicator is that your class lacks energy.

A Nine-Month Apprentice

The key to successfully planting a new class is an apprentice teacher. Since we're talking about expecting, why not consider a nine-month process to get an apprentice teacher ready to assume the leadership

of a new class? The first step in the process is to prayerfully identify a potential apprentice. How do you do that? Just ask someone with potential to teach in your place when you're going to be out of town. When you return, casually get feedback from class members: "How did Hal do Sunday?" If the response is something like "He was OK, but we're glad you're back," you probably need to keep looking. Next time you may ask Sam to teach. If you get similar feedback, keep looking. But soon you'll get this kind of feedback: "Bob was surprisingly good! When are you going to be out of town again?" You've found your candidate! The next step is to sit down with the potential apprentice and ask him or her to pray about what you have in mind: a process of several months during which he or she will teach every time you're gone, then sometimes when you're present so that you can be a coach. Clearly state that the endgame of the process is to start a new class, with him or her as the teacher. Ask the candidate to pray about it. Covenant to keep the plan between yourselves until it's time to tell the class.

The Curriculum Connection

A church or a class that adopts a curriculum plan tremendously increases the chances of successfully planting new classes. How's that? Compare two different responses by the teacher when the apprentice asks what to teach on the Sunday he or she is out.

1. "Well, I just ask the Lord to speak to me and direct me to a passage I think the class would be interested in. Then I study my vast collection of commentaries and other resources to put the lesson together."
2. "Here's a copy of the leader guide that goes with the learner guide the class is using. Just do what it says. Later you'll learn to be more creative and use other resources. But this is a good place to start."

The advantage of using a Sunday School curriculum is doubly true for apprentices in preschool and children's classes, in which the use of creative activities and learning centers that relate to the Bible story are essential to a life-stage-appropriate learning experience. Maybe one of those classic ideas churches might consider saying yes to again is dated

curriculum materials! Am I just trying to sell materials? No! I'm trying to help churches and classes remove a barrier that prevents them from starting new classes. But that's not the most significant barrier.

The Number One Blocker

The number one blocker to developing an apprentice teacher and thus reproducing adult classes is the associate or team teacher. It seems like a good idea to have a steady standby anytime the regular teacher is not able to teach. That's fine if the associate or team teacher has the desire and intent to eventually accept the challenge of leading his or her own class. Unfortunately, that's often not the case. Rather, the associate just wants to teach and is usually fairly good at it. But he may not have a desire to shepherd his own class. So, in essence, what seems like a good idea results in the unintended consequence—or sometimes a subconsciously intentional one—of effectively preventing a class from reproducing by blocking the number one factor in starting a new one: the apprentice teacher. The solution lies in enlisting a true apprentice (maybe even the associate) who buys into the great expectation of planting a new class. After a proper germination period you're ready to make the big announcement to the class.

Breaking the News

You can expect many members to resist or object to the news at first. This is how it usually goes. The teacher announces, "God has really blessed us, and I think the time has come for us to plant a new class." Lips draw in. Arms cross. Eyes glare. There is obvious tension in the room. The teacher continues, "Here's the good news! No one will be forced to take part in the new class. Everyone who wants to remain in our class can do so." No coercion. No guilt trips. People start to relax a little as you deal with their number one objection. So you continue, "But we will need a few missionaries to help start the new class. Not everybody! Just a few of you who will agree to be a core group for the new class during its infancy. We may need some of the missionaries to accept responsibility as care-group leaders or other positions." The faces of a few begin to

indicate anticipation. Then you announce that Bob will be the teacher of the new class.

At least three groups will volunteer to help start the new class:

1. Those who want the adventure of being missionaries
2. Those who like Bob's teaching style better than yours
3. A few who are experiencing relational discomfort in the class and need a gracious way to leave

Then you announce the date. The Sunday before Easter is an excellent time, as is the beginning of a new church year.

Celebrating the New Plant

When the big day comes—or even better, the weekend before—make a huge deal of it. I have heard of pastors, educational staff, and Sunday School directors who dress in gardening clothes for a big announcement in the worship service. Both teachers are called to the front. The class may also be called forward and asked to gather around the teacher whose class is planting a new one. Then the members who have agreed to be missionaries to seed the new class gather around the new teacher. The groups don't have to be evenly divided. In fact, an appropriate goal is probably for one-third to start the new class. It may actually grow faster that way. The result is that both classes have an opportunity to experience a period of new growth—at least for a couple of years.

Starting a Family Tree

Once you've determined to start planting new classes every few years, start bragging about it! People brag about their kids and grandkids, so brag about your class kids! If you've just planted your first class, you might want to make a poster or a wall presentation that shows your class at the top, maybe a photo of the class. You might want to use another classic idea and have a class-photo day as a mini-high-attendance campaign. (For added emphasis, do this on the day you're planning to announce the new class. The crowding of the class may amply demonstrate the need for a new one.) Then on its first Sunday,

take another photo of your seedling class! Put it below the photo of your class, connected by a string of yarn.

A 10-Year Plan

Now project this family tree forward 10 years. What will it look like then? How many new classes will your class have planted? Two more? Three more? Does your class have any grandkid classes? Then brag about them too! Ask your child class for a copy of the photo of their offspring they put on their family tree! If just one class in every church in North America that reads this book would follow a 10-year plan, the Sunday School movement—and maybe even the continent—could experience revival. There are about 400,000 classes in Southern Baptist Sunday Schools. About 60 percent of those are adult classes, or 240,000. If just 1 in 10 of those classes would commit itself to plant four classes over the next 10 years, that would result in almost 100,000 new classes by 2020. At an average attendance of just 10 persons per class, that would mean 1,000,000 more adults attending Sunday School each week, plus their children. But it starts one class at a time. Will yours be that class?

A Great-Expectations Benediction

“You, dear friends, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, expecting the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life. Have mercy on some who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire. . . . Now to Him who is able to protect you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless and with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time, now, and forever. Amen” (Jude 20-25).

*Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,
but only God who gives the growth. Now the one who plants
and the one who waters are equal, and each will receive
his own reward according to his own labor.*

1 Corinthians 3:7-8

Notes

1. Al Mohler, "Charles Haddon Spurgeon—A Passion for Preaching, Part Three" [online], 22 September 2004 [cited 2 September 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.albertmohler.com.
2. Eric Geiger and David Francis, "Sunday School in a Simple Church" [online, cited 2 September 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.lifeway.com/simplechurch.
3. Thom Rainer, *High Expectations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999) 45. Having fielded a lot of questions about whether these findings apply to small groups, I asked Dr. Rainer. He said the research did not include small groups but that it is reasonable to assume there is a similar, if not exact, correlation, at least directionally.
4. David Francis, *I-6: A Six-Lane Strategy Toward an Inviting Sunday School* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2007). Also available from the Internet: www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.
5. David Francis, "The Importance of the Door," *Baptist Press* [online], 11 March 2009 [cited 2 September 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.bpnews.net.
6. Wayne Poling, *The How-to Sunday School Manual* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2009) is a practical guide to all things Sunday School. Order at www.lifeway.com, call (800) 458-2772, or visit a LifeWay Christian Store.
7. David Francis, "Clear the Clutter," *Baptist Press* [online], 11 February 2009 [cited 2 September 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.bpnews.net.
8. Check out a sample of links to helpful Web sites at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.
9. The scheduled time and date are 4:00 p.m. eastern time (1:00 p.m. Pacific time) on Sunday, July 11. The only requirements are a high-speed Internet connection and perhaps a data projector. At the time of this writing, the event has just been conceived. For additional details, check www.lifeway.com/events.

Other LifeWay Resources by David Francis

- *Spiritual Gifts: A Practical Guide to How God Works Through You*
- *The Five-Step Formula for Sunday School Growth*
- *The 3D Sunday School: A Three-Dimensional Strategy to Help Members and Leaders Fulfill the Great Commission*
- *I-6: A Six-Lane Strategy Toward an Inviting Sunday School*
- *The Discover Triad: Three Facets of a Dynamic Sunday School Class*
- *Connect³: The Power of One Sunday School Class*

Additional Help

The following materials are available for free download at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool, as well as the entire text of *Great Expectations*, which you have permission to reproduce for use in your class or church.

Sunday School Kickoff Event Resources

Many churches conduct an annual training event to kick off the new Sunday School year. A training module for each age-group team (preschool, children, students, adults, and general leaders) is available for free download. Each module includes a teaching plan, handout masters, and a PowerPoint® presentation that support and supplement the concepts.

Online Training

For a free online study of this resource led by the author, visit www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.

The 3D Sunday School

The 48-page books and training materials for the 2006–9 Sunday School launch events remain available for download, as do the 2005 materials based on the 32-page book *The Five-Step Formula to Sunday School Growth*.

www.lifeway.com/sundayschool

Information about LifeWay curriculum resources, as well as lots of free articles and links to other information, is available. Add this site to your favorites and visit often.

eSource Electronic Newsletter for Sunday School Leaders

This is a monthly newsletter for anyone interested in growing a Sunday School Bible study ministry. LifeWay has a strict privacy policy, and you must opt in to receive LifeWay electronic newsletters. To subscribe, visit www.lifeway.com/newsletters.

Associations and State Conventions

Your local association and state convention have people and resources who are eager to help you grow your Sunday School ministry. Check their Web sites for contact information.