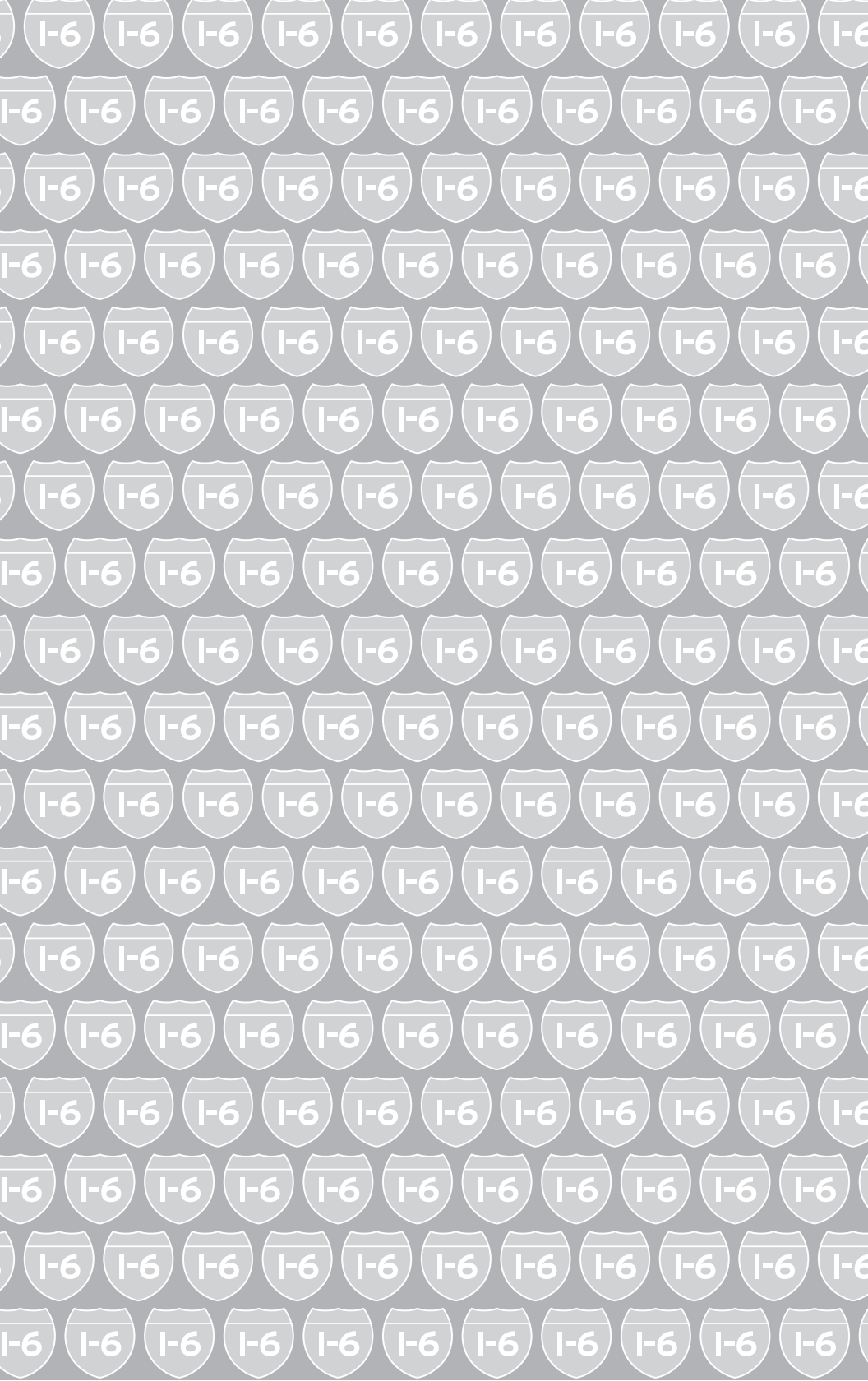


A Six-Lane Strategy Toward an Inviting Sunday School



David Francis



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Introduction

Invite is the first of three dimensions of a balanced Sunday School introduced in my little book *The 3D Sunday School*. **Discover** and **Connect** are the second and third dimensions. Many have asked for additional ideas around each of the three dimensions. This is the first of three books that will do that.

We're going to start with the **Invite** dimension not just because it is first in the **Invite—Discover—Connect** formula, but also because in practice it is typically the weakest dimension of most Sunday School classes. The content will build on that presented in the Invite chapter of *The 3D Sunday School*, so the reader would be well served to review that material. The Invite chapter, as well as the entire 3D book, can be downloaded free at www.lifeway.com/sunday-school. Like *The 3D Sunday School*, this book is written with members as well as leaders in mind.

Why six lanes instead of six steps? Because developing a culture of invitation in your Sunday School is more an ongoing process than a linear one. And different people with different gifts will make a larger contribution in one or two lanes than in the others. That's where they will "drive." Each of the six aspects interacts with each of the others, just like vehicles on a six-lane highway might. On my way to and from work in downtown Nashville, I travel a stretch of highway that is six lanes in each direction. When all the drivers are careful, courteous, and cooperative, traffic rolls smoothly. A stall or crash in just one or two lanes, however, can clog up the whole works, and create a sluggish commute in or an irritating commute home.

Those of us who live north of Nashville endured nearly a decade of construction before being able to share six lanes in each direction. During those years, we found lots of alternate routes to avoid Interstate 65. Sometimes it was the best of a lot of poor options. But we certainly did not invite anyone to join us on the road to the northern suburbs. Nine years of orange barrels did little to promote growth to the north either. All that changed over the course of a few weekends as the work came to an end, the barrels and construction equipment disappeared, the new lanes were striped, and the 45 MPH signs were replaced with new ones that pronounced 70 MPH. You too could have felt the excitement! We no longer had to wince when telling someone how to get to our houses or avoid inviting them at all because of the hassle of getting there. That gives you an idea about what we'll talk about in the first lane—**Invigorate**.

If you are looking for a safe, non-controversial book about Sunday School, you've got the wrong book. That will become clear in the second lane, as I challenge churches and Sunday Schools to Incorporate successful principles from the world of retailing. All retailers know a critical success factor is creating traffic—getting people into their stores or onto their websites. The same is true for churches. An abundant flow of visitors, guests, and newcomers is the number one reality in a growing, vibrant church or class.

In lane 3, **Intercede**, we will deal with the importance of praying for those we invite—or hope to. In lane 4, we will look at ways churches and classes can **Invest** in the lives of others, helping meet needs in their communities that may pave the way for an invitation to Sunday School or church.

Then in lane 5, we will finally get to **Invite** and some creative ways for churches, classes, and individuals to extend an invitation. The research of Life-Way President Thom Rainer finds that over 80 percent of people say that they would likely respond positively to an invitation to attend a church or small group experience. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of people in survey after survey indicate that the number one reason they first came to the class or church they currently attend is because of a personal invitation. I encourage you to read the excerpts from Dr. Rainer's research at the end of each chapter in *The 3D Sunday School*, as well as the books from which the excerpts are drawn.

Lane 6—**Involve**—will deal briefly with some issues and ideas for making sure visitors, guests, and newcomers come back—again and again and again. We'll also introduce you to the concept of churn, a reality that few classes and churches understand. In each chapter, we'll try to provide insights and ideas on three levels: church, class, and individual Christian.

Well, enough introduction! Put on your seat belt and get ready to enter the world of I-6! Be warned that you may have to adjust your mirrors to see things in a new way. One of the risks I am taking with this book is the risk of being misunderstood. Another is the risk of being disliked or finding myself the target of a blogger who thinks I'm trying to bring the world into the church. I'll take those risks. Why? Because I desperately want to see more churches, classes, and Christians become intentional again about inviting boys and girls, men and women to experience something that is out of this world: a living, love relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is often difficult to live in the tension of being in the world but not of it. For you see, in a sense, we must bring the people of the world into contact with the people of the kingdom of God if they are ever going to enter it. We must invite them to come and see and experience a taste of life as a member of God's family.

We must work together to invite them to receive eternal life—a quality of life worth living now and forever.

I-6 is a call to teamwork. It is not so much another cry for “me” to invite people as it is a call for “we” to invite them. It takes us all. Some sow, some water, some reap. Together. As a team. Not so much celebrating how many people have been led to Christ by “me,” but how many people have found new life in Him because of the efforts of “we.” Enough of Lone Ranger evangelism! We can be more effective if we work as a team and worry less about who gets credit for the transaction. I saw this illustrated just last weekend while watching an NFL game. After a long drive, the running back spurted through a hole into the end zone, where the guards and tackles who had created that hole surrounded him. Instead of doing a dance that brought attention to himself, the running back handed the ball to one of the linemen, who spiked it exuberantly while the entire team celebrated the touchdown.

I almost added a seventh lane—**Intent**. But that’s really just the on ramp to *I-6*. Do you want to become a more effective church, class, or Christian when it comes to inviting others? Are you open to some new ideas? Are you willing to work together with others to help fulfill the Great Commission, not doing everything but doing your part? That is the essence of intent. You would be dismayed to know how many churches, classes, and Christians are content with the way things are. Their only intent is to stay content! But you know what? I have decided to stop fretting over those churches and classes. I’m praying instead that God will use some of the ideas in this little book to help a few classes, a few churches, a few Christians become more effective at achieving their intent to be more inviting. So don’t get discouraged if every class in your church doesn’t want to become more intentional. Just lead or help your class to do it! Together. With the power of the Holy Spirit. In the name of Jesus. To the glory of God. Well, here’s the on ramp! Keep reading if you want to enter *I-6*!



LANE 1:

Invigorate

What attracts people to a church or class? Is it dynamic preaching or teaching? Is it a convenient location? Is it a quality preschool and children's ministry? An outstanding youth program? A beautiful building? Great printed materials? Eye-catching direct mail? A fantastic website? You may be surprised by my answer. You see, for the most part, none of these things magically attracts people. Rather, most people who attend a church or class for the first time say it is because of a personal invitation. In fact, about 80 percent say that. So, to be honest, about 20 percent of the people who visit the average church or class do so at their own initiative, and one or more of these factors may have played a part. But most people come primarily because they have been invited.

So, are all these kinds of things unnecessary then? No. In fact, they may be absolutely necessary for your church or class to grow. But not for the reason many people think. You see, none of these things by themselves are going to create some sort of "people magnet" that draws dozens into your church. Rather, these are the types of issues you must address if you hope to create the kind of environment and experiences that cause people to want to invite others to come with them.

Sadly, a lot of people faithfully attend churches they would never invite someone else to attend. Why is that? One reason is that they may have invested much treasure into the church and their hearts are there, just like Jesus said. Often it is because of family ties. For others, important memories are linked to the church. Still others have moved away from the church, and while they continue to make the drive in on Sundays, they don't really think others

who live around them now would make that sacrifice. Some are loyal to a long time pastor who has walked with them “in good times and bad.” These folks have decided that the reasons for staying in the church—or class—outweigh the effort it would take to find and get involved in a new one. The business term for this is *switching cost*. It is why you continue to go to the grocery store that carries your favorite ice cream, or the hardware store with the friendly folks, or the stylist who has been cutting your hair for years, or the dry cleaner who occasionally messes up your order. You know the people. You know the routine. You know where to find stuff. Maybe a newer store is in town. Maybe the old store looks a little run down or the neighborhood is changing, but the cost of finding a new one—in terms of familiarity, time, and relationships—is too high by comparison. At least for now. But do you tell other people about the business like you used to? Maybe you do; maybe you don’t. It doesn’t yet affect where you spend your money, but it may affect where you encourage others to spend theirs. (See Appendix 1 for a scale of connectivity.)

You may be thinking, *are you going to get to a point here?* Yes. Here it is: I believe the foundation of any church or class with a culture of invitation is congregational self-esteem. What in the world do I mean by that? Simply this, groups of people who feel good about what they are experiencing—and the environment in which they are experiencing it—will be more likely to invite others to experience it with them!

So the first step in developing a culture of invitation is to invigorate the environment and experiences in your church or class. If you want people to tell others “This is a great place to go to church or enjoy Bible study,” then you need to do all you can to make sure it is a great place to go to church or enjoy Bible study! If you want visitors, guests, and newcomers to think, “wow” when they come to your church or class, then you’ve got to do everything you can to ensure your attendees think “wow” when they come. It is the “wow factor” that is the basic building block of a culture of invitation.

Invigorate the Church

What kind of first impression do your church property and facilities make? What are some things you could do to invigorate your church physically? Does the landscaping look sort of drab? Maybe someone could be enlisted to plant and care for a flower garden. Is it clear to guests which door they should use to enter the building? Perhaps you could install a flagpole or two near that entrance. How’s the carpet in the worship area? Are the restrooms clean? Would a fresh coat of paint brighten things up?

Tom was a deacon in the church I served while in seminary. One night, I saw a light on in the basement and went down to investigate. Tom was painting the walls in the hallway. The church wasn't funding the project. Tom had bought the paint and was providing the labor. If I had not caught him, no one might have known. Except the Lord. But people would have noticed and said "wow." There are Toms in your church or class. They may not be bold evangelists. But they can use their gifts of service and helps to invigorate the environment. For more ideas on invigorating your church physically, visit www.lifeway.com/invite.

The Three P's

In her book *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott asks a most challenging question. An executive coach, she uses this question in her initial sessions with corporate CEOs. Here's the question: *What are you pretending not to know?* I have asked this question many times during consultations with church leaders. Like many of Scott's clients, the typical answer is "I don't know." She never lets them off the hook, but simply replies, "Well, what would it be if you did know?" This is a tough question. It demands deep reflection and often requires uncomfortable action. Is your church or class pretending not to know something that is preventing you from developing a culture of invitation? Although churches have different and unique issues, it is surprising how many pretend not to know issues related to one or more of the three P's.

Preschool

The Baby Buster generation—who generally hate the label Gen X—are raising children now. Thom Rainer's research found that this generation indicates they are more interested in the spiritual well being of their children than of their own. A full 80 percent of them express an intent to bring their children to Sunday School, but they're not doing it! Why? One reason is because church is a scary place to go if you've never been before. A more important reason is that no one has invited them. And I believe that one of the main reasons no one has invited them is that we know in our hearts that our church is not prepared to provide preschoolers a safe, sanitary, secure, and spiritual experience. In my book *The Five Step Formula to Sunday School Growth* (available free at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool), I challenged churches to start a department for babies even if they don't currently have any. Why? The same reason prospective parents get a room ready for their newborn months before she is born. Expectation. Preparation. Congregational self-esteem.

We need to place a high priority on ministry to preschoolers and children. Historically, that is where the Sunday School movement started. In the *Five Step* book, I tell the story of a pastor who gave up his office with a private bathroom for a bed baby room. There was a part of that story I left out of that book. It was about the oldest senior adult ladies class. That class, taught by Ann Gregory, also gave up their room to preschoolers, and made a significant sacrifice to meet in a portable building. The church built a new building for preschoolers and children. It is over ten times larger now. Ann Gregory's class is about a decade older now, still going strong, and meeting in the pastor's old office with the private bathroom. And, as Paul Harvey would say, now you know the rest of the story! That's the kind of spirit that says, "We care about preschoolers, and we'll honor the sacrifice of senior adults who will help us provide for them."

Is your preschool area clean, bright, and uncluttered? Some fresh paint, new lighting, colorful tables and chairs, and several trips to the trash bin might do the trick. You can do lots of other things to invigorate your preschool facilities and ministry. To view some great ideas from LifeWay's childhood specialists, check out the age-group teaching plans and PowerPoint presentations that are companions to this book, available at www.lifeway.com/invite. Plans are available for guiding preschool, children, student, adult, and general leaders in applying the concepts in this book to their specific areas.

Parking

You can only get as many people into your building as you have places to park their cars. And the ratio is usually about 2:1, meaning your attendance capacity is about twice as high as the number of parking spaces available to those who attend. So how difficult is finding a parking space at your church? If your church is growing, it could be a big issue. If parking is a big enough hassle, people will hesitate to invite others to experience it!

That's not our problem, David! We have plenty of parking. That's good, unless there are few visitors parking their cars there. So what can you do to make that very first impression a superb one for those who visit your church? Let me tell you what one church did. Briarwood is located in Cordova, Tennessee, just a short distance from the massive Bellevue Baptist Church. It was averaging about 100 in attendance when Education Pastor Steve Polk came to the church. One of the first things he did was to reserve several of the most convenient parking spaces for guests. He had signs made that read "First Time Guests." Steve enlisted a couple of men to be the special greeters of these first time guests. The greeters handed each new guest an information sheet printed

on brightly colored 11 X 17 paper and folded in half. And here's the best part. He began to spread the word among the members to be especially friendly to anyone with one of the very obvious information sheets! That's one little way you begin to create a culture of invitation. People will know that if they invite someone to attend, they will be treated well when they come.

Several years ago, I visited Richland Creek Community church, a new church meeting in a school building in Wake Forest, North Carolina. I was amazed at how many people greeted me, as if they knew I was there for the first time. Since I was there on a consulting visit and was trying hard to be a "secret shopper," I thought perhaps Pastor David Cox had spread my photo around! Instead, I learned later that when I had been invited to make a nametag at the information desk, they had determined it was my first visit and had deliberately given me a nametag with a red border. Almost everyone wore a nametag; members knew they were to wear one with a green border, and regular attendees knew their color was yellow! Little idea; big impression. And the cool thing is that everybody was in on it! That's teamwork and an example of how a church develops a culture of invitation.

Preaching

In college, I earned a degree with a somewhat unique double major: Business Administration and Religion. I've sometimes called it the "God and Mammon degree." So I have always been interested in books on both business leadership and church leadership. I subscribe to Christianity Today's *Leadership Journal* and *Harvard Business Review*. Both contain funny cartoons and frequently interesting articles! Both journals hint at something shared by leaders in both arenas: the quest for some new strategy, tactic, or practice that will provide the "silver bullet" to growth. In the classic book, *In Search of Excellence*, author Tom Peters introduced the concept of MBWA—Management by Wandering Around. Unfortunately, some businesses—and churches—today practice MBBS—Management by Best Seller—convinced that the techniques in the latest book would provide the breakthrough the organization needs to move forward.

While such books and articles contain lots of good ideas, many churches need to get back to the basics. I have become convinced—and convicted—that the most basic of the basics of a healthy church whose members invite others to attend with them is this: an authentic man of God preaching the Word of God. When I served a church in suburban Dallas, it was my privilege to work with several students from Dallas Theological Seminary accomplishing their field service internship. I had a similar conversation with almost all

of them as they eagerly anticipated their first pastoral assignment and talked about teaching their new flock the church growth principles they had learned. I suggested a different approach, encouraging them instead to concentrate on three things: (1) developing the skill of preaching, (2) pastoring their people, and (3) growing their church through the Sunday School. That is still a pretty effective formula, especially for those of us who are probably never going to be the pastor of a mega church. And that's about 99 percent of us! (Of some 43,000 Southern Baptist churches, only about 300 average over 1,000 in Sunday School. About 3,000 average over 250.)

Does that mean we can ignore everything else if the preaching is good? Not at all. It's just that Bible preaching is foundational to developing a culture of invitation and that all the other tactics will be much less effective without it. Research indicates that unchurched people say if they do go to church, they want to learn about what the Bible says. "I think you'll like our pastor" is probably the strongest invitation a church member can share. "I think you'll like our teacher" is likewise the best invitation a class member can give.

LifeWay President Thom Rainer recently quizzed a group of Christian educators about what his research had revealed about highly effective evangelistic churches. When asked what factors they thought might correlate most highly with such churches, the group offered answers like evangelism training, regularly scheduled outreach, and well organized Sunday Schools. All of these ranked high, but another factor ranked even higher: expository preaching. Dr. Rainer was quick to point out the difference between correlation and causation when interpreting research findings. That being noted, apparently churches where the Bible is central to the worship experience support a culture of invitation.

What can you do to invigorate the worship experience in your church? Do you encourage the pastor to devote adequate time to study and pray? Would you be willing to let the church try some different forms of music if it would make it easier to invite those young parents who say they want to bring their kids to church? Some of our senior adults had a lot of questions when we started a contemporary service at First Baptist Church Garland, Texas. As I spoke with this group of 70-up saints, I asked this question, "How many of you have an adult grandchild you've been praying for because they are not active in church?" Almost every hand went up. As I said, "That's who this service is for," I watched eyes begin to glisten. They got it. Many of them invited those grandchildren. Some of them even checked out the new service themselves. Although most continued to attend the classic service, many did see their children and grandchildren start coming to church again.

Even though I live in Nashville, I'm not a big country music fan. But if that's what it took to reach a group of people, I could probably get used to it. A number of successful Cowboy churches are springing up around the country. Today's young adults view the music in some so-called contemporary churches as akin to the "classic rock" of the baby boomers. In fact, a growing number of young adults express a desire for something "new": worship with hymns and choirs! How ironic would it be if we baby boomers who criticized our elders for complaining about removing the organ were to raise a fuss if a younger generation wanted to take the drums out?

Music quality and style can play an important part in creating an inviting culture in your church, but, getting back to the topic, it will never trump solid biblical preaching. On the other hand, effective preaching by a loving pastor can overcome just about any kind or quality of music. People will invite others to experience good preaching by a man who cares for them. Everything else is a bonus!

Invigorate the Class

Likewise, the most important factor in an inviting class is a satisfying Bible study experience. The most important variable in that formula is the teacher. The teacher need not be an excellent orator. Unlike preaching, a Sunday School class provides the opportunity for a variety of learning activities. "Discover" is the second dimension of *The 3D Sunday School*. (You may want to read that chapter. We will treat that dimension more fully in the next book in this series.) The teacher leads the class to discover truths from the Bible and the faith stories of the people in the class. The optimum spiritual gift for the Sunday School teacher is probably the Ephesians 4 gift of shepherding (or pastor-teacher). The person with this gift strikes a balance between effective Bible teaching and caring for the "sheep" in the flock assigned to her care, whether they are seven-year-olds or seventy-year-olds. Those with other spiritual gifts can also become good teachers. (If you would like additional insight on this topic, see my study guide *Spiritual Gifts: A Practical Guide to How God Works through You*.)

Although the teacher is the most important ingredient toward developing a culture of invitation in the class, other factors such as the appearance of the room play a part as well. Stand at the door to your room. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? Vickie and I teach a pre-K class in the 8:00 Sunday School session at our church. Kids are not necessarily at their best and brightest at 7:50 on Sunday mornings! When they come to our door, we first sign them in and stick a security tag on their backs. Then we

invite them to choose between a number of activities they can see from the door. They can hear the CD player softly echoing through the room, with a song (usually set to “Repeat”) appropriate for the day’s Bible story. Recently, our story was about King David’s dedication of the “tent church” in Jerusalem. A song about making music from LifeWay’s Enhanced CD-ROM was playing, right next to an assortment of rhythm instruments. Not surprisingly, that’s the activity many of the kids chose first! We also keep an inexpensive toaster oven in the room, and on the Sundays when we’re preparing cookies to decorate or cinnamon toast (or fish sticks when the story is about Jesus preparing breakfast for His disciples following His resurrection!), the very smell invites the children into the room. We always put up an allergy poster when we’re serving food! (Parents are also encouraged to stick a yellow sticker on any child who has allergies as an extra precaution.)

While children generally like to come to our class, we had a huge breakthrough last week. Austin, a newcomer the past few Sundays, had been experiencing severe separation anxiety at the door and would cry for 10 minutes after his parents left. Last Sunday, he walked straight into the room with nary a whimper and went straight to those rhythm instruments where he played the drum—loudly—for a really long time!

Adult classes could learn a lot from observing an effective preschool or children’s department. What does your adult class look, sound, and smell like from the door, especially to a first time guest? Does it communicate, “We’re getting ready to enjoy fellowship with one another around the open Word of God?” Are people wearing nametags to put guests at ease? Are the chairs arranged in a way that promotes a feeling of openness and sharing? This may sound silly, but in one church I served as Minister of Education, I had to work hard to make sure the chairs in each room matched each other. An interesting assortment of metal folding chairs had accumulated over the years. Some green ones, some silver ones, and several colors of brown ones, including some with wooden seats. Just getting similar chairs in each room made a little difference. And that’s really what it’s all about. Not making any one thing a dozen times better, but working on making a dozen things a little bit better. For a few more ideas on making good first impressions, see the “Connect” chapter in *The 3D Sunday School*.

Invigorate Yourself

Perhaps a better way to say that would be *let God invigorate you*. The formula for that is an old one, but it still works. Spend more time reading the Bible and

in prayer. Study your lesson. Make a fresh commitment to regular attendance in church and Bible study. Find a place of service.

The Sunday School is a great place to serve. A good place to start in an adult class is to agree to serve as a care group leader, taking responsibility for contacting 5-7 men or women (depending on which you are!) each week. (For more information on the ministry of the group leader, visit www.lifeway.com/sundayschool or read the “Connect” chapter in *The 3D Sunday School*.) Even better would be to step out as a missionary from your class to serve in a preschool, children, or student class. We are facing a national crisis when it comes to staffing these age groups, notably preschool and children—and especially preschool. Our churches are not going to reach the growing numbers of unchurched Baby Busters and the kids they have said they intend to bring to Sunday School if we don’t put a fresh emphasis on ministry to kids. Children are the history and the heart of the Sunday School movement. Most do not know that the movement started in England in the late 1700s, when prison reformer and newspaper editor Robert Raikes decided to do something about the hundreds of undisciplined and uneducated children who played in the streets on Sundays, their only day off after six long days of factory work. If he could get these kids into a Sunday School and give them an opportunity to learn to read and write using the Bible as the textbook, many of them might escape a life of poverty and possible imprisonment. His idea worked and later spread to adult classes, which some credit with helping raise up a middle class in Great Britain.

When the movement spread to America in the early 1800s, the focus remained on children. But some 200 years later, we’ve begun to lose that focus. Small group Bible study is often now aimed primarily at adults, while children are increasingly put into larger groups and/or with an inadequate number of adult teachers to interact with them. We need men and women—yes *men* and women—to respond to this need, and take a shot at teaching or helping in a preschool, children, or student class. Adult classes need to recommit to taking extra special care of those who leave their class to respond to this need. (For some ideas on that, see “The Two Marks of an Adult 3D Class” in the bonus chapter of *The 3D Sunday School*, available online at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.)

One of the downsides to teaching pre-K Sunday School is that 4-year olds are seldom ready to make a commitment to become a Christ follower. But please don’t tell us that we’re not helping fulfill the Great Commission! We are a part of a chain of teachers who help build the foundations for faith in

the lives of these little ones that perhaps starts when a teacher in a bed baby room whispers “the Bible says God loves you” while rocking a newborn or softly sings, “Jesus Loves Me” while changing a diaper. One day, a teacher in a middle school class may have the enormous privilege of praying with that young person as he pledges allegiance to Jesus, asking the Lord to forgive his sins and take control of his life. But that teacher didn’t do it by herself. It was a whole team of people. The Sunday School team.

I don’t know how—or if—God keeps score on “individual stats” when it comes to the Great Commission, but I think He might count differently than we do. When Jesus gave that command, He made it to a group of followers. Certainly, the command has application to us as individuals. We should share a word of witness whenever the Holy Spirit prompts us that He is at work in the heart of the person with whom He has brought us into contact. But most Great Commission work is a team effort. It takes all of us. The greeter shaking hands at the door. The usher helping a guest find a seat. The hospitality staff at the welcome desk. The maintenance staff that makes sure the restrooms are clean. The preschool teacher who kneels at the eye level of a three-year-old and sings, “I am so happy, Josh is here today.”

Don’t you want to be a part of this Great Commission team? As each of us does our part, we can help our church, our class, and ourselves create a culture of invitation. And, at the end of the day, evangelism starts with an invitation. Lutheran historian Martin Marty says that a single question defines the difference between churches that grow and those that do not: are they inviting others to join them?¹ The same question applies to the class level and individual levels. Are you inviting others to attend your church or class? If not, why not? Do some things need to be invigorated around your church, in your class, or in your own life to give you more confidence that someone who responds to your invitation will have a good experience should they accept it? Then invigorate! It’s the foundation for developing a culture of invitation.

1. Herb Miller, *How to Build a Magnetic Church*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 31-32.



LANE 2:

Incorporate

Why do you frequent the stores you do? Convenience? Lowest prices? Good selection of merchandise? Helpful personnel? Well-lit parking lot? Easy check out? Cleanliness? Advertising? Easy credit? Other reasons?

Have you ever stopped shopping at a store, eating at a restaurant, or using a particular service? Or do you try to avoid certain airlines or hotel brands when you travel? Why? What happened?

Have you ever visited a store, restaurant, hotel, or other place of business for the first time? Did that first visit influence whether or not you came back again? What were the reasons?

What about churches? Have you ever moved and found yourself shopping for a new church home? Or been on a trip and visited a church in a city different than your own? What were your impressions? What things made you say either, “If we lived here, I think we might join this church” or “This is not the church for us”? What do you think people who visit your church say about it on the way home?

Jesus said, “I must be about my Father’s business.” What is the Father’s business? It’s the business of reaching and redeeming people. Although the church is not a business in the same sense as a store is, churches can learn from retailers how they reach people and turn them into loyal customers.

Incorporate Retail Principles in the Church

Successful retailers have a pretty good idea about what type of customer they are trying to reach. Few retailers seriously believe they can meet all the needs

of all the people in all social groups. Most retailers have a pretty good idea of the income, educational background, entertainment preferences, recreational interests, and other data about their target customer group. Perhaps you could argue that such businesses are just practicing good missiology. What do I mean by that? Simply that successful missionary strategy also tailors its outreach and discipleship efforts based on the characteristics of the people group it is trying to reach.

Am I suggesting that churches should exclude certain people? Not at all! Rather, I'm suggesting that good missions strategy in Africa or Asia is both a good strategy in America and an effective way to be about the Father's business. Basically, a church—just like a good retail business—asks four questions. What kind of people are we good at reaching? Are any more of them in our ministry area? Where do they live? What can we do to reach them?

While visiting a church in Pasadena, Texas, with a LifeWay Church Consultant, we presented to the young pastor the findings of a demographic study of the community. Such reports are available from most state conventions as well as some associations and seminaries. After reviewing some of the findings, I asked the pastor whether he might change anything in his approach to ministry based on the report. He immediately mentioned two things. He noted that over half of the people in his ministry area rented their homes and that he needed to give fewer stories related to those who had mortgages and more toward those who had landlords. The report also indicated the people in the area did not care much for college athletics, which he mentioned all the time, but did follow pro sports. These may sound like little things, but information such as the magazines they read and music they listen to are important things to know about your community.

God knows what He is doing in building His kingdom. He's got lots of churches for lots of different people. Who are the people He wants you to reach? It's what church growth researchers call "The Harvest Principle." You reach all the people you can from the people group or groups God has made you good at reaching; and then you get them to help you reach out to another group. Dollar General is not trying to compete with Nordstrom's! Motel 6 is not trying to win guests from Hilton. Waffle House is not trying to figure out how to get diners to switch from Ruth's Chris Steakhouse. Each of these businesses does its best to provide the combination of environment, experience, product, and price valued by their targeted customer base; then they do whatever it takes to get more of those folks into their stores! They want to increase traffic.

Traffic

Sunday newspapers are crammed full of advertising circulars. Such ads enticed shoppers with “specials” in the grocery store I worked in as a teenager. Stores often lose money on some of the special offerings, which are known as “loss leaders.” Have you ever gotten up early the Friday after Thanksgiving to wait outside an electronics store for a chance to buy some ridiculously low priced game or gear? Does the store enjoy losing money on that stuff? Not at all. But that’s not their purpose. They are trying to generate traffic—getting people into their stores with the hope that while there to get the specials, they’ll see other things they’d like to buy.

Does the principle of traffic apply to churches? Absolutely! If you can’t get people on the property and in the building, it is very unlikely that you are going to be able to reach them! But we have some additional challenges in church not faced by most businesses. Perhaps you’ve ventured into a store just to take a peek, and quickly realized it was not the place for you. It was relatively easy to excuse yourself and leave. It’s more difficult to do that with church, especially considering that a lot of people have never been in any church for any reason. One of the huge barriers that prevents people from trying out church is simply that they’ve never been before—either to any church or at least not to yours. They don’t know where to park. They don’t know what door to go in. They don’t know where the children are supposed to go. They don’t know how to get around the building. If you could just figure out how to help overcome this barrier, you could generate a lot more traffic on Sunday mornings.

In order to overcome this barrier, you may want to plan some ways to get people on your property and into your buildings before they visit your church on Sunday. I recently visited Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church in Marietta, Georgia, the second largest church in that denomination. Like any large church, they experience significant parking challenges. Yet, they had a lot of visitors that Sunday. While interviewing several staff members on Monday, I think I discovered why. The church has many weekday ministries, including a preschool, a Christian school, and an extensive recreation and sports ministry. About 60 percent of the participants in these weekday activities are not members of the church. But guess what? They know where to park, and they can navigate their way around the maze of buildings. We decided together that the large number of Sunday visitors whose first contact with the church is through one of those weekday programs might be because that significant barrier has been removed for them.

Magnolia Avenue Baptist Church in Riverside, California, hosts a community “trunk or treat” event as a safe alternative to typical Halloween activities.

They call it “Magnolia 10:31” not just because it is on October 31, but also because of the theme verse for the event, 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God’s glory.” Many churches provide similar events. Besides the obvious service this provides to the community and the positive publicity for the church, such events also accomplish the purpose of getting people on the church campus, helping to remove a significant barrier to church attendance. Egg hunts around Easter, Vacation Bible School family nights, July 4th activities, Labor Day block parties, and similar events help accomplish the same thing.

Another principle of successful retailing we’ve already addressed is parking. Retailers, however, are not satisfied with sufficient parking. They want surplus parking. Additionally, successful retailers typically require their employees to park away from the building, to ensure close parking spaces for the customers. On staffs where I have served, we have parked in the most remote lot on Sunday mornings. One mark that a culture of invitation is beginning to develop in your church is when increasing numbers of members are willing to park in inconvenient places to free up more convenient parking for guests. The opposite is when a lot of parking places are marked reserved. Have you ever been frustrated trying to find a parking space in a medical facility, looking for one slot among many empty ones reserved by name for medical professionals? That is probably necessary in that environment given the busy schedules of doctors and administrators, but going to a new church ought never be like going to a new doctor!

Visibility

Retailers also know the value of visibility. It’s difficult to shop in a store if you can’t find it. I almost always get lost trying to find the LifeWay Christian Store in Denver, and I usually have to make a U-turn on Colorado Avenue at some point. And I’ve been there several times! It’s a great store and worth the drive, but because it is located at the back of the shopping center, it’s just hard to find because it lacks visibility.

How about your church? Does something make people take a second look when they drive by? Maybe a beautiful garden? A great sign? Bright lighting? Can you do something to make your church such a destination? I once had an idea to put a million lights on our church building in Texas at Christmas time. We never actually did it, but I still think it was a good idea! You could use 1,000 lights or maybe a really big Christmas tree. Could your church do something like that so that people would drive by during the Christmas season just to see your church building? Some churches brave the cold to stage live nativity

scenes, another approach that achieves the same result. Other churches host excellent Christmas pageants that not only get people onto the property but also into the building, overcoming still another barrier. What other ideas can you come up with to increase your church's visibility and traffic? Such an increase helps support a culture of invitation among your members.

Names

The most valuable asset a retailer has is customer information, yet churches often hold the kinds of events previously described without attempting to capture the names, phone numbers, and physical and e-mail addresses of those who attend. While such events have value in overcoming a huge barrier whether or not you collect names, why not try to get them? One of the easiest ways is to encourage people to register for a drawing. Last July, we attended the big Independence Day music and fireworks event at First Baptist Church Woodstock, Georgia. You would have had to work hard not to fill out an information form. Plus, it made you eligible for a drawing for 500 gallons of gasoline, among other prizes. They made the drawing a lot of fun, sending a staff member into the crowd to ask a multiple-choice question about American history, with those answering correctly receiving a small prize. The climax was the big random drawing. The names collected provide Sunday School classes with an abundant number of prospects. Or you could ask guests to take their completed form to a special table or booth to receive a free gift. Just get the names!

Advertising and Information

If 80 percent of people attend church because of a personal invitation, do you really need to advertise or provide other forms of information about your church? Yes, you do. One reason is to reach that 20 percent who come for other reasons, typically because they are looking—shopping if you will—for a new church home. The other reason is for what such activities do to help support a culture of invitation among your members. How does that work? It's sort of like the difference between marketing and sales in a business environment. An outside salesperson has a much better chance of getting an audience with a potential new customer if that prospect already has an awareness of the salesperson's organization and what it offers. That's the primary purpose of advertising—to create awareness. Although advertising seldom generates sales by itself, it paves the way for overcoming the "I don't know who you are" barrier. Some churches mail a card to their community—or a targeted portion of it—at Easter or whenever the pastor begins a new sermon series. Some

people respond to the direct mail advertising alone. In addition, the members know that the community has received the mailing, which makes it easier for them to offer a personal invitation.

Today's shoppers are pretty savvy. They often check out a store and learn a lot about it before they ever visit it personally. The same goes for a church. That's the purpose of a yellow pages ad or other information vehicles. Today, perhaps the most important information source is a church website. Many church websites are, in a word, awful! A recent research project (Sunday School in the Simple Church; findings available at www.lifeway.com/simple-church) required my visiting hundreds of church websites. I was alarmed at how many did not provide two basic pieces of information: the location of the church and the Sunday morning schedule! Most were out of date. You can guess the reason why. Someone in the church volunteered to design the page, but no longer is able to keep it updated. Another sad thing I found during that project was how many church websites I could not find—even if they had one! Some of the sites were very pretty; it was just that Google wouldn't provide a link to get to them! Here comes a blatant commercial. If you want an affordable solution to easily keeping your church website up to date and making sure people can find it through a search engine, visit www.lifewaylink.com. A good website will allow your members to say with confidence, "you can learn more about our church even before you attend by visiting our church website." Nothing may be more important in today's connected world to help create a culture of invitation in your church.

Signage

Successful retailers spend a lot of money trying to help you find what you're looking for in their stores. I'm not talking about those establishments where signs everywhere tell you all the things you can't do! I stayed in a hotel in Moriarty, New Mexico, recently that must have been convinced that all its guests were thieves. Signs everywhere in the room informed me that if I smoked in the non-smoking room, I'd be charged (I actually sort of liked that one!). Another made sure I knew the housekeeper would count the linens and I'd be charged for any missing. Still another warned I'd better not be even a minute late checking out.

Rather than negative messages, I'm talking about helpful signage. Signs that lower your stress level and direct you where you need to go. Signs that help you remember where you've been and how to retrace your steps. Signs that say, "We're expecting new people and want to help you have a great first expe-

rience.” I love signs that say, “Thank you for using this door” instead of a sign that says, “Please use the other door.” Subtle, but positive!

Maybe your church can't afford a professional sign consultant. That's OK. Just put yourself in the shoes of a first time guest, ask yourself where they might get confused, then put up some signs. Someone in the church may be willing to take on the project. If the building has suspended ceilings, crease the top of a piece of poster board and hang it perpendicular to the wall for greater visibility. Be creative. More importantly, just get something up. If members see that getting around is easier, they are more likely to invite someone to come.

Businesses also know the value of a great outdoor sign in terms of increasing visibility. I travel all over America and am both amused and amazed how many churches of all denominations seem to be trying to hide their identity from those who drive by. On the other hand, a church that has made an investment in a great sign always impresses me. Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville sits right across the expressway from the spectacular Gaylord Opryland Hotel and a Grand Ole' Opry House sign that looks more like a big television screen than a typical marquee. But Two Rivers has invested in a great sign with an electronic message board that attracts the attention of drivers on Briley Parkway. What does your church sign say about your church? For some ideas about great outdoor church signs, visit www.lifewaystores.com/signs.

Incorporating Ideas into the Class

My brother is the director of a Wal-Mart Supercenter, a huge operation that employs hundreds of people. One of the keys to Wal-Mart's success is the dozens of people in each store who serve as department managers. They are responsible for the appearance, inventory, and merchandising of a specific area of the store. The success of any store is dependent on the performance of each of these individual managers. The same is true for a church and its Sunday School classes. In fact, unlike a retail store, an individual Sunday School class often can grow even when the rest of the church is not. What is different about such a class? In *The 3D Sunday School*, I suggest it is because the class members and leaders have entered into a sort of kingdom conspiracy to create the kind of environment and experiences in their class that make it a safe place to invite friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors (FRANs). The class develops a culture of invitation. Led by a committed teacher, it creates an open Bible study group that discovers together scripture truth and each other's stories. The class does the little things that make it a great place to connect, with plenty of food, fellowship, and fun. It is intentional about outreach.

It is organized to care for each member. And leaders are assigned to each of these areas, sort of like department managers. For some ideas about organizing your class, visit www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.

Name Tags

If you've read any of my previous books, you might be saying, "Are you going to hit that name tag thing again?" Absolutely! There may be nothing more important for a class to create an inviting environment than a conscious and consistent effort to wear nametags. It is the rare retail establishment that does not require its associates to display at least their first names. Some have fancy engraved name badges. I happen to be sitting in a Panera Bread® restaurant as I type this, and the employees make their own hand printed tags. At Home Depot®, the name is written in permanent ink right on the associate's orange apron. If you'd like to test how important a person's name is, just start thanking the clerk who checks you out or the associate who gives you directions by name. I have been a first time guest in a lot of different Sunday School classes, and I promise you that the ones that wear nametags are much more friendly and inviting, regardless of their size. And the friendly classes we have visited would be even friendlier if they would just do this one little thing. Vickie and I visited a very large class at First Baptist Church Concord in Knoxville, Tennessee, one Sunday. When we left, Vickie said, "I would join that class." You've probably guessed almost everyone was wearing a nametag! The class had many other positive dynamics, too, but the nametags helped more than they knew.

Branding

We could say much more about how churches could be more effective by incorporating successful retail principles. As you shop in the weeks ahead, pay attention to things that make you return to your favorite stores. See if you can apply any of them in your church or class. For now, we'll deal with just one more principle: branding. Does that mean our church needs to have a logo? Well, maybe it does or maybe it doesn't. Branding a business involves much more than its name or logo. But let's start at that point, since most churches could improve in the very basics of what the experts might call "brand recognition."

When strangers see something in print about your church, is it readily identifiable with your church—even before they read a word of the copy? Very likely, the answer is no. You see, in our eagerness to grab attention by being different, we usually neglect common elements that tie things such as our

printed materials, bulletins, and websites together and link them in a person's mind to our church. If you want an excellent example of a business that understands—and enforces—this principle, take a look at any Target® ad, brochure, or sign. It will almost certainly feature the color red prominently. The simple target logo will be there—even around the Target dog's eye! Look at the signs inside the store. Even the doors are probably red! FedEx® operates a number of different business units such as air, ground, home delivery, and stores. Each line of business has a different color, but they all feature the same famous logo with the subtle arrow formed between the E and the x. Speaking of the importance of color to a brand, you likely can complete the following sentence: UPS—What can _____ do for you? I don't know what brown might do for you, but you get the idea. How can you apply this simple principle in your church so that every impression you make helps people associate it with your church?

But branding involves much more than logos and colors. In fact, a brand is that whole combination of facts and feelings that flood your mind and emotions when you see or hear the name of a particular business or organization. One of the world's most valuable brands, Coca-Cola®, means more in the minds of those who drink it than just brown sugar water! It's the fizzle in the nose, of course, but it's mostly the association of memories linked to events that included enjoying a Coke.

In the aftermath of the devastating 2005 hurricane season, people all along the Gulf Coast had grateful thoughts and feelings when they saw the “yellow hats” worn by Southern Baptist Disaster Relief teams. Seeing those yellow hats on a chainsaw and mud-out crew or a food preparation unit was a promise of hope. More important than brand identity is brand promise. At the end of the day, a brand is only as strong as the trust a customer has in that promise. A church's brand is also about trust. In a church with a culture of invitation, the members know that if they invite someone to come, they can have a high level of trust that the person will have a good experience when they come.

What is your church's brand? What is your class's brand? What is your brand? Not your logo, or class name, or signature, but your brand? What comes to the mind of someone who sees or hears the name of your church? The name of your class? Your name? What's your brand promise? What do you pledge to people who visit your church, attend your class, and call you friend? Do you consistently deliver against that promise? Or is there work yet to do? Wrongs to right? Improvements to make? Where will you start? How about with prayer? Time to switch lanes again!



LANE 3:

Intercede

Intercession is key if you hope to develop a culture of invitation. Unfortunately, the brand promise of too many churches and classes is this: If you come to our church or class, you can get in on the fussing and bickering too. Satan is having a heyday in too many places. Some people will attend a church or class that is out of sorts, but I'll promise you this: few of them are going to invite someone else to come watch the fight!

What's the solution? Serious situations may require intervention. All such situations require intercession. Something remarkable happens when people in a church start praying for their church, their pastor, their class, their teacher, and the other people in the church. Intercession is a prescription for church health. Many churches, classes, and individual Christians need to start here. (Did we just switch back to the **invigorate** lane?) They are not even ready to start thinking about reaching out to others. Inviting others into the mess would be doing them a great disservice and perhaps damage not only the brand promise of the church but also the promise of the entire church of the Lord Jesus. Start interceding and see what The Great Physician does!

If you are one of the troublemakers, please repent or leave. Please don't go join another church or transfer to another class unless you can sincerely support the pastor or teacher. Wow, David, that's pretty harsh! Yes, it is. This lack of support is a very serious problem in far too many churches and is probably one of the key factors preventing us from accomplishing the Great Commission. Let me be clear. I'm not talking about the person who offers occasional feedback about things that could be done better. All of us do that, and we should. I'm talking about the person who is consistently negative

about everything for a number of years, through a number of pastorates, and with a virtually inexhaustible list of grievances. The kind of person who is not happy unless they are unhappy! The kind of person who sets himself up as the grand permission giver. I don't even understand why such people want to go to church, but they are messing up too many of them. And they usually represent a very tiny minority of the church membership—maybe one or two percent, or even one or two people. Remember the Susan Scott question I mentioned earlier? “What are you pretending not to know?” How do these people retain their negative power in a church? Usually, it's because the new people and the nice people just leave. Often the very antagonists that caused them to leave blame the church leadership—and usually the pastor specifically—for their departure, stirring up dissension. Unfortunately, at the very heart of all this is the desire on the part of some to stay in power. If the church grows, they reason in their warped minds, they may lose power. So the way to retain power is to keep the church small. Oh, they'll deny it's so. But it usually is true. (A very fine book on this subject is *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict* by Kenneth C. Haugk, the founder of Stephen Ministries, a lay-led approach to congregational and community care giving.)

Well, I didn't really mean to chase that rabbit that far into the field, but it is an issue that keeps way too many churches from even thinking about developing a culture of invitation. There is a culture of survival. Survival of the fittest—or sadly those least fit for spiritual leadership. So, again, what's the antidote? Intercession! A church that is praying for its pastor, its leaders, and each other is an uncomfortable place for the forces of evil to operate. Intercede!

Interceding as a Church

Let's assume that you have investigated the demographics of your ministry area. You have a pretty good idea about the people groups God has blessed you with already, thus indicating what groups He's made you good at reaching. For the sake of illustration, let's say that you are good at reaching the “Urban Commuter Families” segment of your community. (One of the 60 geodemographic “clusters” identified by the Mosaic methodology. Visit www.appliedgeographic.com to find a brief description of each cluster—you might be able to discern which groups are most represented in your church.) What can you do next? Well, you may want to design a special mailing targeted at those areas. But you can do more. You can pray. Organize a prayer walk in those communities. Don't be weird about it, sending in dozens of people in suits and scaring entire neighborhoods! Just enlist small teams of volunteers who will walk up

and down their assigned streets, praying for each home, making mental notes about what they see and hear. Pray that God will do something in the families in each home. Ask Him to impress them about going to church. Pray that some of them might come to yours. Pray in faith that you'll be ready when they come. You may be amazed at what God does!

Some churches will want to take it a step further. After some period of praying for the targeted group of homes, perhaps the teams—or different people with different gifts—might actually go door-to-door. They would simply knock on the door, introduce themselves, and quickly say, “We don't want to come in.” After seeing the relief on the face of the person at the door, they continue, “We are from Around the Corner Baptist Church and would welcome the opportunity to pray for you and your family about any needs you might have. We're going to leave this little door hanger. If you would like us to pray for something, just leave this on the outside of your door. We will be back by later and take it without disturbing you again.” On the door hanger form, make it very clear that the needs expressed will be held in the strictest confidence—and make sure they are! Have a place for first names only. As an option—and clearly optional—have a place for them to check a box like “I would appreciate a contact from a minister” and a place to print a phone number. I have heard incredible reports of the things God has done because of actions like these. Not surprisingly, some of the people decide to visit a church. Often the church that took the time to care!

While participating with a team from First Baptist Church Gallatin, Tennessee, in a door-to-door effort during Crossover Nashville prior to the 2005 Southern Baptist Convention, one man told us that his wife was in the late stages of terminal cancer, and they had been unable to attend church for some time. Sensing the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I asked him if it would be encouraging for her if we came in and prayed with her. He eagerly accepted the invitation. Several minutes later, a group of strangers, united only by the love of Christ, moist eyes all around, prayed that the Father would whisper “Fear not” into the heart of our sister as often as she needed to hear it in the days ahead. What opportunities for ministry might open up to your church if you offered yourself for intercession?

Interceding as a Class

Prayer requests sound different in a class that is developing a culture of invitation. Increasingly, requests for prayer are less often focused on someone's sister-in-law's mother's cousin's nephew's girlfriend's knee surgery in a far-away state. Instead, they begin to sound like the following:

“There is a new guy, Mike, in the cubicle next to mine at work. Pray that God will engineer opportunities for me to get to know him better and perhaps invite him to our class.”

“Maggie is in my aerobics group at the Y. She has begun to share some pretty intimate things with me about her marriage. Pray that God will give me wisdom in responding to her, and perhaps give me an opportunity to invite her to attend the Beth Moore simulcast with me.”

“My brother Seth has been away from the Lord for a long time but has recently begun to ask questions. Pray that God will help me discern how best to help him and let me know when Seth might be open to an invitation to our class.”

“Bill and Melody have a daughter who plays on our Lisa’s soccer team. Lisa really wants to invite Sarah to Sunday School. Pray that Bill and Melody will go along with that.”

“Maria and Juan are a new couple who have been visiting our worship services. They are assigned to our class as prospective members. As the class outreach leader, I hope to go visit them this week. Pray that a couple of you will volunteer to go with me and that they will respond positively to an invitation to our class!”

Do those prayer requests sound a little different than the normal fare in your class? As you work together as a class to develop a culture of invitation, those are the kinds of requests that will begin to dominate the prayer time.

Interceding for FRANS

FRAN is an acronym that stands for Friends, Relatives, Associates (or Acquaintances) and Neighbors. It’s a way to remember the various people that may be in your sphere of influence. One of the most important things a class can do if it wants to develop a culture of invitation is to ask every group member to ask God to help them make a list of unchurched people they know who might be open to an invitation. A sample form is included at the back of this book. The first step is to begin to intercede for your own FRANS. The next step is to share the names of those you are praying for with other people—your care group or even the entire class.

Do you want to develop a culture of invitation in your church, your class, yourself? Invigorate! Incorporate! Intercede!



LANE 4:

Invest

The success of any enterprise can usually be traced back to a person or group of people who answered this challenge: *Discover a need and meet it!* How successful the enterprise becomes is most often related to how real the need was, how many people actually experienced that need, and how well the solution offered by the enterprise satisfied that need. Through the coffee shop window where I am sitting right now, I can see Kroger®, Staples®, and Petco®. Each of these stores meets a different set of needs. I don't think I have ever been in a Petco since I am not a pet owner. But I am apparently in the minority in that regard. When I was a kid, people would have thought you absolutely crazy if you had said you were going to open up a superstore for pet owners. My parents still think it is ridiculous to spend money for water in a bottle or dirt in a bag, but I have purchased both in the past week—all because someone discovered a need and made an investment to meet it.

Because Christ Himself is in the business of meeting needs, His church is also in the business of meeting needs. For a little over three decades, Jesus visited the planet He created, walked among the people He designed, and He experienced what it was like to be hungry and thirsty, joyful and sad, proud and disappointed, celebrated and lonely. Three intense years of ministry were characterized by His investment in the lives of others, meeting their needs and challenging them to something higher and greater than themselves—inviting His followers to invest their lives in the grand agenda of the kingdom of God.

Investing as a Church

Too many churches start their long range planning discussions with the wrong question: How can we get more people to come to our church? Better questions might be: What can our church do to make our community, our city, our ministry area a better place to live? What unmet needs exist? How might we invest some of our resources to meet one or more of those needs?

Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, Texas, noticed that a large number of skateboarders were using their parking lots. Signs didn't work! So they built a skateboard park, ramps and all, and created a ministry program for the skaters. Many of them have come to know Jesus as a result.

A church in urban Los Angeles is developing a ministry that involves opening up cafés in urban neighborhoods. The cafés will meet the very real needs of creating jobs and giving folks a place to get a reasonably priced meal, while also providing a “non-churchy” environment to share Christ in the community.

Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Tennessee, discovered several years ago that the Buccaneer football team at nearby Beech High School had difficulty sharing a team meal before home games, since both the church and the school are a good distance from commercial retail areas. So some people in the church created “Feed the Bucs.” If you guessed that some of those young men came to the church, you would be right! A couple of years ago, when the prospect of thunderstorms threatened to cancel the outdoor stadium ceremony, Beech's graduation moved into the new worship center at Long Hollow. They were back again the next year! The next day, some leftover cigarette butts typically litter the sidewalks around the church, but pastor David Landrith reminds the congregation that the cigarettes will be cleaned up; the important thing is that some people who are without a church have now been in one, they know where to park and where worship meets, so invite them to come on a Sunday!

First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia, discovered a need in their community for a safe place for kids to play and have birthday parties and so forth. So they built an incredible play area for kids called Kidzstock Park.

My wife teaches high school math in Gallatin, Tennessee, and Long Hollow Baptist's Gallatin campus provided a tailgate meal for all the teachers prior to a recent football game, getting to know them and inviting them to church. The game announcer almost always broadcasts an invitation to a church sponsoring a “Fifth Quarter” pizza fellowship.

Dozens of other ways exist to help you invest in your community. Distribute cold water at a parade—with labels that include the church's name and worship times. Wash car windows in a parking lot, and leave a little note that

says, “Your windows washed by the student ministry of ABC church.” Provide music classes at the church in school districts where a financial crunch has strained the fine arts curriculum. Offer science, physical education, or Bible classes for groups of home school students. Sponsor a health clinic. Operate a preschool or daycare ministry. Start a ministry (such as DivorceCare or Grief-Care) to families shattered by divorce or death. Build a walking trail around the perimeter of the church property. Schedule special daytime activities for senior adults.

My colleague Bruce Raley, LifeWay’s national leader for Christian Educators, shared with me how the church he served as Minister of Education, First Baptist Church, Panama Beach, Florida, encouraged a culture of invitation in all activities. They reserved 10 percent of the seats on senior adult outings for guests who didn’t go to church. Ten percent of the players on a church softball team had to be folks who were not members of the church. You get the idea!

Would you like to share some additional ideas? Email them to sundayschool@lifeway.com. Type “Invest Idea” in the subject line. I would be particularly interested in learning of any church that may have seen a need for a quiet, park-like area in their community and created something like a beautiful prayer garden where people can come to walk, sit, read, and reflect. Attach photos if you have some! I’ll share some of the best ideas in upcoming editions of *eSource*, our monthly e-newsletter for Sunday School leaders (to subscribe, visit www.lifeway.com/newsletters) or post them at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool.

Investing as a Class

Many of these ideas are church-size projects. What are some class-size projects you could take on to meet a need? Could you adopt the faculty of a nearby elementary school? Maybe paint the faculty lounge, bring an occasional snack or meal to the teachers, and offer to help them move in at the beginning of the school year or pack up at the end? Could you schedule a day to help clean up a park? Or send a group to conduct worship and Bible study at an assisted care facility? Some projects are probably even care group-size ministries. A care group might adopt a widow in the church and occasionally get together on a Saturday morning to rake leaves, clean gutters, or do minor repairs.

These kinds of activities develop a strong sense of fellowship in a class, but they also help strengthen a culture of invitation. How? They provide stories to tell—a Sunday School testimony if you will. People, especially young adults, don’t want to just “sit and soak” when it comes to church. They want to do something. They are attracted by and to a group that not only talks about ministry but also actually does ministry.

Investing as a Christian

While you are praying for your list of FRANs, ask God to make you sensitive to needs in their lives He might want you to respond to. Get to know them. Listen more than you talk. Say encouraging words. Perform kind acts. And heed this important word of caution: People don't want to be your project!

When our three sons were young teenagers, one night at dinner I asked a question. I don't even remember the question, but I vividly remember the response of my middle son: "Dad, do you really care what we say or is this just one of your exercises?" Ouch! That question hurt, especially since I was probably exercising something I had read in a "how to have a better family" article.

Someone shared recently about their visit with a FAITH evangelism team in the home of a man who had recently visited their church. As they began the conversation, he said, "I've got one question before we start. Do you really care about me, or is this just some church obligation you're fulfilling?" A person you visit doesn't want to be the next notch in your evangelism belt but may be open to a sincere relationship—even with someone who openly but humbly practices faith—who is willing to be a friend who listens to life stories without condemnation.

One of the coolest things about being a member of a Sunday School class that has committed to creating a culture of invitation is that you get to be a part of a "Great Commandment and Great Commission support group." What if your Sunday School class spent 10-15 minutes each session dividing into care groups for sharing and prayer? What if the part of that time you looked forward to the most was hearing and sharing not only the requests for intercession for FRANs, but "investment reports" too. Sharing ideas with one another. Teaming up with one another. What if the following need were shared by one of the guys in your men-only care group? (I'm a strong believer in single sex care groups; see *The 3D Sunday School* to read why!) The work associate with whom he's been investing time loves to fish but doesn't know where the best places are because he's new to the area. The care group member himself is not a fisherman. But you are! What if you offered to take both of them out on your boat one Saturday morning? You can think of other such examples. It's not just about us taking all the responsibility for reaching our FRANs. It's about us taking the responsibility together—as a class—to help each other reach each other's FRANs. Don't you long to be a part of Sunday School class like that? A class that works together to invigorate, incorporate, intercede, invest, and invite!



LANE 5:

Invite

Hopefully by now you've seen that there is a lot more to creating a culture of invitation in your church or class than just exhorting people to invite others to come. But you can do all the things we've talked about, and most people still won't come unless someone invites them. All your work to invigorate, incorporate, intercede, and invest simply paves the way for an invitation, makes it more likely that you will extend an invitation, and increases the already good odds that the person you invite will accept your invitation.

David Durey, conducting research for Mission Portland, found that just 15 churches in the Portland, Oregon area accounted for 10 percent of the total church attendance of all churches combined. Durey grouped his findings into three areas: personal relationships, intentionality, and small groups. He found personal relationships were the most significant reason unchurched people came to these churches. The people came back because the churches were intentional in reaching lost people, welcoming visitors, and providing a pathway for spiritual development. They stayed because small groups provided a place for new people to form significant relationships and grow spiritually. In a section of his report titled "Personal Invitations Carry the Day," Durey reported results similar to other surveys. When he asked, "What attracted you to this church?" over 70 percent of the new Christians interviewed responded by saying it was a personal invitation from someone they knew and trusted. One of the pastors he interviewed explained, "Our people are our tool for evangelizing. What God has done in their lives is an example for the people that they are around—in families, in neighborhoods and in the workplace. Our members either extend an invitation to their unchurched friends or these

friends visit our services because of what they see the Lord has done in our member's lives."

I found the following quote in a discussion thread among campus ministers while doing an online search. Carl Sharon, I assume a person involved in campus ministry at Yale University, posted, "Right now I view evangelism as sensitive and timely invitation into a place where there is known hospitality and where there is the possibility of finding what one is looking for. It is a dependence on the Holy Spirit to touch the spirits of persons near to us, and on the Holy Spirit's ability to move us to invite them in a welcoming, open, generous and hospitable way." Wow. I wish I had said that, because it captures the very essence of *I-6*.

New Residents: Low-Hanging Fruit

In the "Invite" chapter of *The 3D Sunday School*, I include a section on inviting people who are facing new frontiers. I'll not repeat that entire portion here, but I would like to focus on one of those frontiers: people who have recently moved into your community or neighborhood. Moving is difficult. A move across town may mean new schools for the kids, putting in a new yard, and certainly experiencing new neighbors. A move to a new city typically means all this plus finding a new doctor, a new dentist, a new grocery, a new dry cleaner, a new daycare center, and—maybe—a new church. Find out who these folks are by subscribing to a newcomer list like the ones you can purchase from LifeWay Christian Stores Prospect Services (www.lifewaystores.com/prospectservices). Follow up with a friendly visit and a pack of goodies that includes such things as a map of the community, coupons, and of course information about your church—or several churches that might want to partner with you. If you have people in your church who provide services, consider preparing a little guide—printed on yellow paper of course—or just give them the opportunity to insert their business cards. Can you imagine the impact it would make on a new family if the doctor, the chiropractor, the dentist, the plumber, the auto mechanic, the lawn maintenance guy, and so on, all asked a newcomer where they were going to church? That might be more than just a happy wish if everyone were in on the conspiracy—an active part of a church with a culture of invitation?

E-invitations

A growing number of church websites enable members to send electronic invitations to their FRANs. I actually sent myself a few invitations from some websites, just to see how it worked! Crossroads International Church in The

Hague, Netherlands, utilizes this mechanism (www.crossroadschurch.nl/invite). I also sent myself an invitation from the website of Fellowship Church, Grapevine, Texas, which included a full color mini-poster of an upcoming sermon series (www.fellowshipchurch.com/evite), as well as from a service called flockfinder.com. Even if your church website does not provide this feature, you could still use e-mail to help introduce your FRAN to your church. You could include a link to the staff page and say, “Here’s a picture of our pastor.” Or link to other pages that include photos or other information. (If you’re not real computer savvy, here’s a hint. Just highlight the address at the top of your web browser, press Ctrl-C to copy the address, then Ctrl-V to paste it into your e-mail.) Some churches provide archived sermon audio on their sites, which is another link you could send. Or just send the link to the main page and pray that they will click through on the “How to Become a Christian” link and ask you about it later.

Parties: The Mark of an Inviting Class

Did you mean to say fellowships or socials? No, I mean parties! There may not be a better tactic for creating opportunities for invitation than department, class, or group parties. Parties should be scheduled regularly. It requires discipline and a committed leader who will take the responsibility for planning such events, typically called the Activities Leader, Fellowship Leader, or Connect Leader. I’ve never heard one of these leaders referred to as a Party Planner, but that is the essence of the job. And it is a very important role in a group serious about creating a culture of invitation.

In a church I served as Minister with Adults, we asked Sunday School groups to plan 10 parties a year, one per month except in June—when Vacation Bible School Family Night was the major Friday night event—and November—because of Thanksgiving. Christmas parties were scheduled early in December and were some of the biggest events of our church year. Departments and classes that included parents had their parties on the third Friday, with child-care provided for a small fee at the church. Because all the kids were there together, they had something special planned for them as well, and they liked Party Night as much as their parents. We mailed out only one large postcard that listed the theme and location of each department’s party and contact information. The card was mailed to every adult on the roll, every prospect, and every associate member serving in preschool, children, and youth classes. Most often, parties included the entire department. Sometimes, each class had its own party. Twice a year, groups could opt to use the night as a “Parents Night Out,” with couples or smaller groups enjoying a more intimate dinner or

other activity. This provided a great opportunity to invite a prospective couple to get to know them better or have a spiritual conversation in a relaxed atmosphere. Most of the time, parties were the typical fare of food, fun, and fellowship—with the food usually providing the theme. A favorite menu that made its way among our groups (who often stole the good ideas of other groups they saw on the card!) was Mexican Stack Up. People signed up for the various ingredients: chips, ground beef, beans, rice, lettuce, tomatoes, salsa, onions, sour cream, cheese—even pecans and coconut. Guests were asked to bring something such as a 2-liter soft drink or a bag of tortilla chips so they could feel a part of the gathering. When the weather was nice, outdoor activities might be included.

The Party Night principle can apply to other special events as well. If your church is taking a group to a ballgame, use the event to invite a FRAN in a non-threatening environment. Most unbelievers not only need to hear the gospel of Christ, but they also need to see that Christ followers are real people. Becoming a Christian is almost always the result of socialization as well as evangelization.

Invite Guests to Enroll

Keith Wilkinson, former state Sunday School Director in the Mississippi and Oklahoma Baptist conventions, shared a great story from the little country church he has been pastoring since his “retirement.” A man in his church and a young cowboy were visiting one day and talked about riding together sometime. Most people, Keith said, would have suggested a Saturday afternoon, but not this man. Instead, he said, “I ride my horse about five miles to this little country church on Sunday mornings. How about riding with me next Sunday?” And he did. After being introduced to him, Keith went to the Sunday School teacher and exhorted him to ask Jim to enroll in the class. When he saw Jim later, he asked if they asked him to enroll. He responded with a big smile, “Yes, they did. They acted like they really wanted me!”

That’s the way most people receive an invitation to enroll! They don’t hear it as an intrusion into their privacy. They don’t think we’re being too aggressive. They just think we’re communicating, “We like you. We’d like you to be a part of our group. We’d like the opportunity to get to know you better. We’d like to take responsibility for ministering to you.” So most people will say “yes” when you ask them to enroll. Even on their very first visit.

A great way to view and promote your class roll is to call it a ministry list. Being a member of the Sunday School class neither makes you a member of the church nor obligates you to become one. Enrolling simply adds your name

to the ministry list, the list of members who have made a covenant to pray and care for one another. Invite people to enroll.

Involve Newcomers without Embarrassing Them

It's scary to go to a new church, but at least you can be somewhat anonymous in a larger crowd. Sometimes it can be even scarier to go to a small group for the first time, so do everything you can to make sure your group works together to create the kind of environment and experiences in your class that makes newcomers feel welcome and at ease. In *The 3D Sunday School*, I call it a "Kingdom conspiracy." Everybody is in on the plan! When possible, we make sure chairs are not facing the door. If the room is set up in a circle or semi-circle, we leave the chairs nearest the door empty. If chairs are in rows, we leave empty chairs on the back row or scoot over so guests can sit on the aisle—and we smile while we're doing it!

We never ask a guest to fill out a form; we do it for them. We never ask newcomers to stand and introduce themselves; the person who filled out the form introduces them—sharing interesting information not included on the form! We never call on a newcomer to pray or read without making sure it's OK ahead of time. We always wear nametags. Nothing—absolutely nothing—makes a newcomer feel more at ease than a room full of people wearing nametags. These are just some of the little things that distinguish a class that is serious about creating a culture of invitation. And something remarkable happens when you do it consistently. Members start inviting their FRANs! They know they can trust the other members of the class to support them in reaching others.

Invite Them to Christ

A person can hang around Christians a long time without becoming one. A person can hear sermons and Sunday School lessons for a long time and still not be able to put all the pieces together. People who hang around Christians for a period of time prior to making a commitment to Christ are far more likely to continue to walk with Christ and become active church members than those who come to Him in a more isolated context. People who have been exposed to the Bible over a period of time prior to receiving Christ are far more likely to continue a life of faith than those who hear the gospel only once or twice prior to making that decision. But how much time is enough time? In his book *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, Thom Rainer found that most previously unchurched folks wished that someone had encouraged

them to make that decision earlier than they did. So how do you know when it might be the right time? The Holy Spirit will tell you! In that deep place in your heart where His thoughts become your thoughts, He will nudge you to action. While He is communicating Mind to mind with you, He is also doing His work in the mind and heart of the person who will receive your witness. So you're off the hook—except for actually sharing a clear presentation of the gospel message.

Here's more good news. Since it is ultimately the Holy Spirit's work, it doesn't matter all that much what gospel presentation you use. The good news is the good news whether you use the FAITH outline; a marked New Testament and the *Share Jesus Without Fear* approach; a pamphlet such as the yellow *Four Spiritual Laws* from Campus Crusade, the green *How to Have a Full and Meaningful Life* from the North American Mission Board, the blue *Steps to Peace with God* from Billy Graham, or the orange *Bridge to Life* from the Navigators; or just the old tried and true Roman Road! Find something that you're comfortable using and sharing. It is more important that your FRAN sense your love and concern for them than that you say all the words right. You want them to hear over everything else, "I know I have eternal life, and I want you to have it too." Don't get me wrong. The person you are sharing with does need to hear the elements of the gospel clearly, but you don't have to be perfect. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit does the work. Christ is a gentleman. He stands at the door and knocks, but He will not barge into someone's heart. And He has delegated to His followers the responsibility of communicating that offer of eternal life available in and through Him—and only Him.

Effective delegation involves at least four elements: information, responsibility with authority, a clear and compelling assignment with freedom to act, and the promise of help if needed. When Jesus gave the Great Commission, delegating the spread of the gospel to His followers, He did all four. He taught the disciples everything concerning Himself in the Scriptures, arming them with the information they needed to go forth with confidence. He assured them that He had all authority in Heaven and Earth. Therefore, He could delegate this responsibility and the authority necessary to accomplish it. He gave them a clear—and really big—assignment! He promised to be just a prayer away as they set forth to obey His command.

So invite people to parties. Invite them to church. Invite them to Sunday School. And when the Holy Spirit says it's time, invite them to Christ.



LANE 6:

Involve

Involving a lot of different people with a lot of different gifts, a lot of different passions, a lot of different experiences, and a lot of different backgrounds is absolutely essential for a church or class that is serious about developing a culture of invitation. It's a team effort. Everybody who is involved in making a contribution to that effort is considered important, not just those to whom God gives the privilege of leading a person to accept His free gift of eternal life or receive His promise of abundant life in Christ. If a church or class hopes to develop a pervasive culture of invitation, then every person who is involved on the team in any capacity should be viewed as an important part of the process God uses to bring people to Himself.

The Great Commission: A Team Effort

You may have gotten the impression at some time that only those people whose witness results in a person praying to receive Christ are actually doing the Great Commission. That is no more true than suggesting that the clerk who completes a sales transaction is the only person involved in leading a customer to make that purchase decision. The Apostle Paul wrote that some sow, some water, but God gives the increase. Only God knows all the people He used to bring a person to that point of decision. The Great Commission requires a team effort. What if we started asking a very important question just a little bit differently? What if instead of the question, "How many people have you led to the Lord this year?" we made a practice in our classes to regularly ask, "How many people have WE led to the Lord this year?"

Involving More People in Outreach

One example of an outreach effort that follows the teamwork principle is the GROW program available through LifeWay. Other similar expressions of this kind of strategy use a variety of acronyms. Two basic ideas make up these outreach strategies. The first is to ask members to make a commitment to the church's weekly outreach effort one day per month. The second is that when they come to outreach, they have many options for involvement in addition to visitation, including praying for those visiting/being visited, writing cards, making phone calls, or providing childcare for the kids. Everyone can be involved in the reporting session and celebrate together what God did through the team that week.

Involve People Based on Their Spiritual Gifts

If creating a culture of invitation in your class or church is about teamwork—and it is—then it follows that the people on the team should be playing a position for which God has gifted them. In a Sunday School class, persons with the spiritual gift of shepherding or teaching make wonderful teachers. Those with the gift of hospitality are perfectly gifted to be greeters and fellowship leaders. Members with the gift of service can be terrific care group leaders. Someone with the gift of helps would be perfect as the class secretary. For a description of these gifts and others, see my study guide, *Spiritual Gifts: A Practical Guide to How God Works through You*.

The spiritual gift of evangelism is one you will want to be sure to identify, unleash, and protect. Much confusion surrounds this gift, sometimes propagated by those whom God has granted it. On one hand, some people claim—as they do with other gifts—that they don't have the gift of evangelism and therefore are relieved from the responsibility of witnessing. On the other, some people who have the gift of evangelism act as if they don't, implying that their witnessing is fruitful because of their own obedience and holiness. Neither of these extremes honors the Lord. The first suggests that we can get a pass from obeying the Great Commission, which we cannot. The second suggests that we can get the credit when a person comes to Christ, which we cannot.

In my book on spiritual gifts, I devote an entire chapter to dealing with reconciling the issue of spiritual gifts and universal Christian responsibilities. I don't have the gift of mercy, for example, but that does not excuse me from the universal Christian responsibility of being merciful. Likewise, a person who does not have the gift of giving is not excused from the biblical standard of tithing. Someone whom God has not given the gift of leadership must never-

theless exercise leadership in his own home. So are we supposed to exercise all the spiritual gifts? No! We can't. There was only one person who ever walked this planet with a full complement of the spiritual gifts—Jesus of Nazareth. We can reconcile this dilemma with what I call “the along the way and out of the way” principle.

Universal Christian responsibilities—those things in the Bible we are all commanded to do—are things we are prepared to practice during the normal course of life's journey and every day's walk—along the way. Our spiritual gifts determine the things we go “out of the way” to do in service to the Lord and others. Let's apply this to evangelism. Along the way, as God gives us opportunity, we should all be obedient to share a word of testimony or witness. Those with the gift of evangelism should seek out opportunities to go out of their way to share the gospel because God has chosen to use them in such a way that their witness produces results. I don't know exactly how all this works. I just know it is the way God's kingdom economy works.

So what does suggesting that we should protect people with the gift of evangelism mean? Simply this: don't ask them to do a bunch of jobs that don't have anything to do with direct contact with those who need to know Christ! In churches where I have served, I made it a priority to identify these folks. Then I enlisted them to serve as counselors during decision times at worship services, revivals, youth camps, and so forth. These were the folks I wanted to be leaders in our witness training ministries. And, guess what? That's what they most liked to do!

I believe we can do even more to unleash the gift of evangelism in most classes and churches. If I want to learn how to be a more effective witness, I want to be taught by a person with this gift! Most classes may have only one or two people with the gift of evangelism. They make outstanding outreach leaders as long as someone helps them with the administrative stuff! What if one of their key roles as outreach leaders was to train other class members in witnessing? They would enlist a couple of folks to train with them for a period of, say 12 weeks. Then they would release them back to the class and train two more. Over a period of time, many members of the class would be equipped to witness more effectively “along the way.” At the same time, the class visitors regularly become Christ followers. The goal is not to have a zillion teams going out on visitation. Rather the goal is participation involving at least one team from each class—led by a person God has gifted as an evangelist, with a couple of other members who are learning how to witness more confidently.

Over a period of time, many members of the class are trained to witness, and they also have an established relationship with someone they can trust to talk

with their FRAN about knowing Christ personally. Imagine this conversation with a FRAN: “I have a friend in my Sunday school class who has helped me understand more about how a person comes to a personal relationship with Christ. If it would be OK with you, I’d like to get the three of us together to talk. What do you think?” Thom Rainer’s research indicates millions of people would say yes today to such an invitation. When your FRAN agrees, you call the evangelist in your class and make the meeting happen. That may sound a little idealistic, but it’s teamwork. And what most of our classes are doing today is not working very well. What if we tried something a little different and perhaps more scriptural?

Involve People through New Member Events and Classes

A growing trend in churches today is to invite—or even require—prospective members to attend an event or class before they make a commitment to church membership. Some churches offer such classes on Sunday mornings. Others offer a “dinner with the Pastor” on a regular basis, typically on a Sunday night. My church invites prospective members to a monthly “NewComers” luncheon that is scheduled at 12:30 on Sunday afternoon, shortly after the end of the last worship service. An important element of any such event is to help the newcomers determine if they have ever begun a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Oh, and can you guess who might be the perfect people to sit and talk with them about this? People who have the gift of evangelism and those they have trained!

Involve New Members in Inviting Their FRANs

Who do you think probably has more unchurched FRANs, the person who has been in church for 20 years or the person who has just come to know Christ and made a commitment to follow Him? The latter, of course! Help new members of your group identify those in their circles of influence the class could help them reach. Pray for them. Ask for progress reports. Look for opportunities for ministry or fellowship. This is the perfect place to plug members in around hobbies and interests such as golfing, hunting, scrapbooking, a sports team, or a mom’s group. I feel as if words are failing me. What I am trying to encourage you to envision is a class or group that really, really works together to help each other do the Great Commission—one very specific person at a time. A person someone cares about—a person with needs and wants and interests and feelings and hopes and hurts and a name. A person whose

life would be more abundant with Jesus at the helm. A person whose eternal destiny hangs in the balance. Do you know such a person? What could your Sunday School class do to help you reach them?

Involve the Holy Spirit

Here is some good news. You don't have to do the Great Commission by yourself! Your church can help. Your class can help. If they want to. If they intend to. There is one Person who wants to help all the time. His primary intention is to work in the hearts and minds of men, women, boys, and girls to convict them of their sin and convince them to turn to Jesus. If you will listen, He will prompt you when to share a word of witness. If you will seek, He will reveal which of His arsenal of gifts He has assigned to you. If you will wait, He will give you power. Jesus said it this way in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth." Notice that Jesus did not say that you—singular—would receive power (although that is certainly true), but that you—plural—would receive this power. Likewise, the Great Commission, although it certainly has individual application, was given to a group of followers. The Holy Spirit certainly wants to work in and through me—singular. He delights in working through us—plural. When He works through a group of us who are working together in partnership with Him, there is no argument about who gets credit for the results. Our efforts will fail without Him. Yet, for the most part, He has chosen not to work apart from us. Fulfilling the Great Commission takes teamwork, and He is the most important Person on the team!

How Many are Involved?

Sunday School success has typically been determined by two key metrics: enrollment and attendance. Enrollment remains the key measurement of the health of a Sunday School class. A class that is intentional about reaching people will ask them to enroll without requiring a commitment to Christ or church membership. It views the roll as a "ministry list" that details the names of those for whom the class has accepted spiritual responsibility. Attendance is also a helpful metric in that it provides a record of the average number of folks attending each week. Attendance that exceeds 60-70 percent of enrollment probably indicates the class needs to work on enrolling new people. If it dips below 30-40 percent, it may indicate that either (a) the class is incredibly aggressive at enrolling prospects (that's good) or (b) the class has reached a saturation level and consideration should be given to starting a new class.

Let me recommend another metric you might find not only helpful but also encouraging: Active Enrollment. You calculate this number by counting how many different persons on your roll attend during any given month. Do you count visitors? Only if you enroll them! You may be surprised how many more of you there really are on your Great Commission team! A significant gap between average attendance and active enrollment might also indicate the need to consider starting a new class.

Understanding Churn

I promised in the introduction to address the issue of *churn*. It is a dynamic too few leaders in churches and classes understand. Failure to understand *churn* can lead alternately to discouragement or deception. A larger class or church may require a great deal of effort just to keep attendance at the same level from year to year because of *churn*. In one church I served, the annual churn was about 300 per year. That meant we needed to enroll about six new people per week just to stay even. In order to increase 100 in net attendance, we needed to enroll 500 new people every year. The first 300 covered the churn—those people who moved, dropped out, or died. If we enrolled another 200 and they attended 50 percent of the time, then net attendance would increase by 100. So, basically, we had to enroll five new people to net a gain of one in attendance. A smaller church's numbers may be smaller, but they are still likely to be in the range of 20 percent, which is also a good general number to apply to a class.

Failure to understand this dynamic can lead to unnecessary discouragement. You may think, "We're not reaching any new people," when, in fact, if you are only staying even, you are likely reaching quite a number of new folks. This same dynamic, however, can lead people in your class or church to think, "We have new people joining all the time, so our church must be growing." The first part is right. The second is not. There is something even more deceptive about just covering the churn, however. Stay with me here if you are not math inclined! Most classes and churches can stay about even in attendance by covering their churn, typically something in the neighborhood of 20 percent. Eighty percent of people say they attend a church because of a personal invitation. That means that the others come without an invitation. They may be new in town or switching churches, and they found out about your church from some other source. They know how church works. Particularly in a growing community, you may be able to cover the churn and grow just because of population increases. Conversely, in a mature or changing

community, covering the churn is very difficult if you are only counting on the 20 percent of folks who are church shoppers.

What's the point? Simply this. In order to experience Great Commission growth, you must reach the 80 percent of people who will come primarily—or perhaps only—as the result of an invitation. Developing a culture of invitation in your class and church is critical if you want to do more than just cover the churn, and it will make the 20 percent feel more welcome, too! A warm and inviting atmosphere may help them invite their new neighbors and friends, also!

Epilogue

Well, here I am at the end of this little book. I so hope you've gotten the main point of the book. But I never was very good in English classes at trying to discern the main point of a piece of literature, so let me be clear about it. We accomplish the Great Commission most effectively when we do it together. We must be intentional about it, however. It won't just happen by itself. We must do everything we can to make our churches places that welcome newcomers. We must work together in our classes and groups to pray for and reach out to our FRANS. It is a matter of mindset.

Is our class just a place for us to enjoy fellowship and Bible study, or is it also a team working together to fulfill the Great Commission right where we live? I don't have grandiose visions that this little book will cause thousands of Sunday School classes to determine to become Great Commission teams. I just hope it might cause your class to think about it. At the end of the day, you won't have to give account to the Lord for all those other classes. Just yours. If you decide to become a 3D Sunday School class and implement the I-6 principles, I would like to hear your story. Email me at sundayschool@lifeway.com. To God be the glory.

APPENDIX 1:

Connectivity Index

- + 5** I like my church so much I would really like to move closer to it so I can serve more.
- + 4** I often talk enthusiastically about my church in normal conversations during the week and invite people often.
- + 3** If someone starts talking about church, I don't hesitate to tell them about my satisfaction with my church.
- + 2** I like my church but seldom invite others to attend.
- + 1** A few things concern me, but I enjoy my ministry responsibilities and attend regularly.
- 1** I am actively involved, and I don't think or talk about changing churches.
- 2** I attend mostly out of a sense of duty, fulfilling leadership or ministry commitments I've made.
- 3** I am thinking about resigning my ministry responsibilities.
- 4** I attend once or twice a month but don't think anybody would miss me if I changed churches.
- 5** I have decided to change churches and am just contemplating when to attend for the last time.

My FRAN Prayer List

The power of prayer should not be underestimated. Think of individuals in the four FRAN groups and list their names below. Then covenant with God to pray for these individuals daily. Pray for the opportunity to invite these persons to church or Sunday School.

NAME

INVITED

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Friends

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Relatives

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Associates

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Neighbors

_____	_____
_____	_____

ADDITIONAL HELP FOR TEACHING I-6

The following materials are available for free download at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool as well as the entire text of I-6: *A Six-Lane Strategy for Toward an Inviting Sunday School*, 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 kickoff the new Sunday School year. A training module for each age group team (pre-school, 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. These materials will be available beginning in March 2007.

Online Training

For a free online study of this resource led by the author, go to <http://lifeway.acrobat.com/i6course>.

The 3D Sunday School

A 48-page book and training materials for the 2006 Kickoff event remain available for download as well, as does 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 it to your favorites and visit often.

eSource Electronic Newsletter for Sunday School Leaders

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 has people and resources eager to help you grow your Sunday School ministry. Check their website for contact information.



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