

# **F AR SIGHTED**

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**REACHING PEOPLE  
WHO ARE FAR FROM GOD**

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**FOSTERING A CULTURE OF OUTREACH  
IN OUR CHURCHES AND BIBLE STUDY GROUPS**

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Dwayne McCrary

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**REACHING PEOPLE  
WHO ARE FAR FROM GOD**

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# INTRODUCTION

## *What do you see?*

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At one time, reaching others dominated our church culture. Most churches start with a handful of people who want to reach more people. They begin with a culture of evangelism and a vision of what could be. Somewhere along the way, that culture gets altered and the church begins to focus on other things. It does not happen overnight and is subtle.

We need to recapture that reaching culture. We need to do so for the sake of our churches, for the cause of Christ, and for our own spiritual vitality. Doing so will not happen overnight. It will take intentional, consistent action. It will not be easy or painless, but it will be worth it. The eternity of people who are far from God depends on it.

*Farsighted* is about developing a culture with a deep desire to reach people who are far from God. This culture includes an awareness and concern for people far from God that moves us to action.

When we go in for an eye exam, we know we will be asked to look at the Snellen chart and tell the ophthalmologist what we see. Most of us know the chart has a capital *E* on top followed by *F* and *P*, and then *T O Z* on the third line. We could memorize the letters on lines nine, ten, and eleven, but this would miss the point of why we went to the doctor in the first place. We are there to have our eyes checked!

Research conducted by Lifeway Christian Resources points to a need for an eye exam when it comes to us seeing those who are far from God. Most Protestant churchgoers say they are eager to talk to others about Jesus and are praying for opportunities to share their faith, but most say they have not had any evangelistic conversations in the past six months. The researchers discovered that more than half (55%) of those who attend church at least once a month say they have not shared with someone about Jesus in the past six months. Just a little over half of churchgoers (56%) said they pray for opportunities to tell others about Jesus at least once a week,

with 23% praying for such moments every day. More than a quarter (27%) indicated they rarely or never pray for those opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

Some may say we are more reluctant to share, at least in the United States, on this side of COVID. The tensions in our society tend to get in the way of what some feel to be confrontational. The rhetoric of inclusion and subtle messages directed toward one side or the other bleed into how we may feel about sharing with others. Our attention and energies may also be diverted to other causes and issues.

Regardless, shouldn't all believers be praying for an opportunity to share with someone about Jesus? Should it be at least part of the weekly conversations taking place in our groups?

## **A Context from History**

Arthur Flake was a businessman who had a passion for reaching people through ongoing Bible study groups. He mentored others as a layman in a local church and eventually became the first director of Sunday School for Lifeway in 1920. He would chart a course for Southern Baptists felt for decades, keeping the focus on reaching people through Sunday Schools. Recently I had the opportunity to go into the Lifeway archives and read some of the correspondence of Arthur Flake. I discovered some remarkable historical parallels between what was going on one hundred years ago and what is going on today. Society faced significant challenges during that era. The Spanish flu pandemic created a world of fear and despair. The end of World War I ushered in a surge in unemployment that fueled social unrest in what became known as the Red Summer of 1919. Economic recession, prohibition, and political division impacted every area of life. In the decade prior, technological change introduced remote grocery ordering, distance learning, and virtual weddings all facilitated by the telephone. Radio was launching into new territory in 1920 when the Detroit News established the first commercial radio broadcast.

Two different attitudes emerged in American churches as they moved into the 1920s. Some churches chose to focus primarily on the gathering of believers during this time. We can surely understand why. The Spanish flu and World War I scattered and isolated

many believers. The uncertainty of the times also fostered divisions and mistrust, which caused some to begin to circle the wagons with the hope of simply holding on.

However, there were others who saw these challenges as an opportunity. They realized people, all people, were looking for a place to belong—a community where they could talk about the hard things and do so with a view to finding the truth. They realized that the challenges of their day gave them an opportunity to point to the One who could be trusted no matter what. They did not ignore believers but instead focused on mobilizing them in a strategic way.

Out of this second group, Arthur Flake emerged. He led Southern Baptists to organize their ongoing Bible study groups (what they called Sunday School, even though not all groups met on Sunday) with a view toward reaching people far from God. They became farsighted. The idea was to create new and more groups so people could be involved in a community built around Bible study. The focus on reaching others through ongoing Bible study groups placed these churches on a path that impacted society for years to come.

In his book *Fuel the Fire*, Chuck Kelley states: “Flake also helped to convince the [Southern Baptist] Convention about the value of Sunday School as a tool for evangelism. When the Sunday School movement in general began to emphasize nurture more than witness, Southern Baptists continued to perceive Sunday School as the outreach arm of the church.”<sup>2</sup>

A new culture materialized in these Bible study groups. The culture was just as important as the process and practices introduced during this time. Flake’s journal entries and letters point to a culture built on a belief that everyone should at least have the opportunity to study the Bible in a group. Prayer was a key part of that culture. How they viewed others, why they existed as a group, and a sense of doing something that mattered for the kingdom were also seen. All these things pointed to a culture for reaching people far from God.

Too many times we focus on the doing and forget about the culture that supports the actions. The purpose of this book is not to look at what was done in 1920 and copy it, but rather to look at how we foster a culture of outreach.

## Who Creates Culture?

Philosophers, business leaders, and social scientists debate if culture comes from the top down or bubbles up from the masses. In short, the answer is yes. Either way, culture usually starts small.

In his book *Culture Making*, Andy Crouch proposes that culture making takes place in what he calls an “absolute small group.”<sup>3</sup> He defines the optimal group for cultural making in terms of 3 people. Those 3 people impact a circle of 12 who then impact their circles of influence, which is usually 10 people in each individual circle (total of 120). These 120 people then carry the culture to the masses. Let’s think about what that means to us. Most Bible study groups are made up of a small leadership team of 3 or so people. The titles and roles may be different from one group to another, but the number 3 seems to be a consistent number. This reality should be seen as an encouragement and as a warning.

## The Encouragement

If culture making begins with three, then most of us who lead a Bible study group sit in a place to influence the culture of our church. If we teach a group of ten to twelve, we have the second element also needed to create culture—a circle of influence. The influence begins with us and the leadership team assembled within our Bible study group.

If we accept Crouch’s premise, then we can make a true difference in our church through the group we lead and how we lead it. Here’s an example: Sonny is farsighted. He knows his limits as a shepherd and the principles of group dynamics, so he keeps the group to a size that he can handle and in which dialogue can take place. For him that maximum number is eighteen. Any time his group gets near that number, he starts looking for another person who can take on the teaching of the current group so he can go start a new group. He will take a couple of folks with him from the current group with the goal of involving those who are far from God in Bible study. If we look around this church, we will find several groups that were once taught by Sonny who are now taught by someone once in his group. These are his concentric circles, the twelve referenced by Crouch.



The groups he once led continue to be farsighted, looking for others far from God who can be introduced to Him through a Bible study group.

## **The Caution**

If our group can make a positive impact on the outreach culture of our church, then it can also do the opposite. Think about the number of agendas that may be present within our churches. We are not saying these are bad or evil unless they become the focus or detract from the mission of the local church.

Pat McMillan illustrates this point using a rowing team and their need to be aligned. He observes that when the people in the same boat are rowing as they please, doing their own thing, there is a great deal of activity but since they are misaligned, they go off course.<sup>4</sup>

In a 2022 study of pastors, the Barna Group identified the immense stress of the job and current political divisions as the two biggest issues that impacted a pastor's ability to lead his church.<sup>5</sup> Most expect the pastor to take a position on every issue that makes headlines. We forget that our pastor is called to point us to Jesus and His purposes as defined by the whole council of God. We can help our pastor fulfill that goal by keeping the focus on reaching those far from God and helping them enter into a relationship with God.

## **Looking in the Distance**

One more word about culture. It is a lifestyle, not a onetime program to be executed. If you are looking for a quick fix so you can turn your attention to other matters, please let others set the culture. Culture requires regular attention and detail. Culture comes from a passion, an ideal. That passion and ideal give birth to actions.

Most churches have a strategy or a set of programs that define them in some way. This strategy may be understood or stated, but they have something they are trying to do. They have a set of values to which most adhere, which keeps the church together. These values go beyond a shared doctrine to shared relationships. Within these relationships, we see a culture. That culture did not develop overnight. It took time, intentional action, and a consistent focus.

Chapter 1

**LOOKING  
IN THE  
MIRROR**

## *How do we set the standard for others to follow?*

We expect the eye doctor to not only help us but to be an example. We want him or her to either have perfect eyesight or at least use the products he or she may prescribe to us. Nothing can be more disconcerting than sitting in the chair with all that equipment around us with the doctor squinting to read his or her notes on the computer screen. We may wonder why the doctor did not at least put on some reading glasses to instill some confidence in what we are about to hear! If the doctor is not going to use contacts or glasses, then why should we?

When it comes to creating a culture, it starts with us. We are the example of what we want others to be and do; we are the standard. Our group expects us as study leaders to show others what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We can present all day long, but what we say becomes real when our lives match what we are presenting.

James reminded his readers that those who failed to act on what they found in the Bible were “like someone looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of person he was” (James 1:23-24).

Think about how we as leaders impact others. Bruce Halle rented a vacant store that once housed a plumbing supply company and went into the tire business. He had no air tank on site, so he went to a nearby gas station to fill a portable tank to inflate the tires he sold. Realizing that the same tires could be purchased from a variety of places, Halle focused on the customer experience. He built his business off some simple ideas: treat people with respect and fairness, care for those in need, always do what is right, work hard, be responsible, and have fun. These principles may be expressed with different words today, but they continue to be seen in the business begun by Mr. Halle, known to us as Discount Tire™.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the current employees have not met Mr. Halle, yet they carry his values. Some were hired because they already possessed the values while others learned the values from other employees. Either way, the values of Mr. Halle continue to be seen.

We see the same kind of influence being lived out in our Bible study groups. Several years ago some men approached me about helping them start a men's Bible study group. We started off with four, including me. The group grew and one of those original three took on the role of teacher. He had watched me for a year, so he had an idea of what to do and how to do it. Fast-forward to four years later. The group grew and gave birth to a second group. That second group was led by a person who patterned himself after that second teacher of the original group. Interestingly, they both demonstrated some of my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. It was like looking in a mirror to get a better glimpse of myself.

Turning to James once again we find this warning: "Not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment" (3:1). We cannot neglect the impact we have as teachers on the groups we lead. We are a model, a pattern for others to follow. They reflect us. Paul reminded the Corinthians of this same reality, when he called on them to "imitate me, as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). That is one reason we as teachers carry a larger burden than others.

Our influence will be even greater when the groups we lead are children. Kids are so impressionable. We are being watched to see how we talk, the way we greet them, and the way we interact with their parents when the child is dropped off and picked up. They will follow us even when we do not want them to.

## **Get Ready Spiritually**

If we are going to foster a reaching culture, we need to give some attention to ourselves. When we look in the mirror, we do so with the idea of fixing what we need to fix. We cannot tell if our hair is in place without the mirror. Most of us cannot walk by a mirror without stopping or glancing. God gave us His Word as a mirror so we could see our blind spots, discover areas for improvement, and get a glimpse of our hearts. We must continually ask God to show us blind spots, areas for growth, and to give us a heart for those far from God.

We are flawed and have blind spots that can trip us up. Moses was a fugitive who committed murder. David was an adulterer and conspirator of murder. Elijah fled in fear to a distant cave and asked God to take his life. Jonah ran from God's call and then got upset when God forgave the Ninevites. We have blind spots that require us to look in a mirror so we can address them.

Despite his moral failure with Bathsheba, David was identified as a man after God's heart. After being confronted about his sin and cover-up, he responded with repentance. At another point in his life, David penned these words that served as a prayer:

*Who perceives his unintentional sins?  
Cleanse me from my hidden faults.  
Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins;  
do not let them rule me.  
Then I will be blameless  
and cleansed from blatant rebellion.  
May the words of my mouth  
and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you,  
LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.*

PSALM 19:12-14

In the verses that precede these, David pointed to creation and Scripture as testimonies of God. He emphasized the trustworthiness of Scripture and the value of following God's directives. He then pointed to his unintentional sins; blind spots. Paul echoed David's thoughts by admitting that he did what he did not want to do, knowing the truth of Scripture (see Romans 7:15-20).

Some blind spots might get in our way when it comes to being farsighted. In Acts 10, God sent Peter to Cornelius, a Gentile. God had visited Peter through a vision, calling him three times to eat selected meats that were considered unclean by Jewish standards. After hearing Cornelius's story, Peter then declared: "Now I truly understand that God doesn't show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). Peter walked with Jesus, talked to Jesus face-to-face after the resurrection, delivered a sermon that influenced

three thousand to turn to Jesus, and now he was realizing God offers salvation to even a Gentile centurion. After this encounter with Cornelius, Peter ate with Gentiles until Jewish believers were present. His actions were noticed by others, including Barnabas, and they followed suit (See Galatians 2:11-13). Do we see any blind spots here?

Unfortunately, we can see ourselves in Peter's example. Most of us have someone or a group we struggle to accept. It may go back to how we were raised, an experience, or a societal norm. Many of us believe there are some who deserve to spend eternity in hell more so than others. Some of us may even believe that everyone in heaven will look, talk, and think just like us. We forget that heaven will be filled with people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Like Peter, we need to be confronted about this blind spot.

Another blind spot may be our pride. We do not intend to act arrogantly, but we cannot help ourselves. We may be that person who gets caught stopping at the mirror in the store and smiling with satisfaction at our image. We like what we see and will do all we can to keep ourselves from losing that feeling. That includes not taking the risk of engaging with people who are far from God. They may ask us a question we cannot answer or challenge us in front of a person who looks up to us, so we avoid any type of conversation that may move to spiritual matters.

These blind spots represent areas of growth so that ultimately we have a heart for those far from God. We come to realize with Peter that God offers salvation through faith in His Son to even *that* person, the one person we would think least deserves God's grace.

## **Prepare for Tests**

The realization that God offers salvation to all people usually comes through a test. The test is not for God to see how we are doing and if we are ready, but to help us realize our blind spots and move us toward what God desires us to be.

"Bernard" was a convicted felon, having committed the same crime three times. His crime carried all kinds of social stigma with it. He was out on parole and wanted to make sure he stayed out of prison this time. There he stood in our group, wanting to know

how we could help him get things right and stay on the straight and narrow. We noticed the monitor attached to his ankle as he told us his story. He let us know that he couldn't stay long because he only had permission from his parole officer to be with us until a certain time or he would be in violation of his parole agreement.

"Bernard" was a test in human flesh. Would we welcome him? Do we see him as a felon, or as a person in need of God's redemption? Do we see him as a group project, or a person with feelings and hopes like our own?

Your test may be different than the one posed in the form of "Bernard," but be assured you will be tested. In the writing of this book, tests came my way. These tests revealed some blind spots in my life that I needed to address and am addressing. These tests were not unexpected or unnecessary. We all need to examine our lives for blind spots that keep us from being farsighted, things that keep us from seeing the people around us who are far from God and being prepared to engage with them in a way that honors God.

## **Hang Out with Farsighted People**

One way of preparing ourselves to foster a culture of outreach is to be around others who are farsighted. No doubt, there is someone in our church who always seems to be engaging with people who are far from God. We should meet him or her for breakfast or coffee and learn from him or her. We may simply pray with him or her and share our desire to be more focused on people who are far from God. We may ask if this farsighted person can mentor us or let us accompany him or her the next time he or she has an appointment to visit with a person about spiritual things.

We can also attend conferences that focus on reaching people far from God. These could be prayer events that focus on people far from God. These events might be a commissioning service for missionaries as they take a step toward a special work. The point is finding an event to attend where people gather who are seeking to reach others who are far from God.

We may not be able to attend a conference, but we can read books and listen to podcasts of others who are committed to engaging people far from God. These may be pastors or church leaders who tell

their stories or give tips for dealing with some of the more common objections faced when sharing with others about Jesus.

## **Check Our Motives**

This may sound strange or odd, but we also need to get a clear view of the answer to this question: “Why do we want to reach those who are far from God?”

When writing to the church at Philippi, Paul noted that some people were preaching with wrong motives. He identified envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, lacking sincerity, and wanting to cause Paul trouble as reasons behind some of the gospel sharing that was taking place (see Philippians 1:15-18). Paul was in prison when he penned these words, so there was a void that gave people an opportunity to either build off what Paul had done or to position themselves as the next great teacher or leader.

Even with wrong motives, the gospel was still shared, and Paul celebrated that regardless of the motives. This group addressed by Paul did not alter the message, they just shared it for the wrong reasons. Paul rejoiced over the spreading of the gospel, but he was also sending a warning to those who were preaching. They would be accountable for their motives. It was these people with improper motives who were being brought into question, not the people who believed in Jesus despite the heart of the messenger.

We need to consider our motives as well. We may encounter people who are sharing because of expectations or because they want recognition, are trying to deal with guilt for a past failure, or a variety of other reasons. The issue here is not why others may share the gospel but why we share the gospel.

Paul followed the section in his letter to the Philippians about some preaching with wrong motives by describing a dilemma he faced in terms of living and dying. He identified the advantages of him living and dying. If he lived, he would be able to encourage the Philippian believers as well as continue to share the gospel. If he died, then he would be with Christ. Paul’s longing to be with Christ helps us understand his motive. Paul shared the gospel because of his love for his Savior. It was relational to Paul, sharing about the One he knew and would know in greater ways in the future.



The excitement of getting to spend eternity with Christ drove Paul to tell others about what awaited him and could await them.

Consider what you look forward to during the Thanksgiving holiday season. We might tell others we look forward to searching for that perfect gift, a certain menu item made only during that time, or a treasured tradition. Eventually we include being with people we love, whether that be family or friends. We sell the long ride to our kids by telling them who they will see once there. We could do the activities of Thanksgiving by ourselves, but ultimately it is about relationship and seeing people face-to-face.

For believers, life is about a covenant relationship with the Father through faith in the Son. That covenant relationship should be the motivator in all areas of life including our sharing of the gospel. We tell others because we understand the love God has for us and them.

We will examine this more in the next chapter, but many of the items in this chapter require prayer. We are not talking about working through a list of requests, but rather approaching God with our Bibles open, allowing Him to open our minds and hearts to His patterns and our needs as we do so. We must learn to pray openly and honestly to God with a view toward knowing Him, His heart, and His plans. This type of prayer involves praying with His Word guiding us, seeing the patterns and purposes revealed, and joining Him in the work He is doing today.

## **Start in Your Circle**

Most of us reading this book are not *the* leader of our church. We may want to see our church be more focused on reaching those far from God, but we excuse ourselves from making it happen because we are not the pastor or a formally recognized church leader. Leading is about ownership and we can own the role we possess and do what we can do to make a positive impact. The truth is we are all leaders of someone and can make a difference by leading in a God-honoring way.

If you are not the pastor, begin by praying for your pastor. No one wants to see our churches reach people far from God more than our pastors. Our prayers should focus on God using our current pastor to make a difference in our church. The pastor we have is the pastor

who God gave us. If we blame the pastor for all our woes, we in effect are blaming God which is dangerous ground. We can pray for him and let him know we are praying for him to lead our church well.

A second thing we can do is focus on reaching people far from God. If we know what to do, then we should be doing it. If we complain or moan about our church not reaching more people far from God, we must evaluate ourselves in light of that standard. We have a role to play as well, and we cannot leave our part up to the pastor. We are responsible for telling our neighbors, since we know our neighbors and see them often.

That leads us to repentance. As noted earlier, some share out of guilt over a past failure. A friend who was far from God died. He or she may have been a trusted friend, but we never shared with him or her about Jesus. Instead of admitting our failure to God and asking for forgiveness, we seek to reach others to make up for that past failure. The problem is guilt will always be present no matter how much we try to cover it with good actions. We will not find the joy in sharing Jesus if that guilt remains. The better route is to confess our past failures, experience God's forgiveness, and share because of that forgiveness. We can then help others find what we found with a pure heart.

We cannot expect people to follow us if we are not living the gospel out ourselves. How can we expect to foster a reaching culture if we are not readying ourselves spiritually, learning from others who are reaching people far from God, and checking our motives? Developing a farsighted mentality begins with us taking a good look in the mirror.



Chapter 2

**GETTING  
A CLEAR VIEW**

# *What does a reaching culture look like?*

Bicyclists have a wealth of options when it comes to eyewear. The right eyewear not only protects our eyes from the wind, grit, and sun, but also helps us to see clearly. Seeing what is ahead helps us stay on the trail or identify the best part of the road on which to ride. We need a clear view.

One way to foster a reaching culture is to know the characteristics of such a culture. The purpose of this chapter is to identify these characteristics. We will look later at some of the how-tos in fostering these characteristics.

## **Prayer Is Central**

Every church does some type of praying, but prayer in farsighted churches and their groups is different. There is a sense of God's presence when they pray together. If a decision is to be made, that decision is bathed in prayer. The request is not so much that God will bless their efforts as much as it is seeking God's direction and committing to follow that direction once they understand God's heart on the matter. This is a dangerous way to pray. We commit to obey God and follow His direction before we know what He wants us to do. We should not expect a response from God unless the request is accompanied with anticipated obedience.

Most of us would say we pray for people far from God in our community. We pray for missionaries and the people in the country in which they serve. We may even pray for a few people by name. We might even include a list of people who are far from God on our weekly prayer lists.

In groups that possess a reaching culture, they approach praying for those far from God in a personal way. First, if the names of people far from God are included on a prayer list, these names are listed first. What is listed first is usually what is most important. If we are sent to the grocery store, most of us know we had better return with the things at the top of the list. The same is true here. When we pray, we start at the top of the prayer list. We may not have time to pray for

everything on the list, but we at least pray for the things listed first. If other items are listed first, that is what will get the attention.

Many of us have seen prayer lists dominated by people in the hospital or facing a health crisis. An interesting exercise might be to rate each request on a prayer list based on eternal consequence. The people facing health issues should garner our attention, but so should people who are far from God. In most cases, the health needs listed do not carry eternal consequences for the person experiencing the health issue unless they are far from God. The person who is far from God is in greater danger, and the reaching church understands the magnitude of that danger.

The prayers of those with a reaching mentality go beyond asking God to send someone to share with a person. The request includes making one's self available to be used by God to bring that person to Him. We can pray all day for the salvation of a family member and forget that we may be the answer to that prayer. The reaching church knows all too well that God can and will use them in His redemptive work and they have a fervent desire to be involved in that work.

## **Hallway Conversations Include Reaching Actions**

If we were to list the topics of conversation in our group or in the hallway there is no limit to what we might hear discussed. That list may include information about a sporting event and decisions made by a coach, details about a needed surgical procedure and the potential complications, the features on a new vehicle and how that feature makes that vehicle better than the previous, or the changing weather and the images seen in the news of some weather event. None of these are bad in and of themselves, but in a reaching church one will also hear conversations about an encounter with a person far from God.

The hallway conversation can take on different forms. In one conversation the person may be telling about an opportunity to share with someone who is far from God. The person may be someone on their prayer list and they are simply giving an update to another person who had been praying with him or her for the opportunity to share. Another conversation may be about the baptism planned

for that day and the role the person sharing played in that person becoming a follower of Jesus. A third conversation may include an introduction of a guest who has come with a group member. They want to help the guest connect with others in the Bible study group. The regular attenders know the name from previous prayer requests, so they are clued in to the introduction, being careful to make the guest feel welcomed into the group.

Culture experts note that organizations talk their walk. The conversations around the coffee bar, in the hallways, and in smaller circles reveal the true values of the group or organization. If we value reaching those far from God, at least some of our conversation will reflect that value.

## **People Far from God Are Welcomed and Pursued**

Throughout this book, we have used the term “far from God” to describe what the Bible calls the lost. There is nothing wrong with the term “lost,” in fact Luke recorded Jesus saying that He came to “seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10; also see Luke 15:3-10). The Bible uses other terms as well to define a person far from God: condemned, sinners, disobedient, blind, living in darkness, prodigal, rebellious, and unbelievers. At some point in our lives, this defines all of us, and we are still sinners and disobedient even when we do not want to be. Remember, Paul shared the same frustration of being a follower of Christ yet capable of sin at the same time (see Romans 7:18-19).

One reason for using the phrase “far from God” is it describes a person’s state without Jesus. In John 14:6, the apostle recorded Jesus declaring that He was the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him. The only path to the Father is Jesus. Those who are far from God need to know the way to God.

In Psalm 73, Asaph described his frustration over the unrighteous living at ease and with little guilt. He saw their wickedness, pride, and oppression, yet they were living in luxury, enjoying the more extravagant things. We sometimes paint people far from God as being miserable and failures but Asaph observed the exact opposite.

The people in Amos's day were content and thought themselves to be near to God because of their success. Amos even compared them to the cows of Bashan who were pampered animals enjoying the best pasture lands available. The people Amos addressed wrongly attributed success and prosperity to God's favor. Job's friends did the same thing but in the reverse way, thinking Job's misfortune was connected to a sin he had committed.

Churches with a reaching culture understand that all people are sinners and even sinners can enjoy themselves and be successful in their work. The differentiator is their proximity to God—far or near. The person far from God is not an enemy to be conquered (think Jonah and his view of the Ninevites) but a person created in the image of God (God's view of the Ninevites to whom He sent Jonah). When we share God's view that those who are far from God are created in the image of God, we pursue them with the hope of sharing the good news of God's love and grace.

This pursuit is seen in compassion and empathy for people far from God. One reason we are drawn to Jonah is we can see ourselves sitting on a hill waiting to see God's judgment fall on someone we view as less than human. We label people sometimes so we can dismiss them from deserving our care and attention.

The people in a reaching church have come to understand that the doctrine of the sanctity of human life goes beyond the unborn. Matthew and Luke tell of Jesus teaching about His return, explaining that two will be sleeping and working with one being taken and the other left (see Matthew 24:41 and Luke 17:34-36). Sleeping and working are ordinary actions and are being done by both the believer and nonbeliever in Jesus's teaching. They are also doing it side by side.

All people are in the same boat. None of us are exempt from sin nor are we perfect. Paul knew he was a capable sinner. He knew what it was like to oversee the stoning death of a follower of Jesus and feel righteous as a result (see Acts 7:54-60). He also knew the prideful allure of keeping the law and having a perceived clean reputation (see Philippians 3:4-6). Yet Paul knew God offered Him mercy and grace (see 1 Corinthians 10:14-15). We must not forget that we too are capable of sin and unworthy of the mercy and grace offered to us through faith in Jesus.



This reality drives the reaching church and the reaching group to demonstrate compassion and empathy. The pregnant teenager, the socialite who is never seen without an alcoholic beverage, and the divorced mom trying to piece her life together are all offered compassion. This type of compassion is a result of the prayer we noted earlier. When we seek God and His heart, we begin to express the love we find in that pursuit.

## **A Sense of Urgency that Leads to Action**

Many of us have bucket lists, things we want to do or see before we die. If we were told we have a terminal illness, our list may change. Seeing a canyon takes a back seat to seeing a friend or family member one more time. Urgency in completing that list takes on a new intensity. Restoring a broken relationship suddenly moves up the list. Telling a trusted friend what they meant to our lives also becomes a priority on that bucket list. Passing on one word of wisdom to our children or friends seems to be more important than it was last year.

None of us are guaranteed another day on this earth. We may have appointments and plans but so did the man in the parable who built larger storehouses. Jesus told of a man who had more than his current warehouses could hold so he tore them down to build larger ones. The man then proclaimed that he could now enjoy life, not knowing that the day of that proclamation would be his last day (see Luke 12:13-21). Jesus shared this parable to teach about investing in eternal treasures with the urgency of time as the backdrop.

Living with this type of urgency is not intended to increase our stress but to serve as a motivator for stewardship. God gave us this day and we are to be good stewards of this gift. He also gave us this day for a reason—there is purpose in this day. We do not know what God has for us on this day, but we can be assured that He has something for us today. That may be a short conversation with a salesperson, mowing the grass for a sick neighbor, meeting a friend for breakfast who needs some encouragement, or discovering afresh God's presence.

This urgency of action is seen in Mark's Gospel. We cannot get far without coming across the word usually translated "immediately" or "straight away" (*eutheos* in the Greek text). Mark used the word more than forty times in his Gospel. The word reminds us of the urgency of the mission carried out by Jesus. A. W. Pink explains that the presence of the word teaches us that there was no holding back, reluctance, or slackness in Jesus carrying out His mission, but rather a "blessed 'immediateness' about all His work." Pink goes on to encourage his readers to learn from the perfect example set by the Savior.<sup>7</sup>

## **People Know Who They Are Trying to Reach**

This urgency fuels the reaching group to gain a grasp on who it is they are trying to reach. We see this in two ways. First, in the names of the groups. Our group's name helps us identify a general group we are trying to reach. If the group is named after the teacher or some Bible character like Naomi or Ruth, the members of that group have no idea who they are to reach. But if the group is named after the group they are trying to reach the group now has a target. This also helps guests know which group may best fit their needs. A group named "parents of teenagers" gives a clue to guests as to who they may find in that group. If they are a parent of teenagers, they know that group may be a great place for them to start.

Using this naming approach also helps our church leaders know what kind of new groups are needed. We may be sitting in a community that has a new housing development designed for young families. If no group exists with a name associated with young families, the church leaders know they need to start one for this group of people. If a new retirement neighborhood is planned, the church leaders will need to respond with groups targeted for these new people who will be coming into the church ministry area.

In the appendix is an article to help church leaders better understand the ministry area in which a church sits (Knowing Your Community, p. 53). As group leaders, we may be called upon to help develop a clear understanding of the community to which our church ministers. This also helps us understand the needs around us and how we can pray for and reach the people in the community.

Not only do these groups know in general who they are trying to reach, but they know by name who they are trying to reach. We mentioned Arthur Flake earlier. In his book *The True Functions of the Sunday School*, Flake shared the following:

The name of every man, woman, and child in the community who is a stranger of grace should be in the possession of the church and the pastor. It is very much easier to become intensely concerned about the salvation of the souls of people when we know them personally, who they are and where they live.

Bill Smith may be only one of a hundred lost people in the community. However, the chances of winning Bill Smith to Christ are multiplied a hundredfold when we have his name, age, address, and know from his own testimony that he is a lost man.<sup>8</sup>

Reflect on this quote for a moment. Flake assumed that groups would know by name the people they were trying to reach. Doing so narrows the target and brings focus. Knowing the name of the person also implies a relationship and interaction with that person. Groups with a reaching culture know the person, not just the demographic. They know what that person likes and dislikes, what kind of coffee he or she drinks, where he or she works, and about his or her family. They *know* that person.

Knowing someone takes time, energy, and intention. It also means placing oneself in a position to interact with people far from God. That does not mean we spend time at bars, but it does mean we do not huddle only with believers at our kids' little league game and dare people far from God to talk to us.

## **Committed to Open, Ongoing Bible Study Communities**

Groups with a reaching culture understand that people who are far from God need to study the Bible and we need them to be in our groups. The groups are open to both those who know God and those who are far from God. Here is why.

**We need the dialogue.** The longer we live as believers, the more likely our friends will be believers. We begin to talk in “believer” terms and lose our “unbeliever” dialect. Losing some of that language is a good thing, but we must still find a way to communicate with people who are far from God. We are called to share the gospel and we need contact with unbelievers to do so. Keeping our Bible study group open to all people puts us in a position to share the gospel more readily.

**We need the accountability.** In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul called on them to imitate him as he imitated Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). The Corinthian believers needed someone to show them what a follower of Christ looked like, and Paul was willing for them to examine him. By inviting others to be like him, Paul was making himself accountable to all who were looking to him as an example. We need to know others that need an example, and we need the accountability to be such an example.

**We need to remember.** The longer we live as believers, the more likely we are to forget the guilt, the searching, and the sense of loss that comes with being far from God. Losing that sense impacts our gratitude for the cross and the salvation Christ provides us. We need to always be mindful of the grace granted to us.

**We need to be challenged.** We sometimes get comfortable with our beliefs and rarely revisit them. Being around people who are far from God will lead us to explain why we believe what we believe. Doing so will help us refine and sharpen our beliefs, while keeping us from becoming complacent about what we believe and why.

**We need to learn to love.** We are directed to love our neighbors—all of them. The best way for breaking down a “them” and “us” mentality is spending time with whomever we consider to be “them.”

The believers in groups that purposefully remain open to all will gain a great deal from the presence of people who are far from God. Believers need those who do not yet follow Christ to be in our groups just as much as the person who is far from God needs to study the Bible in a group setting.

These reaching groups also understand the value of an ongoing Bible study community. Ongoing means the group meets every week of the year. They understand that we cannot predict when a person

will attend our group which makes a weekly meeting important. They also understand that whenever a group stops meeting for a season, like the summer months, there will be some who will not return. In effect, they know they would be creating an off-ramp to the Bible study ministry of the church. Lifeway Research discovered that when groups stop with the intent of regathering some time in the future, that 36% of those once involved will not regather. The reaching group may have other issues, but they do not have to focus on reclaiming the 36% who dropped out when the group took time off. Instead, they can focus on reaching those who have yet to hear the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

The last descriptor of this characteristic is community. Remember the story about Sonny (see p. 7)? He had a size limit for his group of eighteen because of his limits and group dynamics. We can have a larger group, but we lose something in the process. The larger the group, the less likely we are to involve everyone in the dialogue and the less likely each person will be to share. That is why we used the word *community* here. Our groups should have enough mass to meet but be small enough to sit in a circle where trust and dialogue can be fostered. A larger group with a lecture format kills dialogue, which is one of the things that draws people to a group in the first place.

One way this commitment is demonstrated is by how the group treats those who are already believers but are not active in a group. They do their best to contact the people already in their group and yet are not actively involved. The leaders understand that being in an ongoing group helps people grow in their spiritual lives and assimilates them into the life of the church. They may even start new groups for those already in the church but not connected to a group. They do all they can to help everyone inside and outside the church to find a group and get actively involved in that group.

## Oneness Is Treasured

Daniel James Brown chronicled the conquest of the eight-man rowing team that won a gold medal in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Brown tells about a few times when the team achieved what is known as “swing.”<sup>10</sup> Swing happens when all the members of the

rowing team are in perfect sync, rowing as a single unit. Swing is more of a mystical occurrence that cannot be fabricated but is recognized and enjoyed by the team when it happens.

I considered *cooperative, consolidated, concerted, and unified* to define what we are talking about here, but each of these terms fell short. We are not talking about conformity for the sake of unity. We are talking about a oneness, a swing, which cannot be fabricated but is recognized when it happens.

After instituting the first Lord's Supper, Jesus prayed for His disciples and all who would become disciples. In the middle of that prayer, He asked, "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me" (John 17:21).

The model for this request was the relationship found in the Trinity, being one like Jesus and the Father. The Bible teaches us there are three distinct persons who carry the title God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three were involved in creation (see Genesis 1:1-2; John 1:1-14). These three persons have distinct roles to play, yet they are God without division. Every illustration we might use to explain how this works misses some element of what we call the Trinity. Being Three yet One is one of the mysteries of the Bible that gives us a glimpse of the uniqueness and glory of the God revealed in the Scriptures.

This oneness seen in the Trinity is what Jesus called for the Father to grant to all believers. Earlier that evening, Jesus defined Himself as being the vine while the disciples were the branches. He explained that the "one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me" (John 15:5).

Notice the inclusion of the idea of being in God seen in both John 15 and 17. Jesus defined this "in Him" in terms of abiding, dwelling, or remaining (see John 15:4), depending on the translation. The idea is that we are dependent upon a direct connection to Jesus. This connection involves being in the company or presence of the Father. Being in the company or presence of God takes place through prayer both individually and corporately. The oneness is a product of not just our shared salvation but also of our being in the presence of the Father together. Doing so helps us gain clarity

as individuals and as a group, with us seeing His heart which then gives us a shared oneness.

Notice that the goal of this oneness between believers for which Jesus prayed was so that others would believe (John 17:21). This oneness goes beyond getting along or agreeing on every detail about the return of Jesus. It is about focusing on helping others draw near to God so they too can come into the presence of the Father: abiding, dwelling, remaining in Him.

A reaching culture is seen in numerous ways within the group, including the prayer focus, conversations, view and acceptance of others, urgency, commitment to open Bible study groups, and oneness. Other markers may exist, but this list serves as the major markers seen. These give us a glimpse of what a reaching culture looks like.

Chapter 3

# **ADJUSTING OUR VIEW**



# *How do we build farsightedness in our group and church?*

When we sit in the chair at the optometrist, most of us are drawn to the instrument with all the spinning wheels. The Phoropter™ is one of the basic tools used by optometrists to determine what kind of eyeglass we may need. We look through a lens while the doctor spins one of the wheels and then gives us two options as we look at an eye chart. We may need the doctor to flip between the two choices so we can make sure about our choices. The results depend on us being honest with the doctor when asked to make a choice.

This chapter is about the critical choices in front of us if we want to foster a reaching culture in our church and group. The ideas are a start and foundational to the characteristics seen in chapter 2.

## **Make Time for Reaching**

If a person examined the activities scheduled by your group, what might they discover? Obviously, meeting every week would stand out. When you choose not to meet would also stand out. If all your socials revolve around national sporting events or local art festivals, one would immediately know the special interests of the group. Reviewing an organization's or individual's calendar reveals their priorities.

Fostering a reaching culture requires us to schedule for it, remembering that time works like money. We have a limited amount of time in every week, making it more precious than some of the other things we may budget. One action we may need to take is to clear our calendar of distractions so we can reach out to others.

Some may argue that not having a set time on our calendars for reaching out to others gives us flexibility. We can then reach out to others as we can. The problem is most of us will not do it "when we can" because doing so is usually not convenient nor does it happen in isolation. We will examine the idea more in chapter 4, but one reason we may not be involved in reaching out to people far from God is we do not plan for it in our schedule. Our schedules crowd out some type of planned time for reaching out to others and for

focused prayer for those far from God. We just do not give it the time it needs or deserves.

One step may be designating one Sunday a month dedicated specifically to praying for friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family members who are far from God. We may choose the second Sunday of each month as our day to pray solely for people far from God. As we conclude the study time, we shift our focus to prayer. We begin by asking for the names of people we know who are far from God. We may ask for a first name, initials, or relationship. We record the name, initials, or relationship on a large sheet of paper and in our notes, being sure to include who shared each name, initials, or relationship. We then lead the group to pray for the list, asking God to open our eyes for opportunities to share Jesus with that person. We then ask everyone to pray for this list daily as a part of their prayer time.

Over the next month, we make sure to ask the people who shared a name, initials, or relationship about the person they placed on the list. We pray with them individually and encourage them as they look for ways to share Jesus with that person. We will also want to share about the people we added to the list and about our opportunities to share with each person.

When the second Sunday of the next month arrives, we call attention to the list and ask for any updates. We also invite the group to add to the list. We then lead the group to pray for the names, initials, or relationships listed, asking God to open our eyes for opportunities to share Jesus with that person. We ask everyone to update their list and to continue to pray daily for the people listed.

A second action to consider is personal delivery of the resource used by the group to every person in the group every quarter. This gives us a natural reason to contact every person in our group. We should not discount the value of delivering resources to the individuals in our group. We learn a great deal about the people in our group that we would not have learned otherwise. We communicate that Bible study is important and that we care enough to make sure they have a tool for doing personal Bible study.

When we deliver resources, we will encounter different responses. Some will welcome us with open arms, wanting us to spend two hours with them. Most will be gracious and spend a short

time with us at the door. A few will do what they can to make it a challenge. A smaller few will appreciate the gesture but feel guilty or obligated as a result.

Here are some tips that may help us when delivering Bible study resources to our group.

**1. GIVE A WARNING.** Most of us want to know the arrival time of our pizza, the exterminator, or the package we ordered. Tell the group you are delivering the study resource and the time window so they will know. This need not be complicated and can be sent with a simple text. You will want to make sure you let everyone know a couple of days in advance.

**2. COMMUNICATE WHY.** We want our group to know why everyone needs a copy of the study resource and that everyone ought to study the Bible. We cannot make them study the Bible on their own, but we can at least provide them with a tool to encourage it. Saying things like “So you can study on your own” or “So we can all be studying together” communicates the intent. We do not want to focus on the past (for example, “We have been missing you”) but instead should focus on the future (for example, “I wanted to make sure everyone in our group could study together these next three months”).

**3. KEEP MOVING.** I try to block out a single evening to deliver to everyone on my ministry list. Online mapping can help in creating an efficient route. We need to keep moving if we are going to deliver to everyone in the timeframe we promised. This helps since everyone knows that we are trying to deliver to everyone in a specific time. We can gently ask them to pray for us as we deliver the resources to the rest of the group. We may want to visit people most likely to require more time later in the delivery route than at the beginning.

**4. RESPECT THEIR DIRECTIONS.** If a person tells us to leave the resources on the third spire of the picket fence to the right of the hummingbird feeder, then we ought to do so. If they have a sign on their door to not use the doorbell, then we ought to resist the temptation. A text to let them know we left a bag for them on the

doorknob will work. Use a plastic bag and make sure to include a personal note. Index cards work just as well as personalized cards at this point.

**5. PRAY.** Pray while driving from one residence to the next. Thank God for the opportunity to lead a Bible study group and for open doors. Ask Him to help you be sensitive and attentive to the needs of the person you are about to encounter.

When you deliver content and someone is there to receive it, pray with the persons you encounter along the way. Pray for their needs, refraining from sharing your own needs and struggles unless asked.

## **Plan Socials with Outreach in Mind**

We feel the pressure to get together with our group but also want to watch the game between two rivals. The creative juices start flowing and we produce two plans. Plan one involves us hosting a party for our group in our backyard with the game projected onto an outdoor screen. The second option is to plan a group trip to watch the game in person. Either way we win since we address the pressure felt to get together and still get to see the game.

When we plan any event, we do so with a purpose in mind. We may have multiple purposes in mind with one purpose that outweighs the rest. I mention this here because rarely do we plan an activity where the main purpose is to engage with people who are far from God. What if we planned the same event in our backyard, complete with the projection screen, but did so with the main purpose of inviting the people far from God for whom our group is praying? How would that purpose impact how we conducted the event? Would we make sure the sound of the game was a little lower so we could engage in conversation? Would this purpose change the way we prepared, including brushing up on our salvation story?

What if the purpose of attending the big game as a group included inviting and paying the way for those we have been praying for? How would that change the conversation to and from the big game? How might that purpose impact how we prepared and what was done after the game?

We can plan all kinds of events and consider them a success because of who showed up or if we got to see the winning play and miss the greater goal. When we attend a churchwide event, most of us tend to huddle with our group or circle of friends. What if we intentionally took one of our group members or a friend and roamed through the crowd looking for people with whom we could initiate a conversation about spiritual things? What if we shared our name and number, and invited them to our group or introduced them to the leader of a group that might better fit their needs? Roaming the crowd to engage with people who may be far from God is a simple action that reinforces a reaching culture.

## **Track Actions that Move the Reaching Needle**

Salespeople track their sales numbers, but they also track the number of sales calls made. They know that their monthly sales are tied to the number of sales calls they make in that month. The more calls made, the higher the monthly sales. Some know the exact number of calls needed on average to hit their sales numbers, especially if they work on commission. The number of calls made is the critical thing for them to measure.

When it comes to our churches, we usually measure things that are beyond our control. The number of people in attendance, the number of new members, budget receipts, and the number of people baptized tend to be the more common markers. These are all known as lag measures, things that take place because of other actions (called lead measures). The number of calls made in a month by the salesperson is a lead measure. The salesperson does not control who will purchase what and how much, but they do control the number of people they call. Those calls directly impact the sales (the lag measure), so they track the number of calls.

An interesting note about lead measures is there tends to be one action that controls everything. The challenge is finding that one action. It will take time and some effort but finding that single action—the number of people for whom we pray, the number of spiritual conversations in a week, or the number of new people we seek to enroll—will help us stay focused on reaching people who are far from God.

What we track in our church and group communicates what is important. What we measure also helps us communicate the role we play in accomplishing the mission of the church.

We do not want to forget the role the Holy Spirit plays in the lives of people. He is the One guiding, convicting, and enlightening. That is not our job. But it is our job to place ourselves in a position to be used by the Holy Spirit and to carry out the great commandment and Great Commission. Here are a few things we may want to track if we want to foster a reaching culture.

**Number of spiritual conversations in a week.** People who are far from God do not wake up one day and start searching the internet with no prompting to find out more about following Jesus. God usually uses people who are willing to engage in conversations with the person who is far from God. The number of spiritual conversations we have is also something we control and is an act of obedience for us as believers.

**Percentage of people in our group praying for a specific person.** By now you should have gotten the idea that praying specifically for people far from God is important. One lead measure may be monitoring the percentage of people in our group who are actively praying for a person by name who is far from God. The goal would be for all the people in our group to be actively praying, which is why a percentage may be the best marker here. If we have a group of twelve and ten are praying for a person by name and for an encounter, while another teacher has twelve praying in his or her group, yet that group is made up of twenty people, it may look like they have more praying but the percentage gives a clearer view of what is going on.

**Number of new people discovered who are far from God.** This relates to how we evaluate a social event. We can plan a large event and discover no new people who are far from God, and it be a failure. We could also plan a gathering and have a smaller number in attendance but discover three new people who are far from God, making it a success. A related measure may be the number of people far from God invited to attend the gathering.

**Number of new groups we are seeking to create.** We have already touched on this and will give it more attention again in chapter 4, but new groups in addition to the groups already in place

are important. Ken Braddy, director of Sunday School at Lifeway, states that a new group will reach on average ten new people not already in a group, will grow faster than existing groups, and is more outward focused than existing groups.<sup>11</sup> The future of our church may depend on the number of new groups started. Related to this measure is the number of apprentices and number of potential new leaders in training. One of these may be more predictive in your setting but are so related we cannot really separate the three.

**Number of contacts made in a week.** Just like the salesperson, the number of contacts impacts the attendance. In one church I served, we tracked the number of weekly contacts. We discovered that if four hundred contacts were reported in a week, our Sunday School attendance would be more than 225. If we contacted less than four hundred, the attendance would be less than 200. We also discovered that the type of contact did not matter as long as it was personal (for example, a personal handwritten card as opposed to a generic card with a printed label).

These lead measures, actions that are predictive and controlled by us, serve as a starting point. We may need to experiment to see which one best fits our context and motivates the members of our group or church. For example, the number of spiritual conversations should be encouraging to those who had one of those conversations. We are affirming their obedience to the Great Commission. Obedience to the Savior and His teachings should be celebrated.

## **Train People to Verbally Share**

We train to what we expect in others. As teachers, we may not determine what or how training that supports sharing the gospel and praying for people far from God is provided in our church.

Note: If you are responsible for the training in your church, a process for establishing a training plan is included in the appendix on pages 59–61. Be sure to include evangelism and prayer in your plan.

We can do some things in our group that will help individuals be better prepared to engage in spiritual conversations.

**Look for opportunities in the context of the Bible study.** Most if not every Bible study will have some place that opens the door for sharing the gospel. Many times, we pass over those opportunities without thinking about it. For example, a lesson focused on 2 Kings 12:4-16 and Joash's financial reforms for the repair and upkeep of the temple looks at living up to expectations and honoring God through our financial practices. When we look at honoring God through our budget, the issue of salvation sits in the background. The resource includes this sentence in the comments about 2 Kings 12:15-16: "This story is a reminder that handling our money and financial obligations with biblical integrity bears witness of our Christian faith."<sup>12</sup> We can point our group to this statement, asking for their reaction and reinforcing the discussion by emphasizing that we honor God because of the salvation He provides through faith in His Son as opposed to trying to gain salvation through how we use our possessions. While subtle, the sentence included gives us an opportunity to share the gospel if we look for it.

Lifeway's ongoing Bible study resources include at least one lesson in every issue identified as the evangelistic lesson (usually noted in the table of contents in the resources). This lesson will include specific suggestions in the group plans for sharing the gospel. Just because one lesson is identified does not mean the other lessons in that study are void of opportunities for sharing the gospel with the group.

**Encourage response.** Telling a person about Jesus and His offer of salvation is only half of the work. We need to give individuals an opportunity to respond respectfully and reflectively. Asking them in front of the group may not be the best approach when it comes to demonstrating respect for them. We are also asking them to make a big decision which requires some careful thought. We may want to let the group know we are available to visit with them after the group time or give a phone number so they can talk to us more about what it means to follow Jesus. However we do it, we need to make sure they are not left wanting to know more or wanting to respond without us giving them the opportunity to do so.

**Be prepared to share.** This should be obvious, but we all should be able to tell someone how we became followers of Jesus and how they can do the same. If we need some help, we can always



point to the information on the inside front cover of Lifeway's ongoing resources. We may have a favorite verse (John 3:16; John 14:6; Romans 6:23) or set of verses (Romans 3:23; 6:23; 5:8; 10:9-10; Ephesians 2:1-13) we point to when sharing the gospel. The point is not so much which verse or verses we use, but that we are prepared and ready to share when the opportunity arises.

**Invite people to share their salvation stories.** The people in our group have stories to tell if we let them. Some will not tell their life story unless we invite them to do so. We may want to give them a heads-up prior to the group time that we want them to share about how they came to Jesus. This also gives a way of helping the people in our group improve as witnesses for Christ.

**Encourage the group to invite and bring people who are far from God.** By encouraging our group to pray for opportunities to share the gospel, inviting people not currently involved in a Bible study group, and bringing the people they invite, we may find ourselves being more intentional in sharing the gospel while we teach. Notice that invite and bring are differentiated. We can invite people to attend, but if we invite them and *offer* to pick them up or meet them in the parking lot, they will more likely accept the invitation.

**Take them with us.** When we distribute the resources to the group or make an appointment to share with someone, invite people in the group to go along. They can pray while we share, or we may ask them to tell about how they became a follower of Jesus.

## **Tell Stories that Celebrate the Culture**

What we celebrate is what gets done and one of the best ways to celebrate is by telling stories. But not just any stories, stories that reinforce the culture. To close out this chapter, we will look at a story that gives us a glimpse of a reaching culture.

A group was commissioned to help start a new church in an underserved area in the community. This new church met in a local school at the time. One of the members of the group began hosting a weekly prayer time in their home where anyone could come, with the understanding that the focus of the gathering would be prayer for those who are far from God. A few attended that first gathering

and prayed for a couple of people who were far from God for twenty minutes or so. More began attending in the weeks that followed and the time in prayer grew in length and intensity. This weekly prayer time remained focused on people who were far from God and for the opportunity to share with them. That prayer time became the catalyst for that new church as they began to see people become Christ followers. It was not just random people who were coming to Christ, but the people for whom they were specifically praying. What had once been a small group with a vision for God to start a new church in an underserved part of their city grew into an established church that made a difference in this once underserved community.

Retelling this story helps encourage a new generation of believers in that church to build on that practice and remain focused on praying for people who are far from God. Along with setting aside specific times to reach out to others, planning events with a reaching purpose, and tracking the predictive actions they control (lead measures), our church and group can begin to foster a reaching culture.



Chapter 4

# **ADDRESSING OBSTRUCTIONS**

## *What obstacles might we see and how can we remove them?*

Irritants can get in the way of us seeing clearly. It may be a large item that is obvious, but sometimes those small particles can have just as much of an impact. We may wear protective glasses when doing woodwork or carry eye drops to keep our eyes watered when doing an outside activity. Either way, we are trying to deal with any anticipated obstructions that may get in our way of seeing well and staying focused.

When it comes to establishing a reaching culture, we can anticipate some irritants and obstructions to get in the way. Some of these irritants are natural responses and others are deviously clear to all. Either way, we need to anticipate some of them and prepare to address things that could get in the way of keeping a focus on reaching people. In the next few pages, we will not be able to address every potential obstacle, but we can address some of the more common ones.

### **We Tried It and It Did Not Work Here**

Somewhere along the way, we may very well hear some who are skeptical or resistant to a change. We tried it and it did not or will not work here are not new objections. Once again, we turn to Arthur Flake and his journal. He identified “won’t work here” and “tried that” as two objections to developing a reaching Sunday School ministry.<sup>13</sup> Flake heard the same thing in 1919 and these reasons are still being used more than one hundred years later.

These generic and resilient reasons tend to be a way of hiding a myriad of real reasons if we can just get beyond the smoke screen. Most people in our group like things the way they are. They do not want to appear to be exclusive or arrogant, but they have gotten accustomed to the others in the group and how things work. They trust the other people there and adding a new person puts that trust at risk.

They may also have an experience that haunts them. When we start talking about reaching people we are not currently reaching, what some hear is our group is going to become two groups, we are going to reach some people who are not like us, or we are about to lose something we value. These things may happen, and they may need to happen. In some cases, people are resistant to reaching others because more people involved means new people who they see as a potential threat to their influence.

The people who raise questions serve as a check for us as leaders. We began this book by looking in the mirror—objections can make us look deeper into our motives. We may see ourselves in the objections and need to ask God to heal our scars and remove our fears.

We can also look for and seek to understand the reason behind the expressed reason, which usually deals with something that is lost. In their book *Managing Transitions*, William and Susan Bridges dedicate a chapter to the importance of defining what is lost when dealing with change.<sup>14</sup> We must recognize that when we foster a culture of reaching, we are leaving behind the current culture, a loss in some way. Knowing this can help us better understand any opposition expressed.

When we hear someone express one of these long-used reasons for remaining where we are, we should turn to God. We can ask God for wisdom, to help us love and understand those who voice concerns, and pray for and with them. Honestly seeking God with another person will change both us and that person. God is capable of showing His desires more so than we are, and we need to let Him do so by inviting as many people as possible to corporately approach God in prayer.

## **Settling for Growth in Attendance Rather than Conversions**

A second obstruction we need to carefully remove is settling for an increase in attendance for attendance sake. Most of us like knowing the attendance in our group is increasing or at least staying the same. We may even like being the largest group in the church. But we need to make sure that the increase in attendance reflects the Great Commission. If all the new people we add to our group are

already followers of Christ, we need to pause and ask why. Granted, we want people new to our community to get plugged in to a local church, but we also need to make sure those who are far from God are also welcomed and being sought.

We can grow our group by gathering those who are “concerned” about the direction of their former group, who like the way we teach, who feel their needs for fellowship are better met, or who are looking for a group where less is expected of them. Some of these are legitimate issues, but not always. If our group has not invited or brought one person who is far from God to our group in the past six months, then we have a problem. Our responsibility as leaders is not about comfort, but about shepherding a group to become more like Christ, and Christ was all about reaching those who are far from God.

One of the ways we can combat the allure of the larger number is making sure we measure the success of our group by things other than attendance. We examined this in the previous chapter, but it bears repeating. The percentage of people in our group praying for a person by name who is far from God, the number of spiritual conversations we have in a week, and the number of people who are far from God that we invite and bring to our group may be better indicators of a group promoting a reaching culture.

## **Functionally Closed Groups**

Most of us reading this book who teach an adult group have most likely been with the same group for more than eighteen months. In those months, we no doubt walked as a group with someone who faced a challenge. This challenge may have been emotional, financial, relational, or spiritual and the person going through the difficult time relied on the group to help him or her get through it. The group bonded as a result and are closer than ever. This bond is both good and bad, especially when we are talking about open groups functioning in a reaching culture.

In effect, we can become functionally closed, making it difficult for a new person to catch up with the rest of the group relationally. Ken Braddy identifies eighteen months as the time when this tends to happen in most groups which is why I noted that time in the

opening sentence of this section. Braddy's solution is the starting of new groups.<sup>15</sup> New ongoing Bible study groups help our church reach new people, mostly people who are far from God.

A first step is leading our current group to pray for new groups. When we think about praying for new groups, there are at least three ways we can lead our group to pray.

**1. Pray for a new group just starting.** Our church may have a new group that is in the early stages of starting. They will face challenges and frustrations as they get started, and we can encourage the teacher and leaders through prayer. We can let them know we are praying for them, standing with them as they seek to start a new group. In some cases, all a person wants to know is that someone is praying for him or her, and we can be that person or group.

**2. Pray for a group that started a new group.** New groups are born from an existing group. A teacher may be called upon to leave their current group or some people involved in a group may feel the need to help get a new group off the ground by joining that new group. The group that gave birth to the new group needs our prayer as well. The vacuum left by those who move to the new group will open the door for new opportunities and for new growth. The old group needs our prayer support too!

**3. Pray for us to start a new group.** We can ask God to help us determine if we need to help start a new group. God may tell us to support other groups who are starting new groups, or He may reveal to us that we need to start a new Bible study group. The point is asking God and not deciding for Him. We can ask God to give us eyes to see the need and the courage to help address the need. Our responsibility is to seek God's direction and act based on His answer.

## Accepting the Come and See Narrative

We want people to come to our group to discover the truth of God's Word and how they fit into God's redemptive plan. But they will not come and see unless we go and invite. In recent years, many have bought into the idea that making a personal visit to someone



somehow works against us reaching people who are far from God. We have the idea that people will be so intrigued by us as believers that they will decide to attend our group or church just out of curiosity. We would be hard pressed to find any successful business that carries that idea. They will not come to us so we must go to them.

Just for a moment, let's go back in history. In the early 1900s, Southern Baptists began focusing on helping others understand what an effective Sunday School looked like. *The Convention Normal Manual for Sunday School Workers* printed in 1902 and the *New Convention Normal Manual* of 1913 were a starting point. Both books included a checklist of items for church leaders and teachers that were carried out by effective Sunday Schools.

Interestingly enough, weekly or regular visitation were not a part of the original standard or scorecard in 1902 and 1913. An annual census or canvas surveying an area was recommended and some type of system for staying connected with people found through that census or survey was encouraged. No other standard was included.

A new scorecard or standard came about in 1919 and 1922. Arthur Flake wrote *Building a Standard Sunday School*, and some type of regular outreach time was included. The 1919 booklet called for a monthly day set aside for contacting people while the 1922 book under the same title called for a weekly day set aside for this purpose. This weekly practice would be the standard for Southern Baptist Sunday Schools for the years that followed. Flake called for every person on a group list who was absent to be contacted, for people who had been discovered in the annual census/survey to be contacted, and for people encountered along the way to be invited.

When comparing the 1902 expectations to the 1922 expectations, the call to make a weekly personal visit is one the biggest differences. Flake presented this challenge on the heels of the Spanish flu epidemic that began in March of 1918. The fear and isolation of the day called for this approach. So did the need.

Flake reports in his 1919 book that in the communities canvased or surveyed, of those who were willing to be enrolled in a Sunday School group in Southern states he learned the following: "more than three-fourths of the boys and girls, nine to twelve years of age, are not Christians; that more than half of those thirteen to sixteen

years of age are not Christians; and that a little less than half of the young people, seventeen to twenty, do not claim to be Christians.”<sup>16</sup> To clarify, his numbers related to those who were enrolled in a Sunday School and not the general population. If a person chose not to participate in the census or to be enrolled in a group, they would not have been included in these figures given by Flake. We would have to assume the actual number of people who were far from God in the community to be even higher.

Would we view our communities being in any less of a need today? Do we think people are less skeptical and isolated from others today than they were in 1922?

Fostering a reaching culture calls for us to schedule a time on the calendar for going to invite those not in a Bible study group and to protect that time—for us and the group we lead. I am not sure when or how often, but I do know any day or days we set aside will probably be more than we have now.

How do we change to become a reaching culture when the mindset is that to personally contact people will drive them away? For starters, we invite the person who objects to go with us to make a contact with a person who has not attended our group in a while or to make a personal contact with a person we know to be far from God. And we go. People will talk if we invite them to do so. Once in the presence of the absentee or the person far from God, we invite the person we are contacting to tell his or her story. We listen and invite, offering to bring him or her to our group so we can hear his or her story and so he or she can hear the stories of others as we study the Bible together. We make sure the person knows we love him or her, and that God loves him or her too. We pray with the person. And we do so with the unsure group member watching with an open invitation to participate in the conversation as well.

We will face obstructions when we begin to foster a reaching culture. We may be surprised by who objects and by the tactics used to keep things the same. But with God’s wisdom, we can lead our group to become an inviting force that reaches those who are far from God. There are plenty of people who are far from God out there for us to reach if we want to.

# CHALLENGE

*Where do we go from here?*

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The year was 520 BC. Darius was now king, and he put down several revolts leading to a time of peace in the Persian empire. This opened the door for the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem some eighteen years prior to finish the work they had started. When this group returned, they had a great start, rebuilding the altar and laying the foundation for a rebuilt temple. But opposition arose and the work stopped. The incomplete work sat for nearly seventeen years, serving as a daily reminder of their fears and failure.

Instead of focusing on restoring the temple, they worked on their own homes (see Haggai 1:5-9). They had given up on the temple, knowing that they would never be able to restore it to what it had been. God sent Haggai to deliver four messages to get them moving. In his second sermon, found in Haggai 2:1-9, the prophet attacked the problem head on.

**PERSPECTIVE.** Haggai defined the problem in terms of their perspective. Some of the people could remember the glory of the original temple or could at least tell stories about the glory days. Those memories worked against them, causing them to be deflated. The times we are most vulnerable for complacency to set in is when we have success or when we are deflated. When we succeed, we stop doing what we did to get us there or get satisfied, ushering in a time of complacency. When we are deflated, we begin to accept defeat as our new normal and give up. We accept the new state and become complacent, ignoring what might be. The people of Jerusalem needed a culture change.

**PRODUCTIVE.** Haggai challenged the governor, high priest, and the people to get over what was and to get to work (see Haggai 2:4). They had let the foundation sit far too long and it was time to do something about it. Granted they had been busy building, but their focus was on their homes. They were busy but focused on things that did

just that—kept them busy so they did not have to think about the what-could-have-been and their own shortcomings.

The Bible has a great deal to say about work. We are told Adam and Eve were placed in the garden to work it. People who do not work should not be allowed to eat, and we are to work to take care of our family needs. We are also told that we can be so busy doing that we miss what's important (Mary and Martha being an example).

Paul encouraged his protégé to work as well. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul called on Timothy to preach, be ready whenever called upon to deliver the truth, and to not allow the pressure of itchy ears to deter him. In the middle of all this, Paul directed Timothy to do the work (there is our word) of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5). He was telling this to a pastor who had been involved in the early missionary trips recorded in Acts. Paul even called Timothy a fellow worker in spreading the gospel (1 Thessalonians 3:2). If anyone did not need to be told to do the work of an evangelist, most of us would think that would be Timothy. But preaching, refuting, and standing for the truth can consume all a person's time and we ignore the *work*.

**PRESENCE.** Haggai declared to the people in Jerusalem that God would be present with them as they did the work. He used words and phrases like “be strong” and “do not be afraid” (another way of saying be courageous) when addressing them.

These same things were told to Solomon when David commissioned him to build the first temple.

*Then David said to his son Solomon, “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Don’t be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He won’t leave you or abandon you until all the work for the service of the Lord’s house is finished.”*

1 CHRONICLES 28:20

In both cases, the key issue was not about the work as much as it was about God's presence. Success and contentment are found not in the building but in God's presence. In *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby taught this principle: we are to find out where God is working and join Him.<sup>17</sup> This was what Solomon did and this was

what Haggai encouraged the people to do. By doing the work that God commanded them to do, they would experience God's presence, which was the whole point behind the temple in the first place.

**PROSPECTUS.** Haggai concluded his sermon with a picture of the future. That picture portrayed a better day. He told about a day when the final glory of the house would be greater than the original (Haggai 2:9). For any who had seen Solomon's temple, that promise must have been a stretch, but that was the promise.

The promise of a better day causes us to recall the words found in Hebrews. We are told about the faithful who viewed themselves as foreigners in this world in search of a better place, a place prepared for them by the Father (see Hebrews 11:13-16). They were farsighted.

The people who heard Haggai were being called upon to build a building that would one day be renovated and expanded by Herod. The temple being built would be visited by Jesus in the flesh. He would stand in front of that structure and declare that something greater than the temple was here (Matthew 12:6). This alone made the rebuilt temple greater than the one built by Solomon which the people in Haggai's day were so distraught over.

Like the people in Haggai's day, we can fret over what once was. We hear the stories of revival and "everyone attending church." We know what the research says about the trends in our country and how our future will not be the same. But that does not mean that it will not be less than what once was. It may be greater! In fact, we need to change our perspective and get to work.

We have a choice, to join God and enjoy His presence or live in the corner distraught over what was and forgetting that God has a glorious future He is moving His creation toward. It is time to work in anticipation of what the prophets called "that day," the day when God redeems and restores His creation.

# APPENDIX

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## KNOWING YOUR COMMUNITY

Knowing our community and who lives there can help us better understand those who are already a part of our congregation and identify potential groups yet to be reached. These potential groups can be those living near current attenders or within a defined geographic area around the church's location. Trends, changes, and the underserved in the church's ministry area can help leaders make ministry and strategy decisions.

### A Place for Demographics

Church ministry must remain focused on people. Each demographic category examined represents a group of actual people living in a defined area. Each piece of demographic data gives one snippet of insight into who those people are.

When driving or walking through the neighborhoods surrounding your church facilities, what do you see? Are there swing sets, tricycles, basketball goals, or cars with high school parking permits? What kinds of vehicles do you see? What type of housing do you find: apartments, duplexes, or single-family homes? Do you notice work vehicles and if so from what companies? When you talk to the people in these neighborhoods, what are they talking about? How does what you find in the neighborhoods around your church facilities compare to what you discover when visiting the members of your church?

These questions assume we are talking to people. We may be introverts but that does not excuse us from talking to people. Nor does the claim that people do not want to be bothered at home. We need to find ways to connect with those in our ministry area. How will we be able to effectively minister to people we do not know and who do not know us?

So, what does this have to do with demographics? Here is a warning: we cannot allow demographic research to replace interacting with the people we serve and hope to serve.

Demographics serve as a tool to confirm insights we gain as we interact with and observe what is going on in our ministry area. As such, demographics are one more tool for us to use in understanding those we serve and could serve. Insights gained can help us anticipate changes in the area, make wise staffing decisions, and speak into our understanding of the ministry area.

A couple of more warnings before moving on. Not all demographic information is helpful. For example, we may find out that the average age of the people in the neighborhood around our church facilities is thirty-seven. We do the math and find out that the average age of the people in our church is also thirty-seven. The problem with that is the people in the neighborhood could be dominated by people who are in their late thirties and early forties while those attending our church are in their teens and fifties. The average ages can be the same, but that average does not tell the true story.

Secondly, not all demographic information matters. The temptation is to examine all the information and lose focus on what matters. For example, if we are focused on helping people who teach Generation Z in Bible study groups, then we will want to focus on the demographics of the specific people teaching that group. The demographics of the larger group of church leaders gets in the way. The demographics of those who will be trained needs to be the focus. If all the people being trained are also Gen Zers, then our training may have less merit than if those being trained are from a different generation. The disparity gives credence to the work.

## Getting Started

One goal of demographics is to define who we are now. A first step is creating a pin map. A pin map tells us where the people we currently serve live. We are trying to create a visual that defines who lives where. The first action in creating a pin map is securing an accurate map of the area around the church. We will need the map to be large enough for us to place markers for everyone who is a current attendee of our church. We will then want to mount the map on a large board. The second action is securing a list of the attendees by address. Once we have these two items, we need to

decide how we will categorize the attenders. We will use a different color for each category when plotting people on the map. We may use one color for regular attenders and a different color for members who rarely attend. We may have other categories within these two larger categories that call for other pin colors such as families and another color for single-parent families. We may also choose to plot the names of people who have been guests in the past twelve months, meaning yet a different color or colors. This also means we will need to secure push pins with colored heads, enough for each category. Now the work begins. We begin placing pins on the map, plotting where each family and attendee lives (Some church accounting software includes modules and features for creating a series of pin maps. Some of these features may come with added costs, but that cost may be worth it in time saved).

Some have found it helpful to create a series of pin maps. On one, they may plot the locations of active members and on another the locations of church staff homes. Some other ideas for the map series may be Sunday School teachers, deacons, prospects/guests, and committee volunteers. Looking at the series can give a better visual of the dynamics at play within the church body.

Pin maps give us a visual understanding of who the church is currently. The majority may or may not live near the church's meeting location. We may discover clusters of church attenders in different areas within our city. We may also find out the number of other churches they drive by on their way to our church.

Everything we observe should raise questions that will help us better understand the people to whom we currently minister. It will also give us clues as to if we focus on the area immediately around the church's facilities or the areas in which we find clusters of our current attenders. Another source to consider is the Annual Church Profile. For Southern Baptist churches, the Annual Church Profile (ACP) is an annual survey of statistical information administered by Lifeway. Gathering ACP reports from various years can give us some comparison points that may help us as well.



## Defining the Ministry Area

Ministry area can be seen in one of three ways. The first view is the area immediately around the church facilities. Most recommend a two-mile radius as a starting point, but that may depend upon your location. Natural and man-made dividers like highways, bodies of water, and other structures may impact the radius as well.

A second view is looking at the demographics in the neighborhoods where clusters of current members live. Looking at this view gives us clues as to how we might enable our current attenders to reach the people who live around them. In this strategy, each current attendee is a potential missionary on the field.

A third view is doing a drive time study. The vast majority will drive less than twenty-five minutes to get to the church facilities. The time may vary depending on the community in which your church sits. People in a rural area may be more willing to drive a farther distance than people in an urban area where everything they need is within five minutes. Notice the criteria is minutes and not miles. Someone might drive twenty-five minutes but cover less than ten miles depending on the roads and stops along the way. To figure out the ministry area, we can get in a car and drive away from the church facilities until we are twenty-five minutes away. We may get different distances going different directions.

A fourth view is a combination of all three. In this view, the goal is to put as many hooks in the water as we can get.

## Making Personal Observations

One of Yogi Berra's more memorable sayings was, "You can observe a lot by watching."<sup>18</sup> This is especially true when we want to understand the age groups and lifestyles of those living within a defined ministry area. We may want to spend time in a local coffee shop in that defined area on multiple days in a week at the same time (Be sure and order a beverage. Do not just hang out). Watch who frequents the establishment. Do the same people come at the same time each day? If they do, we might casually strike up a conversation with them as they drink their coffee.

Another option to consider is our neighborhood grocery store. Take a cart, place one or two items in the cart (we always need something from the grocery store!) and slowly go aisle by aisle through the store. Observe the customer base. What age groups or lifestyle types shop at this store? For example, many grocery stores have a specific day or morning for senior adults to shop. Go by during that time. If the store is full of seniors that will tell us there are probably a large group of senior adults within a few miles of the store. Likewise, if the store is void of seniors at that time, it could tell us that there are not many senior adults in the area. As we visit the grocery store at other times, observations about the customers give us additional demographic information. For example, if we notice a number of senior adults at times other than “senior day” it could communicate that these individuals are more affluent and don’t necessarily need the “discount” of senior day. Other days and times of day will also give us additional information. For example, a visit to the grocery store from 4:00-6:00 p.m. on a weekday will give us a broader view of the number of parents with children.

After our visits to coffee shops, restaurants, parks, and grocery stores in the area, we will want to write about what we observed. We may even give a name (or names) to the typical person we encountered and then list characteristics. We are trying to create a profile based on what we observed.

## **Securing External Demographic Data**

A variety of sources can be used when searching for demographic information that looks at the general population in an area. This data is external in that attendance in your church is not a prerequisite. In some cities and municipalities, the local chamber of commerce may have data they are willing to share. The chamber may also have someone who can help you analyze the data as well. The United States Census Bureau is another source ([census.gov](https://www.census.gov)). Not only does it have the data, but it also has tutorials and apps that will help you be a better interpreter of the data collected. You may also consult one or more demographic services. The Association of Religion Data Archives ([thearda.com](https://thearda.com)) is a free website that provides access to several tools that can help you get a data picture. This site also

includes tutorials that will help you gather and interpret the data. A variety of other fee-based services exist that one may consult.

When looking at the data, pay attention to population trends, income fluctuation, ethnicity, religious background, family types and composition, housing type, and psychographic data. The goal is to better serve a defined community with the demographic data being one source to better understand who is in that defined community. We may also discover the underserved, giving rise to ministry initiatives for serving and reaching all people in a defined area who have yet to be reached by our church.

We will also need to know some of that same information about the current attenders, otherwise we will have nothing for comparison. The for-fee services are helpful here because they can craft and administer surveys of our current attendees to help us define the demographics of those who currently attend our church.

Once all the data is gathered and sorted, do not interpret it alone. Talk to city and county leaders and ask them questions about the data. Visit with other church leaders and compare notes about what they are observing in the community. Reach out to denominational leaders, especially the director of missions in your area. If a college is in the area or nearby, we may find professors who can help us interpret what we have found, and they may even point us to a student who can help us do some of the research.

## **Conclusion**

Demographics is one tool we can use to help us gain an understanding of the people we serve or want to serve. Other tools need to be used as well including observing others, dialoguing with people, and prayer. Using demographic information well can help us discover unmet needs as well as give us deeper insight into how to pray for the people we are hoping to reach.

# SIX STEPS

## FOR BUILDING A TRAINING PLAN

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Most of us know we need to train people if we want them to succeed. Aubrey Malphurs states: "If we ask our people to lead any ministry of the church, we are responsible to provide them with continual leadership training. If we cannot do this, we have no business asking them to serve, doing both them and the ministry an injustice."<sup>19</sup> This may seem harsh, but there is a great deal of wisdom in what Dr. Malphurs shares, and we need to heed his wisdom. Some training can be done on the job, but not all of it. Ongoing training for our Bible study teachers and leaders is essential if we expect them to succeed and flourish.

A big question is: how do we put together a plan for training our leaders? Here are six steps for creating an effective plan for ongoing leader training for our Sunday School teachers and leaders.

### **STEP 1: List all the tasks.**

Before we can start training people, we need to define what we are training them to do. We begin with the creation of a list of everything we expect a Bible study teacher or leader to do or be able to help someone else do. We cannot forget to include things we expect them to know as well, like who to call if someone in their group needs counseling. We will want to invite some of the Bible study teachers to help us create the list.

### **STEP 2: Categorize the tasks.**

Next, we should take our list of tasks and categorize them as either handout, video, audio, or strategic. If that item can be addressed by a handout, then create the handout. We do not need to call a meeting to explain how to make coffee. We might create a list of local resources we have vetted that could be distributed as a handout as well.

Some things can be handled by video or audio, especially things that rarely change. Visiting a hospital today is remarkably similar to visiting a hospital twenty years ago. Shooting a video using a modern smartphone can be just as effective as a professionally produced video.

The tasks we identify as strategic are the ones we need to address personally. These may be strategic because of the task (like teaching evangelistically) or because of the needs of our church (such as a church without a pastor, so pastoral care may fall on the Bible study leaders).

Within each category, we will want to rank each task. Doing so helps us know where to begin when it comes to creating handouts, shooting videos, recording audios, and scheduling face-to-face training.

### **STEP 3: Schedule the training.**

Now we will need to determine how often we plan to offer training. Most leaders provide either monthly or quarterly training. If we do it monthly, we will most likely conduct nine meetings (we will not plan a meeting in December or July, and the meeting prior to the start of the Sunday School year will be more inspirational in nature). If we conduct training quarterly, we will most likely conduct three training meetings with the one immediately prior to the new Sunday School year being inspirational. In our world today, personally does not necessarily mean face-to-face, but it does mean a live gathering led by us in some way.

Assign the strategic tasks to each of the training dates selected. We will want to place the more strategic tasks on the days we anticipate having the largest attendance.

Note: Many are finding Sunday after worship to be an ideal time for training leaders. Provide lunch and as the leaders begin to eat, the training can begin. When taking this approach, we will want to make sure we find people to watch children so that our preschool and kid's Sunday School teachers can attend the training as well.

## **STEP 4: Gather our content.**

Create a file (paper or digital) for each task and start placing content in that folder. In effect, we are building a go-to source for the future. After conducting training on that subject, place a copy of the plans used in that folder. If someone calls us in the future needing help, we at least have a starting point.

Note: I have more than thirty years' worth of content in my folders, adding articles and ideas regularly. This folder set is invaluable to me.

## **STEP 5: Conduct the training.**

Prepare to lead the training, and then do it to the best of your ability. If you are *the* leader, then you ought to be the one leading the training.

If we are not experts on a subject, we need to read all we can about that subject. We can then show participants how to do what we are asking them to do to the best of our ability. Training others to lead Bible study groups makes us valuable to the church. Room is always made around the table for a person who helps others succeed.

## **STEP 6: Evaluate.**

We want to evaluate on two different fronts. First, we need to evaluate ourselves so we can grow as trainers/coaches. Ask people who attended the meeting to give feedback on the training. Ask, "What are some things you wish we had done differently?" Let them know we want to improve and need their help.

We also need to evaluate the training plan. Other needs may have surfaced since we put together the training plan. If we believe these new needs to be strategic, then we may look at how we can rearrange the remaining training sessions.

# HELPING A PERSON TURN TO GOD

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A person who is far from God needs to know some core ideas that help them understand where they are. Here are three things we will want to make sure to share with a person who is far from God, using some simple terms to do so.

## **IDEA 1. We are far from God.**

Everyone has disobeyed God in some way. The Holy Spirit makes a person aware of his or her sin and spiritual need (John 16:8-11). Each person must reach a point where he or she realizes something must change—turning away from sin and trust in oneself, hating what God hates and the things that separates us from Him (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 9:1-6; 2 Corinthians 7:10).

The change in direction (what the Bible calls “repentance”) is driven by a conviction of personal sin that separates the person from God and causes that person to be held accountable, to face God’s judgment (John 16:8; Romans 3:23; 6:23; Hebrews 9:27; 1 John 1:9).

This realization can be summed up in the word *admit*. We admit to God that we are sinners and repent, turning away from our sin.

## **IDEA 2. God loves us and will forgive us if we repent and believe.**

God has taken the initiative to demonstrate His love for every person by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead (Acts 4:12; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Romans 5:8; 1 Peter 3:18; Ephesians 1:7a). Jesus died, taking what we were due as our substitute. We can respond to that love with repentance through faith in Jesus (John 3:16; 10:10; Ephesians 2:8-9).

The emphasis here is to *believe*. By faith, we receive Jesus Christ as God’s Son and accept Jesus’s gift of forgiveness of our sin.

### **IDEA 3. Jesus is the only path to the Father.**

This forgiveness is not automatic. Each person must express an act of faith in Jesus Christ—an action of the will and the mind in response to the work of Christ—to believe, to trust (1 John 1:9; Acts 20:21; Romans 1:17). Confession of faith in Christ as Savior and Lord is an outward expression of an inward experience (Matthew 16:24; Romans 10:9-10).

The moment a person expresses his or her faith, Jesus becomes that person's Savior and that person is made right with God (justified; Romans 4:1-3). God forgives all of a repentant person's sins and removes them "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12). Nothing else is needed. The person is now a believer, a disciple of Jesus Christ, baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

New believers are like newborn babies who need to grow up (1 Peter 2:2-3). New believers are to be transformed into the image of Christ. When Christ is Lord, as God transforms them, believers submit to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

This third idea is best understood in terms of *confess*. We confess our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.



## END NOTES

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## FOCUS ON THE GOSPEL

If we want our church and Bible study groups to focus on reaching people far from God, then we must create a culture that encourages and celebrates reaching people. In this book, we examine ways of creating a culture of outreach, giving some practical ideas for building and reinforcing such a climate.

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