

Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 11

How to Increase Adult Sunday School Attendance

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Purpose of this Volume: Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures that increase the percentage of adult worship attendees who also attend adult church school classes.

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I. What Do Adult Sunday School Classes Accomplish?

Medical science reports that increasing daily fruit and vegetable intake significantly increases life expectancy. Earlier medical practice focused primarily on curing illnesses. Contemporary health care encourages lifestyles that reduce health risks through *preventative* behavior.

Among the numerous health-giving nutrients in church life, adult Sunday school is one of the finest. Adult church school classes strengthen the spiritual health of both the attendees and their congregation in at least four ways:

- *Adult church school classes provide a sense of family through the social and psychological nurturing relationships inherent in a small, caring group.* Effective worship music and preaching inspires people. Nothing substitutes for that component. However, few people experience a strong sense of “belonging” in worship. We do not *belong* to a church by worshipping there. We *belong* by relating to a peer group in which we know people and are known.
- *Adult church school classes increase the growth in spiritual maturity that helps people enrich their personal lives through absorbing Christian values and behavior principles.* Studies indicate that adults often report experiences of personal spiritual growth through Bible study, prayer, service, or social interaction with other church attendees. Healthy, effective adult classes provide all four of those spiritual growth opportunities.
- *Adult church school classes increase the percentage of church members who exhibit active Christian discipleship in and beyond the congregation.* “Letting your light shine” works better with a thousand-watt spotlight than a twenty-five-watt flashlight. Teaching Christian values in adult church school classes does not guarantee that those values blossom at the office on Wednesday. However, values not thusly transmitted have far less chance of reporting for work.
- *Adult church school classes reduce the church dropout rate by enfolding new members in a friendship-saturated peer group.* Newcomers who are still active one year later do more than attend worship. Most of them (a) participate in a regularly meeting, ongoing group of some kind and (b) give time and energy to a ministry in which they feel that they are doing something meaningful and worthwhile with their time and talents. Adult classes are not the only regularly meeting adult groups capable of protecting new members from dropping out the back door into passive membership status. However, no group does it better than adult classes. Members of adult Sunday school classes do not as frequently become inactive church members during periods of congregational unrest. When parishioners think of jumping overboard or chartering on another cruise line, they must also figure out how to explain their decision to a dozen people in their Sunday school class. Often, staying put is easier than coping with the emotional stress of abandoning their friends.

Of course, a congregation’s denominational origin greatly influences the percentage of its worship attendees who participate in adult Sunday school classes: Lutheran congregations seldom report more than 20 percent of their adult members attending adult Sunday school classes. At the other end of the spectrum, Southern Baptists often report more people in Sunday school than in worship; almost by definition, being a Southern Baptist means attending an adult Sunday school class! Presbyterians and United Methodists are in midrange, usually reporting Sunday school attendance that averages between 40 percent and 60 percent of average worship attendance.

However, regardless of the denomination, adult Sunday school attendance is still an important church-vitality barometer. In the healthiest congregations, adult class attendance as a percentage of worship attendance is high and rising. In declining-health congregations, adult class attendance is low and falling.

How, then, can congregations increase the health and vitality of adult classes?

II. Tend Existing Crops and Plant New Fields

“Which should we do?” the Sunday school leader asked. “Try to increase attendance in our present adult classes or start new classes?”

“The answer to that question is yes,” the consultant said, grinning. “Every class can do some things that increase its likelihood of growth. However, the warm, friendly, fellowship glue that holds an adult Sunday school class together also tends to restrict its size. Thus, young adults and new adult attendees of all ages are far more likely to join a completely *new* adult class than one celebrating its fortieth anniversary. A new class remains socially open to outsiders for several months and sometimes for as long as three years. The fellowship glue that makes visitors feel as if they are invading the sanctity of a private club has not yet hardened to armor plate.

“In churches where a high percentage of adult worship attendees also participate in Sunday school classes,” the consultant continued, “the existing classes are intentionally extroverted. Such churches also plant one or more new classes each year.”

III. Twelve Ways to Strengthen Existing Classes

“I love my Sunday school class. But it used to be much bigger. Why don’t people go to Sunday school these days?”

That question illustrates a strange paradox in American church life. Some Sunday morning, ask your adult church school class members to list several reasons why the class is meaningful and enjoyable. They will enthusiastically give you a dozen reasons why they like the class.

Yet adult Sunday school attendance across America has diminished significantly since 1965. The drop has been most noticeable in mainline denominations. The more evangelical denominations report that adult Sunday school attendance growth has not kept pace with their membership growth.

Major causes of adult Sunday school class anemia:

1. *Some leaders charge that adult church school classes are as outdated as buggy whips.* Even Christian education experts sometimes fail to see their significance. “Replace adult classes,” some education leaders say, “with small groups that meet during the week.” Ironically, most advocates of that shift are in congregations that (a) have no such groups and (b) have no plans to invent such groups.
2. *Some congregations suffer from the “confirmation syndrome.”* Becoming a confirmed member in some denominations is a lengthy, arduous, and sometimes boring process. Many teenagers seem to learn that completing confirmation class means never having to study the Bible again. Some youngsters decide that they never *want* to study it again.
3. *The reduced birthrate from 1964 until recent years produced part of the adult attendance decline.* With fewer children available to go to Sunday school, fewer adults attend Sunday school. During their children’s college years, some parents felt less pressure to accompany and serve as a Sunday school role-model for their children.
4. *The high divorce rate in recent decades is another source of declining adult Sunday school attendance.* Ping-pong-ball weekend residence-changes of children—due to joint custody—damages children’s Sunday school attendance. That drop negatively affects the attendance of parents, who often schedule precious weekend time in locations other than Sunday school.
5. *In some parts of the United States, Sunday morning sports, especially soccer, drops the Sunday school attendance of both children and parents.* In a few communities, congregations have banded together in protest and reversed that trend. However, in most cases that has not happened.

Despite all the justifications for attendance decline, most researchers agree that adult Sunday school classes stay the same size or grow smaller because they lack an effective strategy for doing otherwise. Strategic planning and effort can reverse a decline pattern.

Photocopy the twelve points of this section (pages 4 through 8).

Ask each adult class in your church to (a) spend one class session discussing it and (b) select ideas they feel can help grow their class.

1. Appoint a gregarious hospitality coordinator. Select an outgoing, friendly type who knows names and faces and enjoys meeting people. An equally essential qualification: he or she must habitually arrive ten minutes before the class is officially slated to begin. Why? In some adult classes, only the visitors arrive on time or early. (The regulars know that this class starts ten minutes after the publicized time.) Classes seldom impress strangers greeted by a dark, empty classroom. A hospitality coordinator who arrives early prevents that negative experience, making early arrivers feel at home with a warm greeting, coffee, and chitchat.

Some classes protest that *all of their members* should do the greeting: “We don’t need a special person!” Despite their high ideals, class members seldom base such protests on observable reality. If one person takes responsibility for greeting people, it always happens. If *everyone* takes responsibility for greeting people, it usually happens but not always. Nothing makes first-timers feel more disenchanting than a cold welcome in a place where they expected a warm one. Many visitors respond by not returning.

2. Appoint a steering team. Give total responsibility for class health and vitality to this group. The team meets at least every two months, takes minutes, and reports to the class. Change one-third of the steering-team members every six months. Rigidly adhere to a six-month-tenure rule that prevents turf holding, burnout, or both. Put new class members on the steering team, not just long-timers.

An active steering team signals that the class belongs to its members, not to its teacher. The steering team determines curriculum, teacher, and social events. As well as protecting the class from a teacher who loses touch with class needs, the team provides an invaluable sounding board that increases the teacher’s effectiveness. Some adult classes use the following steering team structure:

- (a) Teacher
- (b) Membership Care Coordinator
- (c) Social Activities Coordinator who organizes a monthly social activity
- (d) Hospitality Coordinator who oversees making first-time visitors and new attendees feel socially comfortable
- (e) Recruitment Coordinator who oversees procedures for attracting potential new class members.

These designations and procedures counterbalance the natural tendency for adult class vitality to rise or fall with the teacher’s energy level and ingenuity.

3. Provide coffee and tea in the classroom. Coffee does more than dispense a caffeine- or decaf-fix. Refreshments facilitate fellowship. Greeting people warmly and directing them to the coffee and donuts helps newcomers transition into an unfamiliar social situation. They know how to fix and drink a cup of coffee. This fellowship ritual gives them something to do with their hands, their minds, and themselves.

The hospitality coordinator noted above oversees the system for providing coffee, tea, juice, donuts, and whatever. Many hospitality coordinators appoint couples or individuals to handle this on a rotating weekly or monthly basis.

4. Provide nametags for each class member. Most of the regulars know one another. Newcomers do not. A class without nametags equals a class with this sign on its door: “We are not expecting company. We are not concerned about helping new people feel at home.” Provide permanent, printed nametags in plastic sleeves for established attendees; peel-off tags for visitors.

5. Build and maintain a fun climate. Many leaders fail to see the essential organizing principle around which healthy adult classes develop. Effective adult Sunday school classes are not Bible study in which fellowship occasionally happens. Effective adult classes are fellowship groups that study some. Because their warm, fun, fellowship climate glues people together, motivation to learn grows stronger.

When church members fail to attend adult classes, critical church leaders often infer that those non-attendees lack character. More often, they lack motivation. If the class climate focuses on study alone, motivation to attend and keep attending withers.

6. Organize class social events at times other than Sunday morning. Many effective classes schedule a social activity monthly. Others do them quarterly. The steering team selects the date and nature of each one. The social activities coordinator noted above involves other class members in planning and accomplishing the details.

7. Select a capable teacher and keep him or her in place over a relatively long time span. Do not try to rotate the teaching responsibility among class members. This rule has occasional exceptions, but not many. In one university-town congregation, most of the class’s members are professors. When most of a class’s members hold a Ph.D., they love to take turns teaching. Articulating ideas in front of a group comes as naturally as putting on their shoes each morning. However, typical adult class attendees are the opposite: they do not want to teach. At least 25 percent of people in the typical class feel terrified at the prospect of taking their turn with the teaching. Some of those fearful people hang around long enough to do it once. Others fade into the sunset before their turn comes.

8. Select a study topic of vital interest to class members. In most classes, the topic is Bible study or the standard adult Sunday school material the congregation’s denomination provides. Some classes prefer to study a book other than the Bible for six weeks or three months. Other classes may study marriage communication, parenting, or some other need-addressing subject for several weeks.

Generally speaking, when starting a new class, begin with a topic or a book that interests adults of that age. Later, after the class becomes a cohesive group, the steering team may want to recommend a Bible study or a more traditional type of church school material.

9. Exhibit “active acceptance” toward newcomers. Different kinds of people hope for and seek a variety of qualities in a class. Friendliness and caring, extended to them personally, tops everyone’s preference list. People look for a caring place, not just a teaching space.

Despite that obvious need, some long-term class members fail to grasp the difference between active acceptance and passive acceptance. What happens if long-timers feel positive about class visitors but never send them a signal to that effect? The visitors may never catch on. Loving people in your head is not enough. Members of healthy, growing classes reach out to new people in overt ways that they see and feel.

10. Use the “Triple-Play Plan” to invite new worship attendees and new church members to attend an adult class. Large numbers of congregational newcomers never become involved in an adult class. The following formula reverses that tendency.

☉ Ask all adult classes to cooperate with a one-year trial of this process!

☉ Ask each class to appoint a “recruitment coordinator.” In some small churches with fewer than 100 in average worship attendance, the pastor should personally select and enlist that “volunteer” to help get this process off the ground during its first year.

☉ The pastor meets for five minutes with the “recruitment coordinators,” as a group, between Sunday school and worship, to explain how the plan works.

☉ When someone attends worship regularly for two months or joins the church, the Triple-Play Plan begins. The following Monday the pastor or associate pastor (depending on church size) decides which adult class might best fit that individual’s or couple’s preferences and needs.

☉ The pastor or associate pastor contacts the recruitment coordinator in that class and shares the name, address, and telephone number of the new member(s) or worship attendee(s).

☉ During that same week, the recruitment coordinator telephones for an appointment to make a fifteen-minute visit to that home. The stated reason for the visit: “We are glad to have you attending our church. I’d like to stop by for fifteen minutes and get acquainted. Would Tuesday evening at 7:00 p.m. be a convenient time?”

☉ During that brief home visit, the recruitment coordinator communicates three things:

(a) “I’m happy that you are attending our church.”

(b) “I wanted to get acquainted with you.”

(c) “I want to invite you to visit our Sunday school class.”

The recruitment coordinator also tells newcomers how to find the classroom. If the building is large and confusing, the recruitment coordinator may offer to meet people in the entryway or a specific hallway and escort them to the classroom.

☉ During the second week of the Triple-Play Plan, the recruitment coordinator telephones another class member and asks him or her to telephone the newcomer(s) and get acquainted on the telephone. The recruitment coordinator instructs the telephone caller in using the three-point outline noted above. Of course, he or she alters the conversation slightly if the newcomer(s) visited the class the previous Sunday. In that case, he or she says, “I’m happy that you attended our Sunday school class!”

☉ During the third week, use the same play, different player. The recruitment coordinator asks still another member of the same adult class to telephone the newcomer(s).

The Triple-Play Plan helps in three ways:

(a) It transmits active acceptance in an unmistakable form!

(b) It increases the likelihood of the newcomer(s) meeting church members whom they enjoy getting to know.

(c) When the newcomer(s) visit the class, they already know several people and feel much more at home.

No congregation reaches a nirvana where everyone who attends worship attends Sunday school, but every congregation can increase its percentage. The Triple-Play Plan is accomplishing that in hundreds of churches across the United States.

11. Maintain balance in study/discussion content. Effective adult classes use a variety of topics, books, and curriculum. No “right kind of study material” exists. Good study topics connect with class members’ life-needs and personal preferences.

Regardless of the subject matter, any adult class can unintentionally drift into “interpretation fixation” that destroys its value for most attendees. In other words, any study or discussion content can become unbalanced and bog down into boring meaninglessness. That happens when it fixates on one of the three ways of examining any topic.

To see how these three kinds of “interpretation fixations” happen in a Bible study class, visualize a pyramid slashed by two horizontal lines:

- Let the bottom section, or base of the pyramid, symbolize the basic biblical material (historical setting, who writes it to whom, why, when, where, etc.).
- Let the middle section of the pyramid symbolize the manner in which the biblical material applies to people who live in our current society.
- Let the top slice of the pyramid symbolize how that biblical material applies to the personal life of each class member.

Effective adult classes deal with all three layers of the Bible’s message: its historical aspects, its present-day applications in society, and its personal application to individual lives. Classes become ineffectual when they lose their balance and fixate lectures or discussions on only one of those three pyramid sections.

For example, some classes fixate on biblical exegesis. Under the leadership of an avid Bible-student teacher, they spend all their time on textual minutia such as, “What year did the Apostle Paul write his letter to the Church at Corinth?” This type of class feels like one hour of reading a Bible commentary. It never gets out of the Bible onto the sidewalk of contemporary life.

Other classes fixate on the middle section of the pyramid. To most attendees, this feels like a sociology class that never comes in off the sidewalk of how the biblical material applies to people in current society. For example, in a rural, small-town church, a class member is determined to discuss the “welfare problem” every Sunday morning. Whatever the topic, he always steers the discussion toward shortcomings of people who live on the receiving end of government benevolences. That negative focus on how a biblical passage applies to people in another social class repels visitors. They attend once and do not return. The class is locked into the middle section of the content pyramid.

A less common interpretation fixation happens when the class gets stuck on the pyramid’s top section: personal application. This pattern develops in “group therapy” type classes. In extreme forms, such groups become emotional strip-tease shows in which people share intimate details of their lives and consequently feel very close to one another. Warmth and acceptance run high in such groups, as they do in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and other kinds of addiction recovery groups. The downside of this interpretation fixation in adult classes: the group often becomes a clique incapable of assimilating outsiders. The honesty that bonds attendees to one another often blocks the class from growing larger. Then, too, class members eventually run out of feeling-charged experiences to share. They keep repeating their same feelings about each new text they study. The class commits suicide by boring itself to death.

All three kinds of study/discussion content have value, just as meat, vegetables, and dessert have value in a meal. Serve one of them exclusively, at every meal, and your family members begin to suggest that we dine out tonight. The three interpretation fixations illustrated above can happen to an adult class that studies any book, topic, or curriculum. Only constant vigilance by class leaders prevents the tendency to focus on one of the three to the exclusion of all others. To give your adult class an annual health check, draw on a blackboard the above-cited pyramid with its cross-lines defining the three sections. Ask class members to raise their hands in a multiple-choice vote on which “tendency” our class most often needs to guard against.

12. Continuously evaluate. Every six months, use some kind of survey tool that allows your class to pinpoint its strengths and weaknesses in a non-threatening way. The following exercise is more valuable in a discussion class than for a lecture class, but it provides helpful insights for any group or teacher.

Print the following fifteen items on one side of a sheet of paper. Give class members five minutes to check the sheets, without discussing the questions among themselves. Do not mail these out. Do not let class members take them home, expecting them to return the sheets next Sunday. The response rate will underwhelm you.

Hand out the sheets. Say, “We want everyone to complete his or her sheet this morning. I’ll set the timer for five minutes. Then, we will collect the sheets.”

Evaluating Class Climate

Please indicate your opinion by writing *yes*, *no*, or *sometimes* beside each of the fifteen items. Be as honest as you can. Do not sign your name.

1. The leader keeps the discussion moving in such a way that it does not bog down in useless speculation.
2. Everyone enters the discussion.
3. Differing points of view are accepted.
4. The discussion emphasizes experiences, feelings, and opinions rather than theories.
5. The leader tends to dominate the discussion.
6. One individual in the group (other than the leader) tends to dominate the discussion each time.
7. Everyone makes preparation for the discussion before arriving.
8. The members of the group are honest with one another.
9. I feel completely relaxed and at ease in the discussion.
10. We tend to bog down in “what other people do wrong.”
11. The members make an honest effort to see how the topic applies to them, rather than how it applies to others in the church (or outside the church).
12. I find the discussions personally helpful.
13. The group members seem to be genuinely concerned about each other.
14. The group bogs down in speculation about what various experts, scholars, and ministers say.
15. I could honestly recommend this kind of group to one of my close friends.

After five minutes, collect the sheets. Total the *yes*, *no*, and *sometimes* answers to each question. This allows members to express opinions about class dynamics in a constructive way. The teacher and steering team sense problems and take action to correct them before they injure the class. The tabulated results, fed back to the class in a ten-minute discussion session, also help individual class members. They get clues about how changes in their participation habits might improve class quality.

Ken Blanchard said, “Feedback is the breakfast of champions.” Give your class members a chance. They will give you the feedback that makes your class a champion.

IV. Starting New Adult Classes by Intention

Several factors contribute to a drought of new adult classes. Among those, the following ten are especially important:

- *Some church leaders fail to recognize that churches need more adult classes per one hundred worship attendees than they did fifty years ago.* The ways in which adults relate to groups have changed. Higher educational levels since World War II contributed greatly to this shift, increasing the number of adults who are comfortable expressing opinions in groups. Discussion classes have replaced lecture classes.
- *Why do contemporary adult classes seldom exceed thirty on the roll and fifteen in average attendance? When a class grows beyond twenty in average attendance, the participation opportunities dwindle. Many participants begin feeling they cannot get even a ten-second sound-bite into the discussion. Consequently, (a) they feel less interest in attending and (b) the class stops growing. Unawareness of this “30/15 phenomenon” sometimes blocks leaders from seeing the need to organize new adult classes.*
- *Some leaders feel blocked from starting a new class due to protests from members of existing adult classes.* “We’d like to have those people in *our* class,” members of those faithful classes say. Sincere in their convictions, they fail to realize that a far larger percentage of newcomers are willing to join a new class than one established in 1906 or 1950.
- *Some large churches fail to take advantage of opportunities to form a new class from one of their Sunday morning “Information Classes” for new members.* Sometimes this happens because the pastor feels forced to form a conspiracy with outspoken, influential members: “No new classes” avoids criticism from the ranks of Sunday school veterans. Result: the larger the church grows, the smaller its percentage of worship attendees gaining spiritual maturity through adult church school classes.
- *Some churches lack sufficient rooms in their building to house a new class.* Assuming that they can only meet this challenge with bricks, mortar, and money, they postpone the birth of new classes because there is “no room at the inn.” Such uncreative thinking limits God’s power due to architectural restrictions, forgetting that the early church conquered the Roman world with no public buildings.
- *Some small churches believe the myth that three generations will attend the same Sunday school class.* Few in the two youngest adult generations want to attend the same class as their parents and grandparents. They respect them but are not comfortable expressing all of their opinions in their presence.
- *Some Christian education leaders cling to the multi-generational learning myth.* Often, such leaders bought into this after reading some literature on the concept. They tried it in a short-term summer class, often in a small church. Making a leap of logic that excluded large chunks of reality, they assumed it would work all year.
- *Some churches fail to recognize that few adult classes are eternal.* Generally speaking, an adult class attracts new people only a few years younger than the youngest person in the group that established the class many years ago. Like human beings, most Sunday school classes have a life cycle. They die a few years after the death of the class’s last charter member.
- *Despite its antiquity, many leaders disregard the well-known research that shows a correlation between the number of adults in Sunday school and the number of Sunday school classes.* Richard Meyers proved many decades ago that as the number of classes increases, the total adult Sunday school attendance increases. As the number of classes decreases, attendance drops.

- *Some churches fail to start new classes because they misjudge the people group from which attendees will come.* The present membership of your church contains few prospects for a new adult class. Efforts to recruit them are usually (a) quite discouraging to your Christian education leaders and (b) a waste of their time. The people most likely to join a new class are (a) people who recently became regular worship attendees; (b) new church members; (c) people who feel they have something in common with one or more of the new class's members; (d) people with whom the new class's members are in contact through work, recreation, family relationships, or social contact; and (e) people not active in any local church who recently experienced a heightened awareness of their spiritual needs.
- *Some churches fail to start new classes because they try to divide a present class.* Ordinarily, one or both classes shrink and die. Instead, every adult class needs a vision that says something like this: "We want more people involved in life-changing Christian education through Sunday school attendance. We accomplish that in two ways. (a) We reach out to people who might benefit from attending our class. (b) We trust that God will occasionally call one or two couples or individuals from our class to organize a new class that consists of church newcomers or members not attending other classes."

Whatever myth blocks the establishment of new adult classes, get over it. If your church has fewer than sixty in average worship attendance and only has one adult class, start another one. If your church has 100 in average worship attendance and has only two adult classes, start a third one. If your church runs 300 in average worship attendance, plan to start one new adult class each year. Concentrate on starting classes that reach adults ages twenty-five to forty-four, especially those who recently started attending or joined your congregation. A good rule of thumb: Do you think you can enroll sixteen new people? Start a new class.

How to Do It. Although no one is outside of God's reach for attending a new class, the most likely candidates for attending a new class are (a) people who have recently joined your church, (b) people who are regularly attending your church but have not yet joined, and (c) young adults in the age range of twenty-five to forty-four. The following examples illustrate a variety of methods by which churches intentionally establish new adult classes.

Example #1. An Oklahoma pastor in an oil-industry town with high population turnover started a new class. With the help of a select committee, he recruited people for a class he taught for eight weeks. Before he stopped teaching it, he arranged for the group to continue as an ongoing class with a capable teacher and appropriate subject matter. Over a period of four years, the pastor established four classes that way. In each case, 75 percent of the new class consisted of church members who had joined within the past three months or were regular worship service visitors.

That example illustrates this principle: A pastor with the spiritual gifts of teaching, compassion, and community-building brings enormous likelihood of success to new class construction.

Example #2. A pastor wanted to reach young adults who had either dropped out of attendance at that church or had become disenchanted with church life. Feeling that he needed to know more about these people, he pulled together a group of nine couples. Some were inactive church members. Some had not yet joined the church.

The pastor met with the group for nine weeks. He surveyed their attitudes on faith, the church, and life-style issues. After compiling the results, his findings became the primary agenda for the group's early life. One thing he learned: Those young adults were not totally secular and

unconcerned about the church. Faith issues were quite important to them, but they thought the church was unresponsive to their needs.

At the end of the initial nine-week period, the group was not ready to disband. They organized around study materials developed by Bruce Larson and met on a weeknight. One couple dropped out, but the others felt excited about the new group and began inviting their friends to join them. Eventually, the class began meeting on Sunday mornings in an attorney's office across the street from the church. Within a few months the group seemed ready to move into the church. It established itself as a new young-adult Sunday school class. Over time, most of the class members joined the church. Many of them moved into church leadership positions and are actively involved in shaping the church's future.

That example illustrates this principle: Kennon Callahan insightfully observed that pastors and key leaders are often motivated by “challenge and commitment.” They therefore assume that grassroots and unchurched people are motivated by “challenge and commitment.” Wrong! Grassroots and unchurched people have their motivational radios tuned for “compassion and community.” They hear pleas for challenge and commitment as so much static. (Kennon L Callahan, *A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass], pp 74-75) Most church leaders cannot leap that motivational gap because they do not see it. This pastor was an exception. He signaled “compassion and community.” The fringe-area people in his experimental group heard that loud and clear. The result: evangelization through a new adult class.

Example #3. A church had two adult classes. Members of one class heard a lecture with the teacher standing up. The other class heard a lecture with the teacher sitting down. These two classes met the needs of their founding members decades ago.

Now, however, the spiritual needs of many singles and young adults in the congregation were unfulfilled. Many young adults had moved into the church's geographic area. Many of them were first-home-of-our-own families. The congregation had remained the same size during the ten-year period when community population was exploding.

The church's education committee chairperson identified some key young adults. She invited them to an exploratory session at the parsonage.

- Over coffee and cookies, the group birthed the church's first new class in twenty years.
- Next, after appraising the needs of church members and people in the surrounding community, a second new class began—the Single on Sunday class.
- Subsequently, a College and Career class formed.
- Then, a strong class formed for “People Who Dislike Sunday School.”
- Two other adult classes and one children's class began on Wednesday evenings.

Result: in two years, average worship attendance increased from 47 to 147.

The education leaders asked all of the classes to focus on *recruiting new members*. All of the classes used the “3S Model”: *Service* to others, *Study* for spiritual growth, and *Support* for one another. Service example: One class developed a video Sunday school class for the children of inmates at a nearby correctional institution. Its goal was developing Christian character while giving mom and dad a few minutes to visit alone.

That example illustrates this principle: Being intentional about starting new classes beats waiting for them to start by accident.

Example #4. A congregation and pastor committed to Sunday school evangelism used the following model.

1. Leaders formulated and studied a list of new members and non-attending current members.
2. Leaders decided to focus on young married adults who were just starting their families.
3. The pastor mailed a personal letter to prospective class members, inviting them to a dinner at the associate pastor's house.
4. Before the dinner meeting, leaders lined up a couple to teach the class for one year and selected study material for the first six months.
5. Nine people attended the dinner meeting at the associate pastor's home.
6. The group set a starting date, made a covenant with the teachers, and committed themselves to be an ever-growing class.
7. The pastor taught the first three sessions, helped with the fourth, and observed on the fifth and sixth.

Results: One year later, the class had twenty-six active members and new teachers. The church's total Sunday school attendance had increased by an average of forty-two. Worship attendance had increased. The church membership showed a net gain of thirty-four, the largest in twelve years.

That example illustrates two principles: Reports of the death of adult classes are highly exaggerated. Leaders underestimate adult classes' positive influences on congregational vitality.

Example #5. A church that experienced declining membership for years reversed that trend with a net gain of thirty-five. The pastor said, "We have had several false starts with new classes. Instead of feeling a sense of failure, we learned and redesigned.

"We did one thing differently than most churches have the opportunity to do. We have a Knights of Columbus Home nearby. We met with the residents on Tuesday evenings and developed an extension Sunday school class:

"During soccer season, we meet with our soccer team on Wednesday afternoons, providing a teaching, devotional-type experience. Although we do not call it an extension of our Sunday school, in reality it is. We have gained new church members through that connection. This truly gets us outside the walls of the church and into the 'field.'"

That example illustrates this principle: motivated people with the spiritual gift of tenacity often succeed after their earlier attempts failed.

Example #6. In two years a church in a population-booming suburban area established eight new Sunday school classes—three for adults and five for children. Five years earlier, the church had an average attendance of fifty-five young adults (24 percent of all the adults attending). After starting the new classes, 54 percent of all worship attendees fell into the "young adult" category. Several insights from their experience:

The Christian education director describes the church's strongest adult-class teacher as a person who knows and cares about each member. Using a somewhat passive leadership style, he lets the young adults develop and implement their plans for ministry. New leaders constantly rotate through the group. No one serves in a class leadership role for more than two years. *The teacher's main goal is to teach, become acquainted with, and care about the people in the class.*

Class members come together because of their common life interests—children, similarities in occupations, age ranges, location of residences, and a common sense of being new in the community. Most of them are far away from relatives, so the class becomes as much a family as a study group. One of the motivations for returning to church (many after several-year absences) is parenthood. They have young children and want them in church.

Newcomers usually get to this congregation after an invitation from a friend, neighbor, or co-worker. Some couples choose this congregation because they are trying to blend different denominational backgrounds. After putting their toe in the water with one or two visits to an adult class, they stay for the fellowship, the variety of activities, and the excellent teaching. Class members make absentee follow-ups a high priority. They mail postcards to people who miss three consecutive weeks. Someone also telephones to communicate, “We missed you and we care.”

The class builds friendships through its various programs. Monthly parties provide places for young adults to meet and get acquainted with one another. The class sponsors quarterly “Dinners for Eight.” Class members who normally do not socialize with one another get acquainted with people they do not know and deepen friendships with people they know. Sports teams provide opportunity for people to play and/or cheer for players. Bridge groups form. People bowl together or go to football games. Some families vacation together.

Service projects are another important class ingredient. The class sponsors cleanup days, provides painting services, collects food and clothing for low-income families, and provides money for special projects. A church staff member says, “This class is what every church should be: good friends sharing their lives and their faith in and out of the church.” That pattern not only edifies the members; it magnetically attracts new people to the class.

That example illustrates this principle: adult classes whose atmosphere communicates a sense of caring, belonging, and community among people of similar ages (a) build spiritual growth in attendees, and (b) build a congregation’s magnetic evangelism power in the community.

Example #7. Leaders formed another young-adult class with these methods: The “Young and Restless Class” started with five couples. The Christian education director met with each couple, individually, in their homes. During the following week he met with the couples as a group. Each couple agreed to be a charter member of the new class. Each couple took on a leadership responsibility. One couple became the teachers. Another couple became the coffee makers/greeters. The third, fourth, and fifth couples agreed to make telephone calls.

The church office supplied a list of church members and active visitors that fit the age-group target of the new class. The couples telephoned prospective class members and introduced themselves during announcement time in worship. The church publicized the class and its start date in the newsletter and from the pulpit. The first class party happened within a month. The men started meeting every Sunday afternoon for a pick-up basketball game. The women sponsored a baby shower for a prospective class member.

Why did this class grow so strong so quickly? The original five couples shared their enthusiasm, friendliness, time, talents, and lives with God and others. They followed the FRAN plan (inviting Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances, and Neighbors) with enthusiastic extroversion when someone visited the class. They telephoned first-time class visitors the following week and said, “We are glad you came. Please come again.”

That example illustrates this principle: personal recruitment of leaders, strategic planning, and determined follow-through get results.

Summary of the Seven Example Churches. The motto of a gigantic hospital with multiple subunits in small towns across a giant section of a western state: “Covenant Health Care: The Strength Is in the System.” That summarizes churches that are intentional about starting new adult classes. The strength is in the system.

Robert Webber reminds us of changes in the way churches communicated faith in different eras of history. In its first few centuries, the church transmitted faith knowledge orally. Few people could read, so the spoken liturgy played a powerful role in communicating Christian thought and experience.

By the medieval era, the church controlled all government and cultural communication systems, so it immersed the entire population in the Christian Year. Every part of people’s lives

rotated around the church building in the center of the town. Citizens were obliged to attend the parish church each Sunday. The building was filled with the images of God, the words of Jesus, and the lives of the saints. People were immersed in the Christian faith from infancy, just as they were immersed in their mother tongue.

The printing press, invented in the mid-1400s, leaped into religious use in the early 1500s. The medieval “immersion of people in a faith culture” gave way to transmitting the Christian faith through printed words. Teaching the written catechism became the way to hand the faith to the next generation. Instead of the ear hearing the liturgy and the eye seeing Bible stories in stained-glass windows, communicators seeded the mind with faith through intellectual concepts. The faith became information, “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:04) and now delivered to us. The three paragraphs above adapted from Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books) pp. 154-155.

A world of mass advertising and sales has reduced people’s trust in print. They are much more willing to hear Christian wisdom through the experiences of their peers. The Christian faith, for so long thought of as propositional, intellectual, and rational, must be embodied. Unless faith is incarnated, this generation cannot accept it. That happens best by immersion in a caring faith-community where people not only read the faith; they live the faith with one another. Like the medieval era, evangelization happens when people are immersed in a community: not Christianity in the secular community but a Christ in a church community. One place that happens is small groups that study together, pray together, and serve together. Another place it happens is in healthy, effective adult Sunday school classes.

V. Starting New Adult Classes by Spontaneous Combustion

As noted above, most new classes are born through the overt intention of church leaders.

Other new classes begin through a combination of covert intention and spontaneous combustion. For example, some congregations establish the nucleus that eventually becomes a new young adult class by scheduling an eight-week, Sunday-morning, study/discussion group on a subject such as “parenting.” About 60 percent of the time, this study/discussion group spontaneously blossoms into a new adult Sunday school class. If that happens, the church leaders declare it a victory and schedule a similar class in the fall or the pre-Easter season next year. If the class does not spontaneously combust, the church leaders declare it a victory and try again next year.

The organized, spontaneous-combustion procedure protects a congregation from this classic situation: Despite the best efforts of its leaders, a new class does not gather momentum. The leaders cannot get it to grow, but they do not want to kill it. Attendance limps along between life and death for months. The pastor and education leaders say, “Perhaps we need to give it more time.” They hope it eventually grows beyond three or four class members. Months pass and that does not happen. They wonder when and how to remove its life support system without offending or discouraging the people who worked so hard at it.

To implement the “spontaneous combustion” concept, use the following twenty-point outline:

1. Recognize that forming a new class is usually easier than adding new people to established classes. People are more attracted to something new than to an existing group where the content and leadership roles are set in concrete.
2. Begin by developing a discussion group on a specific subject for eight weeks. For young adults, “Parenting Skills” is one possibility. Do *not* call it a Sunday school class. Do schedule it on Sunday morning. Many unchurched young adult males agree to attend a study/discussion group on that topic. Far fewer of them want to help start a Sunday school class that plans to meet for eternity. (Many leaders therefore find these principles effective for increasing the Sunday school involvement of adults that traditional means cannot reach.)

3. Contact potential attendees in person, not by letter or telephone. Paper cannot substitute for the influence of personality. Electronic voice transfer does not accomplish as much as personal presence.
4. Tell the invitees the discussion group subject. If it is “Parenting Skills,” stress that everyone in the group is in that age bracket and life-experience stage. None of them is an expert on this topic. The group will use videos and/or printed material that serve as a basis for sharing ideas in a study/discussion format. (In a few cases the class may be fortunate enough to engage a leader with specialized training.)
5. Tell the invitees that you are limiting attendance to sixteen people (couples and/or single parents totaling sixteen). This makes the invitation genuinely personal. They are special. They have been *selected*. Do *not* advertise in the newsletter, unless you state clearly that the class will close with the first sixteen people to sign on.

A different twist on the above model: Some small-town congregations (a) obtain resources on “parenting” from Focus on the Family (www.focusonthefamily.com) and (b) advertise in the local newspaper, and (c) personally invite sixteen young adult couples and single parents from the church. They do not expect the newspaper advertisement to draw many people, but it may draw a few. Even if it recruits no one, the advertising signals the community that this church cares about parents and children.
6. Tell invitees that the group is casual, not formal. Whatever attire they are comfortable with is acceptable. Many people avoid Sunday school because of its stereotypical, rigid, formal atmosphere. An amazing percentage of young males do not own a suit.
7. If the church building lacks an empty classroom space, turn that into an advantage. Find a couple in the group whose home is not far from the church. Ask them to host the eight-week discussion group in their living room. Parents can drop their children off at the church nursery or a Sunday school class before driving to the discussion group. Some young adults respond to such an invitation because they are more comfortable in a home setting than in what feels like a Sunday school setting.
8. Ask each couple or individual to commit to attending all eight sessions unless an emergency arises. Since the group closes after the first sixteen people commit to attending, this agreement makes sense to people. The continuity of attendance also insures frank and open discussions. Adult group rapport takes time. Most people need six hours of interaction to become emotionally comfortable with and trust one another.
9. Limit the number of group meetings to eight weeks, regardless of what the curriculum calls for. More than eight weeks sounds too long to potential attendees.
10. Always meet at the same time in the same location. If the group meets at a home near the church, do not shift from home to home each Sunday. People are creatures of habit about time and place. Violating that principle causes attendance to drop.
11. Designate a specific leader for the entire study. Do not pass the teaching role around among group members. That drives away shy and low-self-confidence people. Many of them disappear before their turn comes, without explanation.
12. Tell potential attendees that the group’s purpose is two-fold: (a) to gain information they might not otherwise get a chance to learn and (b) to get better acquainted with people who share their interests. This lets potential attendees know that the emphasis is on relationships, not on content alone.
13. Your primary invitation target group is (a) new church members, (b) not-yet-members, worship attendees, and (c) unchurched people who have not attended your church. Adding to that mix one or two inactive-member couples or individuals sometimes reactivates them. They have habitually said no to Sunday morning

worship for months or years. They are therefore stuck in the “no” mode of responding to the question, “Shall we go to church this morning?” An invitation to participate in something other than worship sometimes gets a yes answer, especially if they have a personal interest in the subject matter.

14. Be prepared for resistance by church members who have for several years worked hard to make their Sunday school classes grow, without success. Help them to understand that “our church can reach new people this way who will never consider visiting an established class.”
15. Avoid dividing a present class to create your eight-week discussion group. Three negatives result from that approach. (a) You create resentment among your most faithful church members. (b) Because the majority of your new group already has social bonds with one another, they are less likely to bond with the newcomers. (c) Your new group never has a chance to become an ongoing group, since part of its members return to their regular classes.
16. After the seventh week, this type of discussion group sometimes spontaneously combusts into an ongoing Sunday school class. Such a transition can neither be predicted nor programmed. If it happens, during the seventh week one of the group participants usually says, “This has been fun. Maybe we ought to study something else.”

The teacher is ready for that comment. He or she casually asks, “Do you have a topic in mind?”

Usually, the person who made the remark has not thought of a topic. But the teacher has! She or he throws out two possible topics. Warning: Do not mention a long list of possible topics. Do not invite the group to list topics. People like to decide between two alternatives. They do not like to select from a long list.

If the discussion group members have bonded socially and enjoy being together, they often begin discussing which of these two topics is best. The discussion of the two options moves the group past the question of whether to meet longer and study something else. The group locks in on the question of what to discuss.

17. If the group selects a topic, ask them to commit to another eight weeks. Resist the temptation to set an open-ended time span. That causes you to lose a few people from the group who would otherwise have transitioned to another eight-week study.
18. Much of the time, at the fourteenth week (during the second, eight-week study) someone spontaneously says, “This has been fun. We ought to study something else.” If that happens, the teacher is ready to throw out two more options. She or he knows that a new group is forming and will probably become a permanent adult Sunday school class.
19. Never try to force spontaneous combustion. By definition, spontaneous means it was not planned. Be ready to support and encourage it if the idea emerges from within the group. Never broadcast that possibility when you form the initial study/discussion group. People, especially young adults, are sensitive to and resentful of manipulative techniques. If they smell a “contrived sale,” they stay away in droves. If a permanent class forms, the idea absolutely must come from within the group.
20. This procedure is especially valuable among young adults in the age range of twenty-five to forty-four. For most such people, institutional systems have marginal to zero appeal. Yet, people in this age group have high relational needs. They are also attracted to courses that offer practical help in dealing with specific issues.

Very few spontaneous combustion groups *begin* with Bible study. However, left to make their own choices, virtually all groups arrive at that destination within sixteen to twenty-four weeks. When the group begins to select its next study topic, someone spontaneously says, “The book I know the least about and would like to know more about is the Bible. Do you suppose we ought to study that?”

Summary: Church leaders cannot *create* a spontaneous combustion class. Leaders can only set up the circumstances in which such classes can invent themselves. The secret to increasing the number of adult classes in your church via this method is persistent creation of such circumstances.

Early fall is a good time to schedule such efforts. By spring, you know whether a class resulted from your efforts. If it did not, the group served a valuable ministry purpose. Celebrate that and do it again in the fall. If the discussion group became a regularly meeting adult class, celebrate that and do it again next fall.

When a class forms in this way, you are witnessing what God through the Holy Spirit can do that human ingenuity alone cannot always accomplish. God has created a meaningful new class where adults can grow spiritually, become strong disciples, and feel the sense of family that comes from belonging to a group in which people care about one another.

VI. Managing Problem Personalities

The longer a group is together, the more pronounced become the interaction habits of some members. Use the following tips to handle some of the traits that emerge in most adult classes.

The Over-Talker: Seldom shy, usually uncomfortable with long periods of silence, this “oral thinker” compulsively puts words in the blank spots. Often, he or she steals the conversation space from people less quick to put thoughts and feelings into words. Some ways teachers can clip the wings of that habit:

- Ask the talkative person’s help by following his or her comments with, “So what do the rest of you think?”
- Instead of opening the floor to popcorn responses on every discussion question, say, “Let’s go around the room and ask each person to share an opinion.”
- Institute the following rule for one class session. “No one can speak a second time until everyone who wants to share has had a chance.”

Mr. (or Ms.) Professor: Often possessing considerable biblical or theological knowledge, this person has the willingness (sometimes the compulsion) to convey it. Handle that pattern in one of these ways:

- Say, “That is really interesting information. Let’s turn back to the central issue we were discussing.”
- Say, “How do the rest of you feel about that passage?”
- Say, “I want to ask each of you to share how that applies to you personally.”
- Say, “I can understand why you feel that way. Let’s hear some other viewpoints.”

In extreme instances when nothing else works, talk to Mr. or Ms. Professor alone, outside the group setting:

- Say, “You may not be aware that your superior knowledge causes some of the class members who are shy or less well informed to keep silent. Could you help me draw other people out by letting them talk first, then add insights that no one gave? Perhaps they will feel less intimidated that way.”

- Say, “Your historical knowledge is quite valuable. People appreciate it. I feel like we need to spend more time helping people see how that applies to their personal lives. Could you help me draw the group out in that way?”
- Say, “I felt that you would want to know this and that you and I have a good enough relationship that I can share it. You have quite firm opinions, and you sometimes come across as if those are the only opinions that could be true. I fear that may hurt the feelings of some people in the class. I know you don’t mean to give people the impression that their Christian experience is inferior because they do not have your level of biblical knowledge. Do you see any danger of that happening?”

The Monomaniac with a Mission: This person redirects every subject to a particular topic. Some possibilities for dealing with this obsessive-compulsive pattern:

- Outside the group setting, say, “Joe, I’m concerned about whether the Sunday school class’s focus on . . . (subject the class is studying) is meeting your personal needs. You have such a keen interest in talking about . . . (the topic about which Joe is obsessed) in the class. What experiences made that so important to you?” This may provide the sounding board that individual needs but is not finding in the class.
- Use a smothering routine. When Joe obsessively switches the class discussion to that topic, say, “Joe, are you personally involved in helping to address that problem?” After he responds ask, “Do you have any suggestions for how the rest of us could make a difference?” The next time Joe brings it up in a class session, ask, “We have discussed that topic several times. How could we substitute doing something about it for discussing it?” Many obsessive-compulsive personalities get an emotional charge (feel rewarded) when they bring up their pet topic. If they stop feeling rewarded, they stop bringing it up.

Fear of Sharing Feelings: Focusing on what other people think or ought to do often protects such people from the need to express their feelings. The following ideas are sometimes helpful with such individuals:

- Ask questions such as, “We could stack a lot of intellectual facts and theories onto this subject, but I’d like to hear how each of us feels about it, personally. June, what are your feelings on this?”
- Rephrase most of your discussion questions in ways that move toward personal opinions and away from intellectual speculation.

VII. Resources for Adult Sunday School & Weekday Groups

Adult Sunday school leaders will benefit from studying *Vital Adult Learning: Choices to Fit Your Church* by R. Wade Paschal Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon Press). Paschal’s list of adult class personality patterns and interests that usually characterize classes in different age ranges are particularly insightful. Of special value: (a) how to form new adult classes, (b) a unique approach for recruiting and training adult teachers, (c) a chapter on the unique qualities of various types of singles classes, and (d) a chapter on how to deal with problems that often arise in adult classes.

Denominational and commercial publishing houses provide announcements of new resources and topically arranged bibliographies. For example, twice each year Cokesbury publishes a free guide titled “Adult Study Resources” which describes several dozen books and studies with regard to the following issues: Topic, settings in which they work best (such as Sunday school, small groups, etc.), and nature of the material (number of sessions, video/audio, leader’s guide, etc.). Visit the www.cokesbury.com website. For specialized personal assistance, contact CURRIC-U-PHONE at 800-251-8591.

Examples of other resources:

On topics such as single parenting, divorce recovery, and parenting skills: Obtain films and/or study materials from organizations such as Focus on the Family, (www.focusonthefamily.com).

In the *Walking with God Series* by Don Cousins and Judson Poling (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House), each of the six Bible study guides contains twelve to thirteen small group study sessions. Obtain a description from Zondervan (www.zondervan.com).

Jesus' Twenty Megatruths by Herb Miller (St. Louis, Chalice Press) fits a ten- or twenty-session study/discussion format.

Get on several mailing lists to receive catalogues and announcements of new adult Sunday school and group resources. Watch for popular books that might make good study/discussion material.

VIII. The Bottom Line

Treat the source, not the symptom.

The general decline in Sunday school attendance across denominational lines does not primarily stem from a lower birth rate and declining attendance among children. The chief cause lies at the adult levels.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me” (Matthew 19:14). That is an essential ministry. But when Jesus appointed his first twelve teachers, they were not for children’s classes. They were adult teachers. Jesus told those adult teachers to go and make disciples—“teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20).

Perhaps we should get back in touch with that simple, brilliant strategy.