

IT BEGINS
WITH PRAYER



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Foreword

The act of praying is first seen in Genesis 20, and you will find stories of people who prayed throughout the Bible. We see their example, and we observe how God answered the prayers of His people:

- *Isaac prayed for his barren wife Rebekah, and she conceived a child (Gen. 25:21).*
- *Hannah prayed for a male offspring, and God answered by giving her Samuel (1 Sam. 1).*
- *The Lord consecrated the temple after Solomon prayed (1 Kings 8–9).*
- *Job prayed for his friends, and God restored his fortunes and doubled his previous possessions (Job 42:10).*
- *Young King Asa prayed for God to deliver his people from Egypt's million man army, and God did just that (2 Chron. 14).*
- *Nehemiah prayed a short silent prayer before approaching King Artaxerxes (Neh. 2), and God used the king to grant Nehemiah's request.*
- *Daniel continued to pray three times a day to the Lord his God in spite of an edict to pray only to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 6:10). Daniel and his friends later experienced a great deliverance from the fire.*
- *Jonah prayed from the belly of the fish, and God heard and answered his prayer (Jonah 2).*
- *Jesus prayed early in the morning (Mark 1:35).*
- *Paul and Silas prayed from the depths of a jail and were delivered (Acts 16:25).*
- *The prayers of all the saints are presented to God in heaven (Rev. 8:3–4).*

As we gather together in groups to study the Bible, we continue to pray just as people have for centuries. We lift up our needs and the needs of others to God. We trust that He hears each prayer and that He answers according to His will. But in some groups, prayer has moved beyond simply praying for each other's needs. In some groups, prayer has shifted to a different topic: the lost.

In a growing number of Bible study groups, prayers are regularly presented to God on behalf of people the group is trying to reach with the gospel. In some cases the person who is far from God is a friend, a family member, a coworker, a schoolmate, or a neighbor. In these groups, the focus is on the Great Commission, and the heartbeat of the group members is for people who have not placed their faith in Christ as Savior.

In this year's Sunday School support resource, my friend and colleague Dwayne McCrary helps us understand how we can lead our groups to pray for people far from God. Dwayne practices what he is about to preach! I have seen him regularly pray for family members and members of the two Bible study groups he leads at his church. May we all become consumed with praying for the lost. Jesus came to seek and to save them—and to die for them. How could we not pray for their spiritual salvation?

Ken Braddy
Director of Sunday School

Introduction

I don't count myself an expert on prayer. That may be a strange way to start a book about prayer, but it is the truth. Many people are more accomplished pray-ers. Lots of great books exist that can give us insight into the practice of prayer in general.

Most of these books include some common themes. Prayer matters. God hears the prayers of His people. We must humbly admit our needs to God. The Holy Spirit will help us pray even when we don't know what to say. Faith in God is required. Sin, anger, the way we treat our spouses, and unforgiveness can get in the way of prayer. Prayer is about discovering God's will and honoring Him by acting on what He reveals and has revealed in His Word.

All these things are important to remember in our discipline of prayer. If you are looking for help on how to improve your prayer life, please take a look at the books listed in Appendix 1 (p. 46). God has used the lessons found in those books to shape the prayer lives of many.

One thing that seems to be missing is a book that helps us understand how Sunday School and prayer intersect. Most of us would declare our class to be a praying class. We may start with a prayer, conclude with a prayer, and gather prayer requests. But should prayer play a more strategic role in our groups? What is the relationship between a reaching Sunday School and prayer? How does prayer foster a sense of community? What role does prayer play in serving the people in the group?

To help you understand how I got here, let me tell you about a special journal.

Journals fascinate me. On one page can be the most compelling insight, while a recipe for chili sits on the facing page. Journals don't tell us everything about the people who wrote them, but they do give us a glimpse into their priorities and struggles at a specific point in their lives.

In the entryway of LifeWay's corporate headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee sit three display cases housing items with historical significance. In the middle case sits a copy of the 1902 *The Normal Studies for Sunday*

School Workers (the first leader training book published by what is now LifeWay) and the journal of Arthur Flake, the first director of Sunday School for LifeWay. The pages usually on display from Flake's journal are his notes for growing a Sunday School which were the genesis for much of the Sunday School growth in Southern Baptist life in the 1900s.

As one looks at the pages on display, one may begin to wonder what nuggets are recorded on the other pages. Are there any grocery lists? What other insights sit on the other pages?

A group of us were granted the opportunity to find out. The journal was removed from the case so we could examine the other pages. We created an archived set of photos so we could study the contents well beyond that day. We discovered that the journal was actually a marked-up copy of the 1918 edition of *The New Convention Normal Manual for Sunday School Workers*. The book was printed in three sections with blank pages included at the end of each section. Like many of us might do, Flake read the book, marking, underlining, and commenting in the margins. He then wrote his ideas and thoughts on the blank pages at the end of the second section. These notes would become the outline for Flake's 1922 book, *Building a Standard Sunday School*.

As we looked at these pages, themes began to emerge, with prayer being one of those themes. Flake obviously believed prayer to be a dynamic force behind the work of a Sunday School class. Prayer was more than an addition to what he wrote, but it was a starting point.

This led to some sobering questions. Do we view prayer as a teaching tool more than as a conversation with our Creator? What is our real purpose of prayer circles, prayer chains, or whatever system we use to collect prayer requests? Do we treat prayer as an extra to be added to make the recipe work?

Do we view prayer the same way we view water when using a cake mix? Some baking mixes require only water. We need not add eggs, oil, baking soda, or anything else—just water. However, some of us simply can't resist the temptation. We have to add something other than water. We may add buttermilk, almond milk, egg whites, chocolate milk, or olive oil just to see what happens or to give the cake mix our own personal touch.

We add water or any other liquid we may have on hand. Water is boring and every day. However, each liquid we add changes the final result. It is no longer the cake like the photo on the box but our own extra special cake. We view it as richer, better, and more to our liking. But the mix was formulated so that it works best if we add just water. The other stuff gets in the way of baking the perfect cake, browning, or pancake. The manufacturers really meant for us to add just water.

When it comes to prayer and our Bible study groups, do we treat prayer the same way? Do we view it as “just add prayer” or “add just prayer”? Do we choose to add other things in addition? Does prayer seem simple and every day? Do we add other things to set our group apart?

Why is it so important for us to rethink prayer and begin to view it as “add just prayer” as opposed to “just add prayer”?

To add just prayer reflects obedience. Paul directed the Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians to pray (Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17). After the dedication of the temple, God revealed to Solomon that if the people of Israel would pray and repent when facing God’s discipline, He would heal their land (2 Chron. 7:12-14).

To add just prayer demonstrates dependence upon God. The psalmist declared his dependence on God by asking, “Who do I have in heaven but you?” (Ps. 73:25). Turning to God alone in prayer reminds us that we are finite while He is all powerful. We need Him; prayer reminds us of that.

To add just prayer builds trust in God. As we see God answer our prayers, we learn we can trust Him to be God. We see this in Gideon as he took steps that led to greater acts of trust in God. (See Judg. 6-7.) He moved from building an altar, to destroying an idol in the dark, to leading 300 men to battle the Midianites.

To add just prayer opens the door for God alone to be honored. Paul and Barnabas were hailed as gods after healing a lame man in Lystra. They were careful to point to Jesus as the One who acted through them. (See Acts 14.) By taking an “add just prayer” approach, we can point to God only as the One who acts on our behalf. It isn’t through our creativity or effort; it is God who does it.

The purpose of this book is to challenge us to rethink the role prayer plays in our Bible study groups. Over the next few pages, my hope is that we will rediscover the necessity of prayer as we reach others with the gospel, build community, and serve each other.

CHAPTER 1

Reaching Begins with Prayer

What is the relationship between a reaching Sunday School and prayer?

Most of us would say Sunday School is about Bible study regardless of what age we are talking about. But does it go deeper than that? Why Bible study? What is the purpose of Bible study and who is it for?

We would also begin by identifying Bible study in Sunday School as being for believers. Believers ought to study the Bible. They need to study it in a group and as individuals. Sheep are the most common metaphor used to describe God's followers in the Bible. Sheep survive in a group because it's their only protection from predators. Believers need the group for encouragement, to help them process the biblical truths they struggle to apply, and to discuss the things they are not sure about. The group becomes the place for inquiring, gaining wisdom, and accountability.

Another interesting fact about sheep is they need to eat every day. One way a shepherd knows a sheep is sick or in distress is by observing its eating habits. Healthy sheep need and want to eat every day. Believers also need daily spiritual nourishment. Unless the group plans on meeting every day, believers need to individually engage daily with the Bible. It is how we survive—consuming our daily spiritual nutrients. Even those who never participate in the group need daily Bible engagement if they are to grow.

But doesn't everyone need to study the Bible? Shouldn't the skeptic have an opportunity to examine the Bible? What about the paroled? The addict? The mother abandoned and left with two children? What about the child whose parents have no spiritual heritage? Should they study the Bible as well? Certainly! Everyone needs to study the Bible because everyone has spiritual needs that only the Bible answers.

The enormity of the spiritual need demands groups for all ages, for new groups, and for open groups. But where do we begin when it comes to making this happen? What role does prayer play in making this happen?

Lessons from Flake

Sunday School originally focused on teaching poor children how to read. The creation of public education and other factors caused Sunday School leaders to rethink its purpose. Over time, it became a strategic means for local churches to reach and disciple people of all ages in their communities. Arthur Flake's journal reflects this focus.

Flake highlighted the importance of prayer when it came to reaching people who had yet to hear the gospel. In his first book, *Building a Standard Sunday School* (1922), Flake specified that "Every teacher should have a prayer list of all lost for whom his class is responsible."¹

He explained this idea in greater detail in the paragraph that followed:

Each teacher should have a prayer list both of the lost pupils in his class and of the lost who are prospects for his class. This list should be kept in the Bible and daily spread out before God as the teacher prays for each one by name ... Many Sunday School pupils can be reached only through prayer.²

In his journal notes on which the 1920 book was based, he also called for each teacher to share his or her prayer list with other teachers. In effect, the prayer lists possessed by the teachers were to be dominated by the names of people who had yet to become followers of Christ.

Here's how his idea would play out in real life. Let's say we teach an ongoing Bible study class for our church (most commonly called Sunday School). We would then have a prayer list that contains only the names of people we are trying to reach, all of whom are unbelievers. These names represent people we have talked to who told us they are not believers. We ask the members of our group to carry a list as well, and we all pray for those names.

Every teacher in the organization has the same kind of list. When all the Bible study teachers meet together, they share their lists with us, and we share our list with them. While the list of folks in the hospital or of those facing a difficulty are important, praying for the salvation of people by name is at the forefront of our prayer times.

The main element is daily prayer for lost people by name with a hope to share the gospel with them specifically. Let's think about the importance of this idea.

Daily: Every day we brush our teeth, eat our veggies, and take our vitamins. We view these actions as essential for our health and well being. These are simply part of that we do. Flake called on Sunday School teachers to pray every day for the lost people their groups were trying to reach. What would happen if we began to see praying for lost people as a daily necessity?

There is a part of me that wonders why I don't pray every day for people who are lost. I may pray every day for a friend going through a valley season until he or she emerges, so why does that garner my attention more often than a person's salvation? The needs of these friends are real and pressing but so too is a person's eternal destiny. Praying daily reminds us of the importance of salvation and of our responsibility to share with others. If sharing Christ is a daily activity, then praying for those with whom we will share should be a daily activity as well.

By Name: Names are important. When we hear a name, images of people with that name immediately flash in our minds. The simple mention of a name can cause us to smile, grimace, or feel other emotions. That name creates an identity that goes beyond a casual glance. Praying for a person by name also moves us beyond casual prayer. How many times have we prayed for "all the missionaries in the world" without a single face or name flashing through our minds? There is just something about praying for someone by name. We become connected to that person in a different way. Compassion, empathy, and urgency come as a result of praying for a specific person.

Flake emphasized the importance of praying by name in his later book, *The True Functions of the Sunday School*. He stated:

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.³

For the opportunity to share with them: My wife asked me to pray with her about a need in our church. She leads our preschool area and needed more teachers. I was happy to pray, but in the process I began to understand that one of those open spots to serve could be and should be filled by me. I did not enter into that prayer with that intent, but that was where that prayer led me.

Too many times, we find ourselves asking God to send someone to share Jesus with a family member or neighbor with the understanding that He will send anyone other than us. He may very well send someone else to share with the person for whom we are praying, but He may also be preparing us to have that conversation.

We want our friends and family members to become believers, but what is it that keeps us from thinking that we should be the ones used by God to make that happen? Talking to a family member can be hard. The hardest person I have ever tried to witness to was my grandfather. At the time, he was in the hospital, and I drove eight hours to visit with him about Christ. He had checked out of the hospital by the time I arrived, and we talked at his shop. I prayed the entire time I was driving for this opportunity, and here it was! We visited about death and the fears associated with it. The only thing he asked was that I pray for him because he needed it. That was how that conversation ended. It was not what I hoped for, but it did give me a deeper understanding of two Bible passages.

In Acts 20:26-27, we find Paul addressing the Ephesian church leaders on his way to Jerusalem. Knowing he would never see this group of people again, he stated that he would not be held accountable for any unbelievers in their area. If there were unbelievers, it was because they chose to be unbelievers and not because no one told them. He used the phrase “innocent of the blood” to define the results of his sharing with the people in that region.

Paul's reference pointed back to Ezekiel 3. In that passage, we find God calling Ezekiel to serve as a watchman over Israel. God gives a warning in the call, explaining that if Ezekiel failed to warn the people of Israel about God's coming judgment, then God would hold the prophet responsible for their blood. (See Ez. 3:18.) We are responsible to share. God holds us accountable to that point. We are not accountable for people's responses, but we are responsible for giving them the opportunity to respond.

Remember, we need to do this kind of praying as a group. We are not on an island praying for the lost by ourselves. We come together as a group to pray for the lost, seeking to reach people as a team of people. When a person on the group's prayer list attends our Bible study group, everyone who prayed had a part in that person being there. The Great Commission was given to the church as a single entity, so we should view praying for lost people as a team activity as well.

List the names of lost people for whom you are praying daily.

Take the time to pray for the opportunity to share with each person, asking God to prepare your mind and their heart.

Fostering a Praying-for-the-Lost Culture

As teachers, we set the tone for the groups we lead. What is important to us becomes important to them. We begin by establishing a culture in our groups that fosters praying for people who are lost or unaffiliated.

Step 1: Start carrying a list. We can't expect our groups to do something we are not willing to do. After reading through Flake's notes, the first thing I did was create a list of people who have told me they are lost. That means I have already engaged in conversation with them at least once about their spiritual lives. My initial list included the names of seven people, all of whom had told me in the past about their spiritual heritage.

Research indicates that the older we get, the less we engage in conversations with others about their spiritual lives. That seems backward to me since we should grow in our confidence in sharing with others and

stronger in our faith in Jesus. However, that is what multiple researchers have discovered. Some of it deals with being around mostly people who are believers. Another reason may be that the disappointments of life have overwhelmed our faith. I don't know all the reasons, but we need to be aware as we age that the tendency is to stop sharing.

LifeWay research polled churchgoers about their praying habits and how that translates into sharing the gospel. Of those surveyed (these were churchgoers) 56% said they prayed weekly for an opportunity to share the gospel with 27% praying every day for an opportunity. Here's the disconnect; only 45% of that same group of churchgoers said they had shared the gospel with one person in a six-month time period.⁴

One issue that may impact this statistic is the need to pray for specific opportunities to share with specific people on a specific day. I would like to think that praying for a person by name and asking God to help you share with that specific person could change some of these statistics.

Begin with at least three names on your list. If you don't know three people who are lost, then put yourself into situations where you can meet people who are lost. Begin with your neighbors, initiating a conversation with them about their spiritual heritage. Included in Appendix 2 (p. 47) are some questions that may start the conversation. If all your neighbors are believers, then volunteer in your community. Pick wisely so you aren't placed in a position that compromises your witness. Many organizations exist, from helping the homeless to conducting community events.

Don't forget to use the list. Pray for people by name daily and for the opportunity to share with them again. Carry the list on your phone, in a journal, or in your wallet or purse. Make sure you can access it so you will not forget to pray for the people on your list EVERY day.

Step 2: Encourage your group to carry lists. Select a Sunday (or whatever day your group meets) and share with the group about your list. You may want to select a day when this could be a possible way of living out the main idea of the Bible study lesson. You don't have to share the names on your list, but you could. Tell them how you created your list, about the relationships represented on the list, and the purpose of the list. Be sure to tell them how carrying the list and praying every day for the people on that list has impacted you.

Challenge them to create a list as well. Distribute cards, Bible bookmarks, or other items they can carry on which they can write their lists. Emphasize that you will not ask them to share their lists today. Some will need time to identify three people who are lost and with whom they have had some type of conversation about spiritual things. Some may realize they don't know three people who are lost and that they need to take action to change that. Encourage them to take whatever action is needed, giving them time to do so.

You may want to share with people who were not present using social media or some other means of communication. You may also want to send a message to those who were present as a reminder to pray daily. From that day forward, you may end each session with a general prayer for the people represented on the lists. If your Bible study curriculum calls for the group to identify people with whom they could share insights gained from a lesson, encourage the group to first look at their daily prayer lists for potential people with whom they can share. We need to get into the practice of looking for natural ways of using the prayer list within the life of the group.

Step 3: Create a group list. After a few months of encouraging the group to pray daily for three people, invite the group to share the names of the people on their lists. Share your list first, writing the names on a board or large sheet of paper. Invite others to share as you add the names given. You may encourage the group to add the names to their lists or provide the full list to everyone later. Encourage the group to continue to pray for their lists daily and to pray for the names of the others listed at least once a week, if not daily.

Periodically, review the class list with the group. Allow them to add other names to the list and give updates. If they have had additional opportunities to share with a person on their list, invite them to tell about that experience. Take time to thank God for the opportunity and for His answers to prayer.

What specific actions do you need to take to implement these steps?

More Actions to Consider

Create and maintain a GC List. Some have used the term target list, but Great Commission (GC) List may be a better title. The idea is to create a display somewhere in the room of names the group is praying for. If other groups use the room, create the display to accommodate their lists as well. You might choose to use only initials or first names just in case the person listed attends. Some have created the display so that the names can be moved up the list after they attend or the member had an opportunity to share the gospel with them. The point is to keep praying for lost people at the forefront of the group, and the GC List serves as an ever-present visual reminder.

Restructure the Class Prayer List. What we list first declares importance. We have all done it, listing the “most pressing” requests first, pushing other requests on down the line. On some prayer lists, the last thing listed are the names of people needing to know Christ. We tend to pray for the first things listed and then get to the other items when we have time. (Most of us don’t get to the rest of the list.) We all know surgeries, tragedies, and other items should be given prayer time (we will talk about that later in Chapter 3), but should those items supplant praying for the lost by name?

Designate One Sunday a Month. Select a Sunday every month that is dedicated to praying for lost people. It doesn’t matter which Sunday, but the second Sunday tends to have the least number of conflicts (most holidays tend to fall on the first and last Sundays of the month). On that Sunday, explain that the focus of the class prayer time is for people they know who are lost or unaffiliated. This will take some discipline since the week you designate will be the week you really want to share about something you are facing. Life happens that way, but it will be worth it. Include praise for the opportunities to share over the past four weeks. Allow volunteers to tell how God used them in the past four weeks to share the gospel with someone.

Provide training. Find resources that can help the group share the gospel with others. If you use LifeWay curriculum, help the group understand how to use the information on the inside front cover to share the gospel with someone. Create a list of questions that could be used to

transition a conversation onto spiritual matters. (The list in Appendix 2 on page 47 can serve as a starting point.) We need to do all we can to help the believers in our groups be faithful witnesses for Christ.

Ask as a habit. This seems simple, but ask people in the group to share the names of lost people for whom they are praying by name. If they don't have anyone, we can share our lists with them. If they have a name, add that name to the list. We can ask them before class, after class, while walking down the hall, or by contacting them for this specific purpose. What would be wrong with calling members of our groups to share with them our lists and ask if they have a list so we can pray with them about the salvation of the people listed?

Which actions listed do you think would best work in your group? What steps do you need to take to implement those actions?

What about Kids?

I am not sure at what age we should begin to encourage a person to carry a prayer list of lost friends, relatives, and neighbors. We would certainly ask them to do so after they become believers to establish the practice as an early spiritual discipline. Many teenagers could carry such a list and should. Some teenagers may need more than one card!

We can certainly find ways of helping people of all ages think about praying for others who need to know about Jesus, God's love for all people, and Jesus' offer of salvation to all people.

Rethink Teaching Activities. What we talk about matters. When I began teaching preschoolers, I had a different view of what was done in the learning activities where kids get to pick what they do. I thought of myself as a referee who manages a set of rotations, but I was wrong. I soon discovered that the learning activities gave me an opportunity to have conversations with kids about the main Bible theme for that day. When teaching preschoolers while building a "tabernacle" out of wooden logs, we can ask them if we can pray for any friends who do not go to church. We can ask them to pray for us as we share with people about Christ. They can pray for people by name as well. We can remind them that Jesus

loves everyone and wants everyone to trust Him. While the teaching time is important, these conversations in the learning activities are critical, and we get to direct that narrative. We can incorporate these kinds of conversations when teaching adults as well, and we might even be able to do so around a table covered with wooden logs!

Praying for the Preschoolers. Most preschool teachers have a list of the names of the kids in the group. The list usually includes the names of the kids, their parents' or guardians' information, and birthdays. We may make it a point to send a note and have a special treat to present on the Sunday before or after a child's birthday. But what keeps us from praying for the names on that list? We can pray for God to protect their minds, to open their hearts to Him, and to prepare them to fulfill His purposes in this world. We can also pray for their parents as they raise their children.

We can initiate conversations with the parents, finding out about their spiritual journeys. In the process, we may find another name to add to our list of people for whom we are praying. (Remember, the daily prayer list includes people who have told us they are lost.)

*How can we begin to pray for the next generation of believers?
Write a prayer for that next generation.*

A Means for Starting New Groups

Before we move on, we need to address a secondary purpose for creating the daily prayer list. First and foremost is the salvation of those on our lists. Secondly, we can use the list to help us start new Bible study groups.

Imagine teaching a class of thirty year olds. Let's say there are ten in the group who attend regularly with a few more who attend sporadically. Imagine meeting in a room that will seat twenty people comfortably. Let's say those ten regular attenders have three names each that they are praying for, and we have six. Between the eleven of us, that's thirty-six people for whom we are praying. Let's now pick a Sunday when we encourage everyone to invite the people for whom they have been praying. Let's say half say "yes." (Research indicates that if we invite someone and offer to pick them up, between seventy and eighty percent will agree depending on

who was researched. We will go with fifty percent for the skeptic.) Now remember, these are people who have been prayed for every day for several months. So we have our ten regular attenders plus the eighteen guests ($36 \div 2$) who agree to come on that Sunday (a total of twenty-nine people), and we try to fit everyone in a room that holds only twenty. The next week, we will probably go back to our ten since there just isn't space for more. None of us likes feeling like a sardine.

However, what if we did the same thing, but we created two groups for that Sunday—one led by an apprentice teacher from within the group and a second group led by us. If the second group also meets in a room that holds twenty comfortably, we now have space for forty people and could manage the group if eighty percent of those for whom we have been praying agree to attend (29 [80% of 36] + 11 regular attenders). In effect, the list of people for whom we are praying becomes the tool for creating new groups!

If you are the pastor, staff person, or volunteer responsible for the Sunday School ministry of your church, the master prayer list functions as a tool for defining the new groups you need to start. We know new groups grow faster than established ones. In the illustration above we had thirty year olds inviting people on their prayer lists, and we can assume that most of these guests were other thirty year olds. That means children might have come as well, and we probably had a children's class overflowing too. We need not canvas the neighborhood looking for unreached people; we already have that information in the form of the master prayer list, and these are people someone in the church already knows. It makes sense that the master prayer list serve as the first place we go to determine what new groups we need to create. This does not keep us from canvassing the community, but it does mean we may already have a starting point built on relationships already present within the church.

*What steps are you taking to start a new group
or help a new group get started?*

A Reality to Consider

Prayer is a start, but it is not the end. The end is sharing the gospel with the person. Like Paul and Ezekiel, we are not absolved from our responsibility until we actually share. Some in our groups may not know what to say or lack training in sharing the gospel. The local church certainly carries some of the responsibility and so does every believer. We knew enough to become followers of Christ, so we should be able to at least share that much. We are called to be witnesses, which means we tell what we *do* know. We can go with another believer who knows how to share the gospel. We can use a variety of resources to learn how to share the gospel ... if we want to. I would like to think that when we, the teachers, begin to talk about lost people by name and praying for opportunities, that the “want to” in our groups might grow.

Community Begins with Prayer

How does prayer foster a sense of community?

When looking through Flake's notes, one would be hard pressed to find ideas for class fellowships and parties. We looked hard for anything that hinted at conducting a class party even if that event was planned for the purpose of inviting guests. We found nothing along those lines. We should not take that to mean that he felt it insignificant or a waste of time; he was just silent on it.

One could argue that Flake lived in a different time when things were less complicated. The older I get, the more I realize every generation incorrectly thinks the times in which they live are more complex than the previous. They were just as busy as our culture even if in different ways. In every generation people seek relationships and connection.

The absence of anything in Flake's notes that pointed to building community when we know the importance of connecting for every generation leads us to ask if there might be a different way of creating community than attending a group event or meeting at the local coffee shop for breakfast every other Friday.

The Problem with Group Gatherings

As Sunday School teachers, we find ourselves standing or sitting in front of a group of people with all kinds of interests, from families with different traditions, and with lots of hangups; we are supposed to make them into a community. We feel the pressure both internally and externally. We value community just as much as the people sitting in that room, and that gives us some personal motivation to put together gatherings. Some groups look to us to bring them together and make that expectation known without any question. The Sunday School director or staff person may even ask about the plans we have for upcoming parties, which adds to the pressure we already feel.

So we do what many have done before us: we plan a class gathering. We secure a pavilion in a local park, get the group organized with different

people bringing various food items, secure some outdoor games, and off we go. Everyone seems to enjoy the event, sharing their food and competing in the cornhole tournament. The surprise comes with the least athletic person winning the tournament.

We enjoyed our time together and made a memory by something unexpected happening, but have we done anything that really builds community? Certainly, there was some value in getting together. We did create a shared memory which gives everyone present a point of reference. People shared a meal and talked who might not have done so otherwise. But was what we did “community”?

Couldn’t I say the same thing about the people sitting in front of me at a sporting event? We ate from the same concessions stands and visited a little before the game. When our team scored, we gave each other a high five. We talked some more during halftime, evaluating the first half of what we both just experienced. Once play resumed, we cheered some more and celebrated the victory. As we exited the arena, we gave each other one more high five and declared that we would never forget that game. We both felt like we were in community based on a shared experience.

Shared experiences are one element of community, but I wonder if we settle for shared experiences when what we really need is meaningful community. That may explain why some people participate in multiple Bible study groups on a regular basis; they are searching for meaningful community but are only finding shared experiences.

To what level do you agree with the observation shared in the previous section? Explain.

What is Meaningful Community?

Instead of defining the term “meaningful community,” let me describe how it plays out in my life. Several years ago, I created a prayer team out of necessity. All kinds of things were going on that made life a challenge, so I approached several people who became a prayer team for me. Over time, that team has expanded to what it is today. They include high school friends, former coworkers, current coworkers, people who have been

friends in local churches I served, and family members. You could probably piece together my life story if you got all of them in a room at the same time. Ironically, many of them have never met each other.

The one thing the members of the prayer team have in common is they each committed to pray for me one day each month. They faithfully pray for me on their designated day. I usually end my morning devotional by sending the person who prays for me on that day a text message with a few requests for that day. Some of the requests are work related and some are personal. The requests tend to be the big things that are on my agenda or mind for that day. My prayer partner for today is praying specifically for focus and clarity in writing this book (and so are some I asked specifically to pray as I write).

They share requests with me as well. What I have found is that these friendships have taken on deeper dimensions. I did not approach them with the goal of deepening our friendships, but that is what happens when we pray for and with others. We become bound to each other as we approach the Father on behalf of another. We are going to Him together.

We also become co-dependent upon each other, but not in an unhealthy way. We need each others' prayer support. I am dependent upon them for their prayers, and they are dependent upon my prayer support for them. Some have told me that they reschedule things when they can so that specific activities fall on our prayer day. They know I will pray for them, and they can see the difference. I can see the difference they make in my day as well. That is a healthy co-dependency!

To me, this is true community. Some of the people who pray for and with me I have not seen face to face in several years, but that does not diminish the bonds created through active prayer. We are praying through hurts, dreams, and hard lessons. What is shared represents a deeper level of trust than we usually experience with a group talking about our days or weeks while eating some muffins.

What role does prayer play in your deepest relationships?

Could this Work with my Sunday School Class?

Bible study groups provide a natural place for building relationships. The group that interacts through discovery and discussion accomplishes this best. As ideas are discovered and discussed in the group, points of connection are made, and trust is built. These kinds of groups can meet on Sunday mornings or at other times. It is our responsibility as believers either to get involved in a group that already exists or start one.

Serving with others also builds relationships. These bonds occur on multiple levels. Having a shared goal, being involved in another person's growth, sharing a common experience, and depending on each other in a new way all contribute to this connection. If you have served in a soup kitchen, worked on a Habitat® home, or have gone on a mission trip with a group, you may not remember who you served, but you will certainly remember with whom you served.

But what about prayer and the role it plays in building community within a Sunday School class?

Relationships cannot be forced. I taught a men's class several years ago that had a class rule of no parties. When we were forming the group, the original men present made it clear that if they wanted to spend an hour or more with someone, they would have already invited that person to lunch. In the two years I taught that class, we never had a class party. But we were not disconnected from each other. Some sat by each other at sporting events, others played golf together every Friday afternoon, and others met for lunch on Tuesdays. They were not meant to each other; they just had their own subgroups that formed and found a way through prayer to create a larger sense of community in spite of the subgroups.

This experience makes me think that prayer might be more important when it comes to community than getting together as a group for social events. We may think we have little control over our relationships. We may enjoy the company of another person, but the relationship will die if they don't enjoy our company or are unwilling to tolerate our quirks. While it is true that we don't pick with whom we come in contact, we do choose with whom we stay in contact. Jesus established the church for our collective good and our collective growth. We tend to seek out believers who can help us become what we are not. We seek believers with whom

we can do life together. We agree to help other believers who want to be where we are in their spiritual lives.

Whether we like it or not, we have subgroups within our groups now. They sit near each other every week. If you tell the group to find a partner during group time, they always seem to find a way to be together. When you have an event, they hang out with each other. We need to be comfortable with that, knowing that relationships happen, and we can't (nor should we) try to control them. What we can do is make them work for us, creating subgroups within the group based on these already-forged relationships. If we want to encourage prayer as a way to build community, then we should encourage these subgroups to include prayer in their non-parties. We will talk about the subgroups more in our next chapter.

*How might prayer partners impact the sense
of community found in your Bible study group?*

Decisions to Make

Let's wrestle with how to create praying partnerships beginning with the adult and student groups. Kids leaders, you may get some ideas that will help you, so don't move past this section.

Our first issue to address is deciding how to go about partnering up people in the group. One possible approach might be to let them pair up themselves. This keeps the relationships already present intact, but this approach may also fall short in that the goal is to build community within the group as a whole.

Another approach might be to simply draw names to create these prayer partners. If we do this, we will want to make sure that we have two sets of names from which to draw if we lead a co-ed group. We will want to partner men with men and women with women. We don't want to put anyone in a potentially compromising position. We need to be wise when dealing with gender.

So what about a husband and wife being prayer partners? That certainly ought to be happening, and we ought to encourage every husband and wife to pray with each other. But once again, we need to look at the purpose of these partners: to create community within the group as a whole.

Another approach might be to simply assign the prayer partners. We will need wisdom here as well, being aware of any baggage that might exist between group members.

The issue of who participates might shed some light on how we create these prayer partnerships. As much as we may want everyone on our ministry lists (the names of the people who have been assigned to our group, including those who never attend or are missionary members leading in a kids or students group) to participate, not everyone will. Making prayer partners an expectation for everyone on the ministry list may work against us, creating an unintended barrier to persons struggling spiritually in the first place. With that in mind, I am of the opinion that creating partners with those who are willing to participate is the best approach. That does not rule out the person who attends rarely; it just means our expectations need to be realistic.

More decisions await our attention. Are we asking them to pray with each other weekly or monthly? How will they decide on what day they will pray? Are we expecting them to meet face-to-face, by phone, by texting, or by some other means? How will we help them understand the need for building trust and keeping things confidential as much as possible? How will we explain the value of praying with a partner within the group? How do we deal with those who decide not to participate? What is the duration of the partnership—a year, six months, until Jesus comes back? How we answer these questions may also impact how we create the partnerships.

We each need to consider these questions for ourselves. We will be the ones asked to explain the specifics, so working through the issues identified above will help us answer questions when asked.

How Do We Start?

Regardless of how we create the partnerships, the starting steps will be similar. To begin with, we need to establish prayer partners for ourselves. We may want to organize a prayer team, enlisting a person to pray for us on every day of the month. That means recruiting thirty or thirty-one people. If you recruit thirty one, then one person either prays for you only seven times a year or prays on the thirtieth in the months with only thirty days. February already has its stacked day with up to four people praying for you on the twenty eighth.

We may want to enlist four people from the group to pray for us on a certain day each week, maybe asking them to pray for us each Sunday of the month. After doing this for three months or so, we can then ask them to share about the experience and consider what might happen if this was done with everyone in the group. This gives us some people who can serve as a starter team, asking them to recruit four people within the group to pray for them once a month.

We may want to approach people working with other age groups that would be in our group if they were not a volunteer. They need prayer as well! This could serve as a means for helping them feel connected to an adult Sunday School class.

So What About Kids Leaders?

Most of us kids leaders (I teach a group of three year olds) feel disconnected from the adult groups. I see this even though I teach an adult group as well in the first Sunday School hour. (We have two different hours of Sunday School with worship in between.) Other adult leaders who teach in the first hour can eat lunch with their group or guests after worship, but I am not free to do so. Instead, I head to my group of three year olds. We can feel like we are on an island left to fend for ourselves. If anyone needs community, we do.

Some kids and student leaders may find it helpful to create prayer partnerships within the age-group workers themselves, with everyone who works with kids partnering and everyone who works with students partnering. Creating prayer partners within the age-group leaders could be another way of building community within that team. Depending on

church structure and size, we might encourage prayer partners across the groups with kids leaders praying with student leaders and vice versa.

We shouldn't wait for the Sunday School director, staff member, or the adult leaders to approach us about creating prayer partners. We can get this started ourselves!

Should We Encourage Kids to Secure Prayer Partners?

Instead of thinking about the child, think about the role we play in encouraging parents. In the past few years, I wanted to find a way to express to my own children that I loved them. They are grown and have their own families, but I still wanted to do something for them to let them know I loved them. I could think of no better way than to pray for them on a weekly basis. Is there really any stronger way to say "I love you" than by placing a person's name before the Father?

Wednesdays are the day of the week I choose to pray in a concentrated way. That has been a practice for several years now. I had included praying for my children on that day, but I wanted to pray more intelligently. I started sending them a text message on Wednesday mornings simply saying that it was my prayer day, and I wanted to know one thing they needed me to pray for that day.

At first, the requests were guarded. They had to learn to trust me in a different way, and I get that. In time, they have grown to trust me. They have shared with me disappointments, hurts, and victories. They know that if they ask me to tell no one, I honor their request. They also know that if they give me permission to share, I share only what is required so others can rally around them in prayer. My commitment to them is to pray for the requests they share as they share them. God knows the details, and I have to trust Him at that point.

As kids leaders, we can encourage parents to become prayer partners with their kids. Show them how to use the take-home page, pointing to the weekly Bible verse. Challenge them to find a way to use the weekly memory verse in prayer. For example, if the verse for the week is John 15:17 (Jesus said, "Love one another."), we can ask the children about opportunities he had to show love through the day and then pray, thanking God for those opportunities. We will also want to remind

parents to ask their child if there is anything they want to pray about and include that in their prayers with them as well. This is one way we can partner with parents by helping them become spiritual leaders to their children.

Review the actions and principles presented in Chapter 2. Which action or principle is the most pressing for you to undertake or heed?

Serving Begins with Prayer

What role does prayer play in serving the others in the group?

Early in Flake's journal, on the blank pages before the table of contents, he identified four actions that he labeled "the fourfold test of a great Sunday School." The four items on that list include:

1. Reaching its possibilities
2. Really teaching the Bible
3. Winning the lost to Christ
4. Enlisting, training, and utilizing the church members
 - *Enlist - Assign definite tasks*
 - *Train - put books in their hands; get them to studying*
 - *Utilize - All can do something - the SS (Sunday School) offers a place for the entire membership to work*

Within these actions one sees the foundation for what many define as the three main functions of Sunday School: reach (winning the lost), teach (teaching the Bible), and minister (enlist, train, and utilize). However, when we read the margin notes, we need to reinterpret "minister" as serving.

Reclaim Serving

When we think of ministry, we usually think of something we receive, as in "we were ministered to." We also think of someone prepared in some way to provide that ministry action. They may have received some special training or sharpened some skill set that puts them in a position to minister in a specific way. We are not gifted or trained in that way, therefore we are excused. Our role is to receive their care. We become the consumer.

Most of us would admit that we present the value of receiving when we talk to a potential group member. Saying "If you come to our group, you

will find a loving group of people” is really a statement about what they get. The value proposition is that you get your needs met. We present no expectations for them to invest in others even if in return. The message delivered is, “We are here to minister to you.”

Granted, there are times we need people to minister to us, but that does not negate the priority of serving others first. Let me tell you about Shea. She encourages those around her, serving them in multiple ways. She bakes special cookies, sends messages, and serves as a prayer warrior. She is also fighting cancer. She has some big needs, but that does not negate her from serving others along the way. Nor should our challenges disqualify us from serving others.

What if instead the value proposition we presented was that you will find a place where you can make a difference if you become a part of our Bible study group? What if we made the focus serving instead?

Why Focus on Serving?

Flake proposed that everyone could serve in and through the Sunday School in some way, but why would that be important?

Serving others is a characteristic that defines a disciple of Jesus. In a conversation with His disciples, Jesus reminded them that He did not come to earth to be served, but to serve by giving His life to pay the ransom placed on us by sin. (See Mark 10:45.) This comment came in the wake of a conflict that broke out within the disciples in response to James and John asking for the right to sit at Jesus’ right and left. Jesus set the standard for serving.

Serving is also a discipline of the Christian life. Most lists of spiritual disciplines include serving. Serving others changes our focus away from ourselves and on to others. Intentional acts of service become exercises in exposing and removing pride. If we only serve with the idea that we get something in return, then we reveal our motives and who we really love ... ourselves. The challenge is for us to serve out of love, gratitude, and humility—all of which move us closer to Christlikeness.

When we invest in others with the intent of helping them become all God wants them to be, then we become all God wants us to be.

Serving also instills boldness in the believer. Paul declared to Timothy that deacons who served well would acquire good standing and greater boldness (1 Tim. 3:13). Phillips translated this phrase as “gaining confidence and freedom in the Christian faith.” We might think of this as the Gideon effect. God gave Gideon different assignments with each completed action building confidence and faith in God. I saw this in my dad. He passed away during the writing of this book. He served people by selling them auto parts and by sharing his expertise. He was also a deacon who served well. As he served, he became more comfortable speaking to others about Jesus. I am not sure if serving gained him a willing ear and thus he was emboldened, or if serving taught him he could trust God more deeply which led to greater boldness in sharing his faith with others. Both may have happened at the same time.

How does serving others foster spiritual growth, open the door for sharing Jesus, and give us confidence to share?
How has serving impacted your spiritual life?

Praying as a Means of Serving

When I left home for college, several people promised to pray for me. When I came home for a weekend and attended my home church, these people always made sure to find me and pray with me. They sent me cards as well. They will never know the difference they made in my life. They served me simply by praying, and I am forever grateful.

The people who prayed for me were very different. One was a Sunday School teacher, one was a retail store manager, and another was a widow dealing with her own physical challenges. They had different life experiences and skill sets, but that did not keep them from serving through prayer.

We would be hard pressed to find any believer who would be disqualified from serving through prayer. Age, spiritual maturity, economic standing, nor physical limits keep any of us from serving through prayer. The only disqualifying characteristic might be unwillingness or disbelief.

Rethinking Care Teams

Many Sunday Schools have organized the class to better meet the needs of the group. The goal of care teams usually centers on making sure specific needs of group members don't go unmet, or they function as a tool for keeping up with all the people in the group. There is nothing wrong with these objectives, and they both have value.

Let's look back at Flake for a moment. Flake emphasized that everyone can serve in some way in and through the Sunday School. What if we thought of care teams as a means of providing a vehicle for people in the group to serve as opposed to only as a way of discovering needs?

If we begin to think in terms of finding ways for people to serve, then we may also realize the fallacy of the teacher doing it all. We may be able to keep up with everyone in the group, but at what expense? We have people in the group who can serve, and we are cheating them out of the opportunity by not letting them do so. The greater goal is not about keeping up with the group. The greater goal is helping the people in the group develop and grow spiritually, and serving is a means of accomplishing that.

Creating Care Teams

Let's look at the steps we may need to take to establish, re-institute, or redefine care teams.

We need to begin by defining what we are trying to do. In the past we may have defined the purpose in terms of keeping connected with everyone on the ministry list. Instead, we need to find a way of bringing serving to the forefront. We might use terms like *providing a vehicle for serving, for making a difference in the lives of others, and growing through serving others.*

The purpose of care teams is different from the prayer partners suggested in Chapter 2. Prayer partners are about building community while care teams are about providing a means for serving. Both involve prayer, but they do so with a very different focus in mind. We could combine the two with prayer partners being assigned within care groups, but doing so may impact the fostering of community within the group as a whole.

***How can you redefine for your group the purpose
of care groups in terms of serving?***

After we articulate the purpose, we can then focus on the specifics. We need to define the expectations for each care group leader. Do we expect them to simply contact the people on their lists and offer to pray for them or will we expect them to do more? What do we consider a contact—text, call, or personal visit? We may want to incorporate a monthly prayer time at the end of the group time for care groups to pray together. If we do that, then potential care leaders will want to know that they are responsible for facilitating that prayer time. Communicating clear expectations to potential care leaders helps them know when they succeed.

Next, we can focus on determining how many care groups we will need. If we lead a co-ed group, we need at least two care groups, one for the men and one for the women. A good rule of thumb would be one for every four to seven group members of the same sex. The number of people assigned to each care group needs to be manageable and allow for more to be added as the group reaches more people.

Some may choose to exclude those who never attend, missionary members, prospects who have yet to attend, or those who attend every Sunday. It makes sense that we include everyone on the ministry list. The smaller the number of people we include, the less the opportunity to serve. We may want to create a care group made up of only missionary members (people who would be in our class if they were not teaching elsewhere), but we need to include them in some way.

If we have nineteen on our ministry list, plus four missionary members serving in other groups, we will need four to six groups (if starting with groups of seven, $19 + 4 + \text{us} = 24$; $24 \div 7 = 3.4$ so we round up to 4; if you start with groups of four people, $24 \div 4 = 6$).

Once we know how many care groups we need, we can then consider how we will secure these care leaders. Every option comes with pros and cons to each. We can present the idea of care groups, asking for volunteers to approach us. Some who we never thought would be interested will express interest, which can be a pro or a con. We can identify people who

could (and should) serve and approach them individually until we secure the number we need. This puts the burden on our backs, but we know the people we approach will be vetted. We might even consider a three or six month rotation system, giving everyone the opportunity to serve as a care leader in the course of one or two years. The only problem is not everyone will want to serve, so this leaves some holes. Some have even utilized an alternating month approach to involve more, but this also can create an inconsistent atmosphere.

***What approach of selection do you believe
will best serve your group and why?***

While we are on the subject of rotation, we need to consider the length of time we are asking care group leaders to serve. Providing a set end date makes it more inviting for the recruit. In most cases, a commitment of one year works best. We can give them the opportunity to do it again after a year and may even give them a different group for which to care. If a group has a difficult time committing to a year, we might even consider a six-month commitment. The issue is setting a time that works for the group and then sticking with it.

Training Care Leaders

One issue we must address is training. We will be setting care group leaders up to fail if we do not provide them with some type of training. Even making simple phone calls requires some training. Here are a few items to address when training care leaders.

Avoid initiating the “we missed you last week” conversation. Instead, train the care leaders to look forward. A statement like, “This coming Sunday, we will be looking at Matthew 16, so take a look at that passage as we get ready to discuss Peter’s great declaration of Jesus’ identity” will do more than a “we missed you” message. We cannot change where they were the previous week, but we can influence what happens the next week. Focusing on the future still communicates that we missed them while also communicating that we want them there and have a place for them.

Provide a list of community resources. In the course of serving others, needs will be discovered that require referrals. We can do the leg work and provide a vetted list of phone numbers, websites, and other information that could be used. Alcohol dependency groups, gambling hotlines, abuse hotlines, child protective services, pregnancy counseling, family counseling resources, poison control, financial assistance, and local law enforcement are just a few of the resources to include. The community resource we think the care leaders will not need will usually be the one they need the most, so the more complete the list, the better. We will want to update the list periodically since some of these resources may change.

Ask for permission to share. We need to help our care leaders develop trust with the people in their groups. One way of doing that is to ask permission to share a prayer need with others. If that person asks the care leader not to share, then we need to encourage that care leader to honor that request. We may encourage the care leaders to be specific about asking permission, including the purpose for asking. Here are some examples: Can I share this with our pastor so he can pray for you?; Can I share this with the preschool leader so they can plan for a new arrival?; Can I share this with my next door neighbor who owns a tree removal service? Explaining our purpose for asking may open the door for us to serve them in even greater ways.

Be careful when asked to promise to never share. We need to remind our care leaders that they may be required by law to share what they are told. If a person begins the conversation by telling us that what they are about to share cannot be told to anyone, we need to let them know that it depends on what it is they are about to share. Pregnancy, illness, loss of job, and potential divorce can certainly remain confidential, but abuse, neglect, and other crimes cannot be ignored. If someone tells a care leader that they have been abused, then that care leader must notify the authorities and let them handle it from there.

Grow in their prayer lives. We can provide the care leaders with copies of one of the books listed in Appendix 1 (p. 46) and read the book as a group. We can assemble the care leaders over coffee to share insights gained and other ideas spurred on by the chosen book.

*What other issues might need to be addressed
when training care leaders?*

How Do We Create the Groups?

Once again we have options. We can organize the care groups by geography, placing people that live in the same neighborhood, apartment complex, or subdivision together. We may choose to create the groups based on interests or hobbies if we know what those are. We might draw names out of a set of hats taking a name from hat one (regular attenders), a name from hat two (sometime attenders), a name from hat three (never attend/prospects) and a name from hat four (missionary members). We might even consider conducting a draft with all the enlisted and trained care leaders present (this could be one way of concluding the initial training time for care leaders). Whatever system used, we will want to try to balance the care groups so that one care leader does not end up with all the regular attenders while another care leader ends up with all the never-attenders.

We will also want to determine how to best provide feedback to the care leaders. Our focus should be on what they are learning through serving. We may review ideas for strengthening their contacts and reflect on how to more effectively respond. We do not want to forget to give attention to the spiritual growth that comes through serving. We may want to provide feedback individually or with the care leaders meeting together on a monthly or quarterly basis.

Getting Started

A big first step is setting target action dates. Here are the big actions we will need to consider: establish purpose, articulate purpose and plan, determine expectations, determine number needed, secure leaders, complete community resources list, provide training, create groups, and launch day. We may have some other actions that support each of these larger actions, and we can include them in our plan. After we identify the steps and the order of the steps, we can add target completion dates to each action. Once we have the dates, we can begin to work our plan, knowing we are working toward the launch day.

We have already mentioned reframing the primary purpose of care groups, moving from a discover-the-needs focus to a serve-the-group focus. If groups are already established in your class, then begin by talking about the value of serving. Talk about the value with the current care leaders. Share with the class about spiritual growth seen in the lives of the care leaders through serving. Emphasize the role serving plays in spiritual growth. Begin to lead the group to invite others to the class so they can grow through serving as well.

If care groups do not exist within our groups, then we can begin by sharing about the need for serving others and the value of serving. Focus on the benefits of serving in terms of spiritual growth. Explain how serving as a teacher enhances your spiritual growth. Foster a sense of service within the group by enlisting an apprentice teacher. Share the plans for instituting care groups in the class, including the number needed, how leaders will be secured, expectations of leaders, training that will be provided, how groups will be created, and target action dates. Begin working the plan, adjusting as needed.

What About Students and Kids?

Students are more than capable of serving through care groups. They may be better at it than adults. For one, they see each other most days for nine months of the year. Many schools use peer-to-peer tutors and counseling in some form, making students accustomed to this type of experience. We will still need to communicate expectations, provide training and support, and help them reflect on how their serving impacts their spiritual growth.

One approach for kids is to focus on the family. I rarely call a child at home. I do not want to put myself or my church in that position. I will talk to parents or caregivers, so it makes sense that we focus on the family as a whole. Me and the other leaders in my preschool class can make monthly calls to the parents or caregivers on our ministry list, but that does not involve others in serving. So how can we do that?

Schools have utilized room parents or class parents for years. This parent bridges the gap between the teacher and the parents, organizes class parties, recruits other parents for class outings, and other duties as assigned. If public schools can do this, why can't we? We may not ask

them to organize parties or enlist other parents for an outing, but we can certainly give a parent the opportunity to serve the families in our classes.

Enlist a parent to contact the other parents who have kids in the class once a month to pray with that family. If the other parent shares information that might be helpful to the teachers, then train that class parent to ask if that information can be shared with the teachers. We may even call on the class parent to help us get the word out about special Sundays and events that impact the kids in that group (examples: communicating what happens on Easter when the Sunday schedule changes in many churches). We want to serve the parents in our classes well, but we also need to give parents who have kids in our classes the opportunity to serve.

Many of the same questions will need to be answered that were asked when creating adult or student care groups: duration of service, expectations, training, etc. The class parents will need the same kind of community resource list. They will also need to be aware of confidentially laws and what they need to report and how. In most of our classes, the class parent could make four to five contacts a week and contact every family represented on our ministry list in a month (sixteen to twenty total families). This also makes it possible for the teachers to focus on the group time without neglecting families.

How might you explain the role of class parent to a potential volunteer?

The Class Prayer List

Prayer with and for those in your Bible study group is an important element that makes a group great. Great groups make sure that they give attention to prayer, looking for ways to strengthen what we are already doing. One action to take is to make sure the names or initials of lost people for whom the group is praying are listed first.

As you and your fellow class members consider what you can do to strengthen the prayer in and for your class, there are at least four questions to consider. These questions are: *How do we efficiently gather accurate prayer requests? To whom should we communicate these requests? How do we communicate the requests? How can we encourage those making a specific request?*

These questions will serve as the backdrop for us to think about the role prayer plays as we serve the people within the group.

How Do We Efficiently Gather Accurate Prayer Requests?

Most Bible study groups collect prayer requests in one of four basic ways. The first is collecting requests at the beginning of the group time with a leader calling for people to share their prayer requests. This is a good way to signal the start of the group, but it can also take away valuable Bible study time if long explanations are given. A second approach for gathering requests during the group time is passing around a prayer sheet on a clipboard for people to record their requests. The written requests are usually shared with the group at the end of the study time. This method protects the teaching time, but can be seen as a distraction to some if the prayer list gets passed to them when they are the most engaged. A third option is to call for requests at the end. This assures the group that they will have time to complete their study time, but the prayer can feel rushed if they are pressed for time. The fourth approach is to depend upon the care leaders to present prayer needs they have discovered. This approach lifts the role of the care leader, but it can also feel strange when the care leader shares a request of a person sitting in the room.

As a group, lead your group to determine which approach works best in your group. I prefer collecting requests at the end of the study time, but that may not be best for your group.

Before we move on, don't miss the "accurate" part of this question. Nothing is more embarrassing than telling a person you are praying for their loved one only to discover that the loved one has passed away. Including a way of gathering updates to prayer requests may be just as important as gathering the requests. One way groups have found for doing this is by enlisting a prayer coordinator for the group. This coordinator contacts people who made requests to find out more and to get updates. However you do it, make sure someone is responsible for keeping the requests current.

How does your group currently gather accurate prayer requests?

What might the group do to improve the gathering of requests?

To Whom Should We Communicate These Requests?

Notice that the question includes the word *should* as opposed to *could*. There are a lot of people we could communicate prayer requests to. We could post all the requests on a website. But not every prayer request should be posted for all the world to see. Do we really want everyone with Internet access to know that the Lazbuddies will be traveling out of the country for two weeks and need God's protection? We must be smart and aware of privacy laws in our states when it comes to posting information, especially about people in the hospital. That is why it is so important to ask permission when possible. Get in the habit of asking permission to share the request with the Bible study group and pastor so they can pray for that person.

Who should know about a request is up to the kind of request that is shared. For example, if a couple announces that they are expecting a baby and request prayer for the pregnancy, you would want to make sure a preschool ministry leader was told. Hospital stays, family crises, and deaths of family members need to be shared with the pastor and other leaders. That helps these leaders make the kinds of contacts they need to make. When we provide our group's prayer list to our pastor, we are helping him be a better pastor and serving him. He will have a better understanding of the needs of our groups and of the church God has called him to lead.

Who has access to your weekly prayer list? Who needs to be added or subtracted from that access? Why?

How Do We Communicate the Requests?

This is a two-part question. First of all, there is the act of recording the requests in some way. If requests are shared verbally, someone has to record what is said. Collecting the requests by passing around a sheet of paper on a clipboard helps at this point. However, we will still need to make sure that what is requested is accurate and appropriate.

Remember, there are many ways a person can say the same thing. For example, Joan may tell the class that she thinks a neighbor is about to get

a divorce. Instead of recording the request as shared, we may record the request by asking for the group to pray that Joan will be an encouragement in her neighborhood. Both are about the same situation, but one is more sensitive and missional. If we are the person recording the request, let's think about how we would want that request to be written about us.

The second part of this question relates to the medium for passing on the requests. This could be email, photocopies of what was written in class, phone calls, text messages, and a host of other forms of communication. The issue is getting the right information to the right person using the quickest yet most secure medium. Discussing these kinds of issues with the entire group will help everyone be comfortable with what your group is doing.

How does your group currently communicate weekly prayer requests?

What adjustments does the group need to consider?

How Can We Encourage Those Making a Specific Request?

Ultimately, the goal of collecting the requests is to lay them at the feet of Jesus in prayer. For many of us, what helps us get through a tough time is simply knowing someone else is praying. Sending a text message when we actually pray for a person is a great start. Personal notes are always welcomed, especially if they are in a sealed envelope and hand addressed. A phone call that includes a time of prayer is even better. Remember, the goal is not to keep everyone in the group informed of everyone else's business. The goal is to encourage others through prayer, which is a key part of a great group.

How does your group currently encourage those making a prayer request?

What other means of encouragement might you consider?

Allow these questions to serve as a way to evaluate the prayer system of your class, study group, ministry area, or organization. Initially, explore these questions in sequence. Over time, revisit each question to improve your system.

Conclusion

The Gibeonites fooled Joshua and the Hebrews into a treaty. We are told in Joshua 9:14 that the Israelites failed to pray before making a peace treaty with the Gibeonites. The Israelites relied on at least three things to make their initial decision about the Gibeonites.

First of all, they relied on the answers they heard. When the Gibeonite delegation first approached Joshua and the Israelites, they were greeted with the questions, "Who are you, and where do you come from?" These were the right questions to ask, but the Gibeonites were untruthful in their responses. The Gibeonites were faithful people. They became the wood cutters and water carriers for the tabernacle. They were still doing this in the days of David (see 2 Sam. 21), over 400 years later. Some scholars even count them in the exiles that eventually returned to Jerusalem with Ezra and Nehemiah. They were honorable but fearful. Fear can cause even the most honorable person to lie. The Israelites may have also wanted to believe what they were hearing which added to their failure. Remember the Gibeonites were a group of people who offered to be servants in an unfamiliar land. (See Josh. 9:6-8.) The Israelites had no allies, so one can see why the offer of servants may have been intriguing.

Second, the Israelites relied on what they saw. The Gibeonites wore tattered clothes, sandals that should have been replaced a long time ago, and patched bags. They also carried dried and crumbled bread to complete the look. They passed the eye test.

The problem is our eyes can fool us. Lots of research has been done on how what we see impacts what we eat. For example, we can eat strawberry mousse on a white plate, and our minds will tell us that treat is sweeter than eating that same dessert on a dark blue plate.⁵ Our eyes will fool our brains.

Third, they depended upon the judgment of others. In verse 14, we are told that some of the Israelites sampled the provisions of the Gibeonites, and the treaty followed. No one seemed to be worried for three days. The majority is not always right. If anyone should have known about the fallacy of following the majority, it would have been Joshua. He and Caleb were the two spies out of twelve who encouraged the Israelites to take the land

of Canaan. (See Num. 13.) The group followed the report of the ten—the majority—and they wandered in the wilderness for forty years as a result.

Hearing, seeing, and the counsel of others are gifts from God. But they are not a substitute for Him. The majority is made up of people who have the same hearing and seeing problems as the rest of us. Only God has clear ears and vision; only He is trustworthy.

There is a lot of discussion about the decline of the American church. Lots of people are asking the right questions and lots of answers are being proposed. Churches and church leaders are responding to what they see or think they see. Lots of experts are gaining followings, offering solutions in books to sell and blogs to follow.

We understand the urgency and desire to right the church and be back on course. But are we in the same place as the Israelites when they faced the Gibeonites? Have we substituted what we hear, see, and what others are doing for prayer? And when we pray, for what are we praying? Do our prayers reflect a selfish desire for our church to survive, for our ministry to succeed, or for people to see us as being right? What if our prayer focus changed to the salvation of others—by name, that God would be honored in everything including our relationships, and that we look at needs through His eyes and will?

I don't know all the answers, but I do know God wants me to pray for lost people by name. He wants me to build my relationships on prayer. He wants to show me how to serve others through the lens of prayer. Through prayer, our wants get exposed and reshaped into His will and wants. I don't know what that may look like and how it might change my Bible study groups, but it sure will be fun to find out! Let's find out together!

APPENDIX 1

Selected Books on Prayer

In preparation for this book, several friends gave me the names of books they found helpful when it comes to prayer. Here are the most common titles that appeared on the lists.

The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence

Praying Hyde by E. G. Carre

The Power of Prayer and Fasting by Ronnie Floyd

Rees Howells, Intercessor by Norman Grubb

Quiet Talks on Prayer by S. D. Gordon

Prayer by Ole Hallesby

Disciple's Prayer Life: Walking in Fellowship with God by T. W. Hunt and Catherine Walker

A Praying Life by Paul E. Miller

Answers to Prayer by George Mueller

The Prayer Life by Andrew Murray

With Christ in the School of Prayer by Andrew Murray

Fervent by Priscilla Shirer

The Kneeling Christian by An Unknown Christian

Praying the Bible by Donald S. Whitney

Questions to Initiate a Spiritual Conversation

How do we initiate conversations that move toward spiritual matters? One thing we can do is get comfortable asking questions that open the door for a spiritual conversation. Over the years, I have collected questions that help me initiate a spiritual conversation. Here are the top thirteen on my list:

1. What is your perception of Christians?
2. What do you believe about God?
3. What do you think will be your greatest contribution in this life?
4. Is religion important to you? Do you consider yourself a religious person?
5. When you have problems or questions, who do you turn to for help?
6. From what or whom do you draw the strength to endure a difficult situation?
7. When you pray, who do you pray to? Why?
8. What do you think happens after our lives here? What do you think it takes for a person to enter heaven?
9. What causes your greatest concern or stress?
10. What do you believe about the Bible? Have you ever read it for yourself? What did you think about what you read?
11. What do you believe about Jesus?
12. When do you feel close to God? When do you feel far away from Him?
13. How do you deal with regrets from your past?

The issue is not having a question at the ready but being willing to ask the question. We know the questions that will take the conversation to a spiritual level, which may be why some of us never ask those questions in the first place.

What questions would you add to the list? With whom can you initiate a conversation using one of these questions this week?

END NOTES

1. Arthur Flake, *Building a Standard Sunday School* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1922), p. 103.
2. Ibid.
3. Arthur Flake, *The True Functions of the Sunday School* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1936), p. 49-50.
4. Aaron Earls, “Evangelism More Prayed for Than Practiced by Churchgoers,” LifeWay Research, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/04/23/evangelism-more-prayed-for-than-practiced-by-churchgoers/>, accessed 4/30/19.
5. Wynne Perry, “Plate Color May Boost Food’s Flavor,” Live Science, <https://www.livescience.com/17046-plate-color-flavor-psychology.html>, accessed June 21, 2019.