

1976

100 Largest Sunday Schools – 1976: How the Big Got Bigger

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Churches in this in-depth analysis of the 100 largest Sunday Schools are divided into groups of 10 for a clearer presentation of growth. For statistics on giving, bus- ing, rank last year, etc. see page 38. BY ELMER TOWNS, Sunday School Editor

100 LARGEST SUNDAY SCHOOLS—1976

How the Big Get Bigger

FIRST TO TENTH PLACE

Attendance 14,000 to 4,000

The ten biggest Sunday Schools in America continue to grow, but not at the rapid pace of the early 70s. Still First Baptist of Hammond, Ind. retains its lead—highlighted by an almost unbelievable single Sunday record attendance of 101,000 in May. This remarkable record was reached when a multitude of satellite Sunday Schools were held in Greater Chicago amusement parks, shopping centers, game rooms of apartment buildings, little league bleachers, and any other place that children can be gathered. More than 4,000 were attracted to one amusement park alone where the children were given a gospel lesson and then enjoyed the rides before coming back again for a message.

The second largest Sunday School, Highland Park Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tenn., grew by 494, primarily through its 74 chapels, manned by the students of Tennessee Temple

Schools located in the church facilities.

Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Va. (3rd, up from 5th) is the home of the Old Time Gospel Hour broadcast (500 stations) and Liberty Baptist College (1,600 students) with a growth of 934 over the previous year. The church was cleared after an investigation by the Security and Exchange Commission. The Rev. Jerry Falwell, pastor, reports that after an intensive financial campaign, they will be completely out of debt by the end of 1976. "We won't owe anyone a dime."

The Akron (Ohio) Baptist Temple (4th) was rated the world's largest Sunday School for many years. Now under the leadership of Charles Billington there has been a resurgence in attendance and offerings in the past four years. Even though exact attendance records are not available, all reports indicate the son of the founder has given new life to the church.

The First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, (5th) may not have the largest Sunday School, but they can say, "We're number one" in most other statistics. Last year it received over \$5 million in offerings and, according to its brochure, "Owns more ground in downtown Dallas than any other religious or business institution excluding the city government.

No growth is reported in Canton (Ohio) Baptist Temple and Landmark Baptist Temple, Cincinnati.

Within the last reporting year, Dr. G. B. Vick, pastor of Temple Baptist Church, Detroit, (8th) went to be with the Lord. New pastor, Dr. A. V. Henderson, has given inspiring leadership, and this church will experience growth in attendance. Dr. Henderson is founding the East Coast Baptist Bible College in the suburbs of New York City in a multi-million dollar Catholic



Westside Assembly of God, Davenport, Iowa moved from 44th in the listing to 14th. "Our decision to have every class give an altar call every week is one reason for our growth."

institution with a view that the college will become a "center for establishing independent Baptist churches in metropolitan New York."

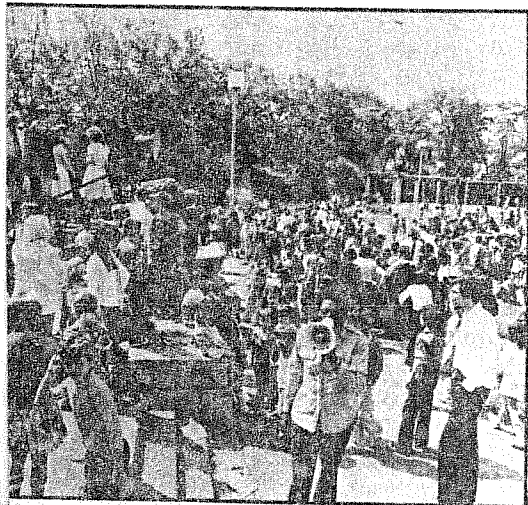
Trinity Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla., (9th) which was not even on the list of the 100 largest Sunday Schools when the listing first appeared nine years ago, has vaulted into ninth spot.

The First Baptist Church, Van Nuys, Calif., (10th) with its multi-phased ministry, slipped to 10th this past year due to being without a pastor.

ELEVENTH TO TWENTIETH

Attendance 3,500 to 2,600

Calvary Temple, Denver, Colo. slipped out of the 10 largest listing last year and is 12th in the nation. It has not gone down in attendance but has stopped growing and others have passed it up. Only two churches in this section grew rapidly. First, the most exciting is the giant leap by



First Baptist Church, Hammond, Ind., retains its lead—highlighted by an almost unbelievable single Sunday record attendance of 101,000 in May—reached through a multitude of satellite Sunday Schools.



Garden Grove (Calif.) Community Church (29th) features a 224-hour prescribed course involving some 1,400 lay ministers. The Rev. Kenneth Van Wyk and Dr. Robert Schuller present diplomas.



Evangel Temple, Louisville, Ky., (46th) attracted 6,800 on Easter Sunday when they featured Gov. Julian Carol, Col. James Erwin and Col. Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame.

Westside Assembly of God, Davenport, Iowa, (14th) which has grown by over 2,000 in average attendance in the last two years (from 44th in the nation to 14th).

"Our decision to have every class give an altar call every week is one of the greatest reasons for the growth," says the Rev. Tommy Barnett, pastor.

The second main story is also an Assembly of God church, Calvary Temple, Springfield, Ill., (17th) with an increase of 687 over last year, reaching 2704. When the listing of the 10 largest Sunday Schools first came out, the Rev. M. C. Johnson, pastor, determined to be included. He would have been included this year, but everyone else is growing, leaving him 17th.

First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla., (16th) occupies a multi-million dollar sanctuary and has doubled in the past seven years under Homer Lindsey, Jr., pastor, who assumed the pastorate from his father who is now pastor emeritus.

First Baptist Church, West Hollywood, Fla., (18th) went down by 152, mostly bus pupils, yet the attendance went up in the adult classes, showing internal growth.

Forrest Hills Baptist Church, Decatur, Ga., (19th) was the fastest-growing Sunday School in 1972 with an increase of over 1100 pupils, yet did not maintain the growth in the years immediately following. However, this year they were the fastest-growing Sunday School in Georgia with 450 more than the previous year.

TWENTY-FIRST TO THIRTIETH Attendance 2,600 to 2,300

The ten churches in this section grew mainly by quality service to their people. Two west Texas Southern Baptist (continued on page 80)

Trends in Sunday School Growth

Sunday School has become a "people's place," says Elmer Towns in this presentation of the trends in the Sunday School world. "What the 100 largest did this year will filter down to other Sunday Schools in two or three years."

Startling trends emerge from this year's listing of the 100 largest Sunday Schools. The greatest growth came in 1976 from schools featuring people-centered education. They emphasize trained workers, curriculum structure, adequate rooms, equipment and organization. Laymen run these schools as opposed to the recent trend of pastor-motivated growth. Their expansion does not ride the crest of busing, but the crowds come as hungry people reaching for spiritual food. Contests are minimized while Biblical content is maximized.

"Who cares about the 100 largest?" one reader wrote *Christian Life*. "There are one-third of a million other Sunday Schools that need a transfusion."

Like waves in the pond, the innovations among the 100 largest are predictions of trends in the Sunday School world. What they do in 1976 will filter down to other Sunday Schools in two or three years. Their emphasis on quality will affect thousands of other schools.

Contests, balloons, prizes and gospel singers were big news in the late 60s. The 100 largest were growing because of external motivation, and the bus ministry was one of the best ways to implement growth through promotion.

Since Sunday School contests are losing their appeal and quality education now works, the obvious question is, "Why?"

During the late 60's growth itself was a novelty. Not many Sunday Schools

were growing and those which did caught the attention of others. When Thomas Road Baptist Church grew from 2,400 to 4,800 in 1970, those interested in growth were awe-struck. They pilgrimaged to Lynchburg, Va., to study the successful formula of the Rev. Jerry Falwell, pastor. In 1972 at his pastor's conference, more than 5,000 showed up to study the principles that attracted people to Sunday School. They were contests, phoning, visitation, buses, newspaper ads, and T.V. announcements, plus a whole new philosophy of saturation evangelism. Delegates went home and applied the principles and grew in proportion to the Thomas-Road-like qualities they possessed. But contests appear to have had their day; like narcotics, they build up a resistance and lose their impact. Even Falwell has slowed down on Sunday School promotions. Church growth in the last half of the 1970s will be characterized by something else.

People-centered education is a principle whose day has come of age. People attend Sunday School where they enjoy hearing the Word of God taught. They want to *feel* the presence of the Holy Spirit and experience the joy of the Lord. It is more than knowing that their teacher is doctrinally correct or that they are supposed to go to Sunday School. Sunday School has become a people's place. Those who are now getting large numbers are not putting emphasis on numbers. Their emphasis is on people- (continued on page 100)

(continued from page 27)

privilege of education, knowing they are guarded and safe. Because of them, a woman may travel escorted into a village to obtain necessities. Because of them, a worker may feel confident to do his road maintenance, knowing that he is watched.

"Lord, care for them as they care for us."

I also included a prayer for our African Security Forces:

"I especially pray for our African Security Forces. You know, God, what pressures and temptations are put before them. May they remain loyal to the government and country.

"Strengthen them in their resolve to rid this country of terrorists. Guide them in their duties and tactics.

"Keep their heads up, and may they continue to be courageous. May they be encouraged in knowing that we appreciate their stand against evil.

"I thank You for these dedicated men.

"Bless the Air Force, too, Lord. May they always be vigilant. Bless the Army. May they be skilled and successful in

their warfare. Bless the Police. May they have the wisdom and manpower to undertake their extra duties at this time.

"Bless the Internal Affairs. May they remember that their first concern is for the welfare of the African people. Because of their experience, may they have the wisdom to counteract the evil influence of the terrorists.

"God, keep our men honourable in their duties. Because of their efforts, we can carry on our daily lives, and sleep peacefully at home in the cities.

"Bless them all."

We are appalled at the atrocities, murders and intimidation practised by the terrorists on both white and black civilians. They cowardly attack homesteads and villages, and plant mines indiscriminately. They also kidnap African schoolchildren and take them to Tanzania for training as terrorists.

Only last week, four African children traveling in a Scotch cart were killed when their cart detonated a landmine. Their four young companions were badly injured. Our television team happened to be the first on the scene and filmed our Security Forces' arrival and *cas-a-vac*. An Army doctor was brought in by helicopter, and the victims and their hysterical, pitiful

families were taken by helicopter to the nearest hospital for medical attention.

In the same week, an European farmer's vehicle detonated a landmine. His wife and three daughters were killed. The body of one girl, 8, was eventually found 20 feet up a nearby tree. A friend of the family, aged 17, survived the explosion but has had both legs amputated.

There are many demands and calls on the population for the national effort. Worthy organizations have been formed to help meet the needs of the troops, their families and the terrorist victims, no matter what race or tribe. Rhodesians are wonderful people and respond to the challenge willingly. However, there is a special call upon Christians. For instance, recently a movement called "The Security Forces Christian Fellowship" was formed. Their objective is to reach out to others in the Forces.

Many chaplains work in the Forces in our operational areas, and many soldiers are coming to know Jesus as Lord and Savior; many are experiencing His peace and trusting in Him.

The Church is very active in Rhodesia with missions, hospitals, schools and other activities. I personally have not

This 9th annual listing of the 100 largest Sunday Schools in the U.S. is the most exhaustive ever assembled. In previous years, churches which did not submit their attendance records were left off the list. This year, however, *Christian Life* has made every attempt to secure all the facts. Those who didn't report were listed in the position indicated by our investigation. So here they are—for your study and analysis—the super churches in America.

SUNDAY SCHOOLS IN THE U.S.—

Rank	Rank Last Year	Church	City-State	Minister	Weekly Attendance This Year	Weekly Attendance Last Year
1	1	First Baptist Church	Hammond, Ind.	Dr. Jack Hyles	14,004	13,561
2	2	Highland Park Baptist Church	Chattanooga, Tenn.	Dr. Lee Roberson	7,947	7,453
3	5	Thomas Road Baptist Church	Lynchburg, Va.	Dr. Jerry Falwell	*6,434	5,566
4	4	Akron Baptist Temple	Akron, Ohio	Dr. Charles Billington	*6,300	5,801
5	3	First Baptist Church	Dallas, Tex.	Dr. W. A. Criswell	5,877	6,129
6	6	Canton Baptist Temple	Canton, Ohio	Dr. Harold Henniger	**4,574	4,574
7	7	Landmark Baptist Temple	Cincinnati, Ohio	Dr. John Rawlings	**4,315	4,315
8	8	Temple Baptist Church	Detroit, Mich.	Dr. A. V. Henderson	**4,043	4,043
9	10	Trinity Baptist Church	Jacksonville, Fla.	Dr. Robert Gray	3,989	3,776
10	9	First Baptist Church	Van Nuys, Calif.		**3,829	3,829
11	11	Indianapolis Baptist Temple	Indianapolis, Ind.	Dr. Greg Dixon	**3,517	3,517
12	12	Calvary Temple	Denver, Colo.	Dr. Charles Blair	**3,418	3,418

All statistics supplied by church * Figure obtained and/or adjusted by Christian Life ** Last year's figures

worked among the African people, but my friends say some fine African Christians are standing up in faith to terrorism. They need our support.

I have an afternoon neighborhood Bible Study at my home weekly. We have been following the Inductive Bible Study on the Book of Acts as serialized in *Christian Life*, and it has been a blessing and guide to us. Our members are from different denominations, but we enjoy wonderful fellowship around God's Word, and we are one in Christ. Amongst our ladies, we have an American missionary to the Asian community, a fully trained marriage guidance counselor, two choir members and a "right-of-entry" teacher. We share, then pray for our country, for our loved ones on call-up, for the terrorists, and for our neighboring countries. The Holy Spirit leads us. We ask for a calm, gentle and loving spirit so that others may see a peace and love in our lives which is enviable.

We encourage family life and obedience to our husbands, and have talks and many Christian books circulating on this subject which gives rise to some very lively discussions! We also have a tape library started by our American missionary mem-

ber. We help others where possible, and find many women being drawn into our group with their individual needs and problems.

In fact, life for a Christian Rhodesian woman is very exciting and fulfilling, and we believe it is a privilege to live in this country. Because of Sanctions and prevailing circumstances, we have had to get used to shortages of commodities and this has helped move us away from materialism. What we feel the most is petrol rationing, but it is amazing how we manage with lift-clubs, friends and our inadequate bus services! We have a quality to our lives.

One day I jotted down in my diary a prayer for "the family unit":

"We especially pray for Rhodesian family life.

"Lord, we know that the heart of Christianity is our relationship with the Father, and our own family unit. The Communists know this and are doing everything possible to undermine the West by breaking down the family unit.

"I pray that women will accept their role of femininity.


"May they care about being a good mother and homemaker.

"Strengthen the family unit so that families can cope with every situation.

"God bless the home."

We are thankful that we have Christian education in all our government schools. Authorities encourage such Christian youth activities as Scripture Union, Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A.

Our children are the Christians and Rhodesians of the future, and we are grateful that our society is protected by a strict censorship board, and that the radio and television media are used effectively for Christian messages and programs. We know the value of this when we have a psychological war waged against us.

I thank the Lord for the privilege of being a Rhodesian, and for the many people all over the world who are praying for this country, and for its peoples. May God keep us humble and open to the direction of the Holy Spirit—and heal our land. 

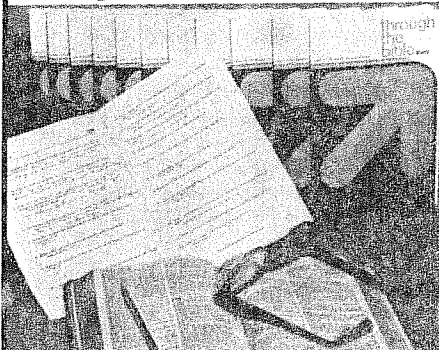
Winifred MacArthur, 36, and her husband Ralph, a civil engineering technician, live in Salisbury Rhodesia, where they attend Trinity Presbyterian Church. Mrs. MacArthur has a weekly interdenominational Bible study; her husband "coaches the bagpipes" for the Boys Brigade church band.

BY ELMER TOWNS, Sunday School Editor, Christian Life magazine.

THE 100 LARGEST '76

	Chapels	Denomination	Professions of Faith	Baptisms	Number of Teachers	Financial Income	Number of Riders	Number of Buses
3	0	Independent Baptist	23,650	7,733	800	\$3,740,000	-	-
4	74	Independent Baptist	2,907	2,349	155	2,000,000	1,109	19
8	0	Baptist Bible Fellowship	-	-	286	-	1,201	41
9	0	Baptist Bible Fellowship	-	-	-	-	640	19
2	20	Southern Baptist	-	430	1,019	5,548,091	-	7
-	0	Baptist Bible Fellowship	-	-	450	-	1,200	40
-	0	Baptist Bible Fellowship	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	0	Baptist Bible Fellowship	-	-	-	-	-	-
3	0	Baptist Bible Fellowship	3,895	1,284	370	7,000,000	2,800	58
-	0	Independent Baptist	-	-	775	-	350	10
-	9	Baptist Bible Fellowship	1,692	284	365	750,409	1,515	34
-	0	Inter-Denominational	-	-	-	998,451	150	4

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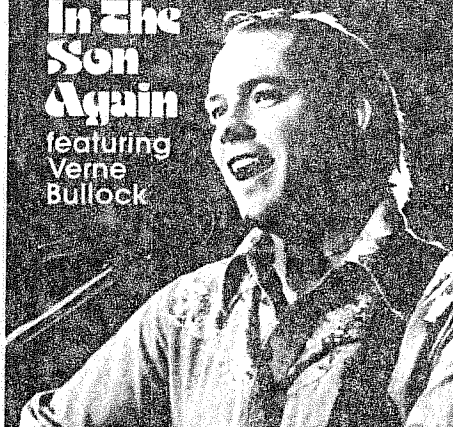
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discipline. Be zealous, therefore, and repent!" (Revelation 3:19). In Jeremiah 30:14,15, He says, "I have wounded you with the wound of an enemy, with the punishment of a cruel one, because your iniquity is great and your sins are numerous."

When we understand that God loves us, loves us more than we can know, we'll echo Peter: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the pain and trouble you're going through as if it were some strange and unexpected thing. It's for your testing, to teach you, to bring you closer to God. If you suffer like this, because of God's will, trust Him. Trust your faithful Creator to do what is right" (1 Peter 4:12,19).

We may not understand what He's doing, for His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). Our frame of reference is too small. Only He knows what is really good for us. We can trust Him for He is good and He is faithful. He wants our greatest good and He knows the only way we can get it. He loves us so much He gave His Son to die that we might have that good.

When we can truly see this goodness and greatness of God, we can also obey Him and rejoice in Him *always* (Philippians 4:4).

"In everything give thanks for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Jesus referred to us as His sheep. Shepherds sometimes have trouble with young lambs straying from the flock into the brush and rocks where they're easy prey for the

wolves. The shepherd knows the dam but the lamb does not. Since the shepherd must protect the lamb, he will break leg if it insists on straying.

While its leg is healing the shepherd will carry the lamb in a sling suspended around his neck. During this time a relationship develops between the shepherd and the lamb that nothing can separate. When the lamb once more can stand and play, one thing is certain: he'll never again stray from the shepherd.

I'm glad God loves me that much.

100 Largest Sunday Schools, 1976

(continued from page 9)

centered education, and numbers take care of themselves.

When a teenager was asked to raise a finger and sing, "This little light of mine," he walked out of a Baptist church in Texas exclaiming, "Crud." Trained in science and sociology, he wanted to know if the church could answer the questions raised by the University professor.

Even the churches that grew on contest are changing.

"Frankly, bubble gum and hamburgers don't get me excited anymore," replied the Rev. Bill Monroe, pastor, Florence Baptist Temple, a church that has gone from 0 to 1100 in six years. "I get excited about preaching the Word and seeing my people mature spiritually."

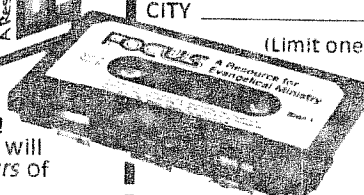
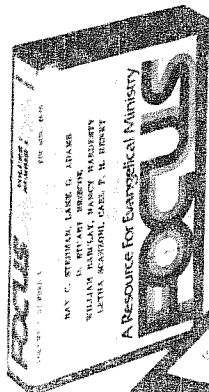
Sunday School has placed emphasis on the results it seeks, and has ignored the

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conditions that bring about numerical growth. What are the Biblical methods that draw a crowd? Soul-winning, Bible-teaching, fellowship, and growing in Christ meet the needs of people. Like an elegant restaurant, people return where there is good food and good service.

Even bumper stickers are changing. Ten years ago they read, "Fastest Growing" or "Macon County's Largest Sunday School." Now you find bumper stickers that maintain, "All that's good about the Bible" and "Sunday School, the Answer for Me."

Why has quality education caused Sunday School growth in 1976 when it did not make an impact in the late 1960s? Remember, that was the decade of riot and anti-establishment. Pessimism infected the church. Yet a group of optimistic pastors believed God wanted them to carry out the great commission in their Jerusalem and they used every means at their disposal to reach the multitudes: contests and bus-riding included. They refused to be discouraged by their world. Now their optimism has spilled from the theological right to evangelical churches. They are growing without changing their methods because a new enthusiasm has stimulated their faith.

Even though some of the churches that employed promotions have decreased in numbers, many still have victories. Most of them have seen the indicators go up in gift classes, offerings and the drive-in crowd.

The buses are down in attendance with a rise in gas prices, insurance and overcrowded classrooms. Bus work is hard; the average length of service for a bus driver is nine months. Some pastors had large crowds but felt frustrated because they couldn't minister to them.

"I want to do more than babysit a bunch of kids," maintained Rayburn Blair, pas-

tor, Trinity Baptist Church, Tallahassee. Bus attendance is down in most of the 100 largest Sunday Schools, but those which work at it still bring people to Christ.

Money—or lack of it—has been a factor in Sunday School growth. The price of used buses sky-rocketed and "For Sale" signs are seen where churches used to have big bus ministries. As the number of bus riders goes down, more families drive to church, stabilizing attendance. As the bus churches stabilize and increase the quality of their education, they will take on new life in the late 1970s.

The establishment of mission Sunday Schools will grow in the next few years. When the 100 largest first appeared there was a controversy over listing mission Sunday Schools or chapels not located on the main complex.

"They are not a big Sunday School if people are not there," some complained. In rebuttal, those with mission Sunday Schools said they would rather preach to people in their own neighborhood and lay the foundation for a potential church. Big busing churches brought riders to one location and magnified the advantages of the massive Sunday Schools. Now those who criticized loudest are expanding to a satellite ministry.

Missionary Bob Hughes, Cebu City, Philippines, might be more responsible for these trends to mission Sunday Schools than any other. His Sunday School jumped from 1,000 to over 20,000 weekly by mobilizing workers to go to the multitudes by jeeps and buses then bring them to hundreds of satellite schools in washeterias, store porches, garages and any other building with a roof.

Forrest Hills Baptist Church, Decatur, Ga., grew by 450 when two new Sunday Schools were opened by bus workers. Highland Park Baptist Church has always maintained mission Sunday Schools. This

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year they have 74 chapels with approximately 3,000 in attendance.

The massive day with over 101,000 registered at First Baptist Church, Hammond, Ind., was accomplished in May 1976 with a vast number of satellite schools. One school was conducted in a rented amusement park. Everyone had to listen to the lesson before he could enjoy the rides. Every conceivable spot was improvised to reach the unbelievable goal: little league parks, shopping centers, public school auditoriums, picnic areas, and any other spot where a Sunday School class could gather.

"I can't conceive of 100,000," one Sunday School superintendent exclaimed.

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"I have problems coping with 100."

Very little has been written in church publications about this phenomenal record of 101,000 people, as though people don't care about records.

"Hyles didn't really have that many, he just sponsored a number of rallies," one critic responded.

Jack Hyles has had the fastest growing Sunday School for several years but Tommy Barnett, pastor, Westside Assembly of God, Davenport, Iowa, got the record this year with a weekly growth of 1,291 over the previous year.

Several observers of Hyles' big day predict that he will try to do it every Sunday and one day average over 100,000 in Sunday School. Incredible! Only a few years ago a goal of 10,000 in Sunday School was unreachable; now he appears to be talking about a Sunday School the size of Lincoln, Neb.

And so the impact of *Christian Life's* listing of the 100 largest Sunday Schools continues, as God gives the increase year by year. 

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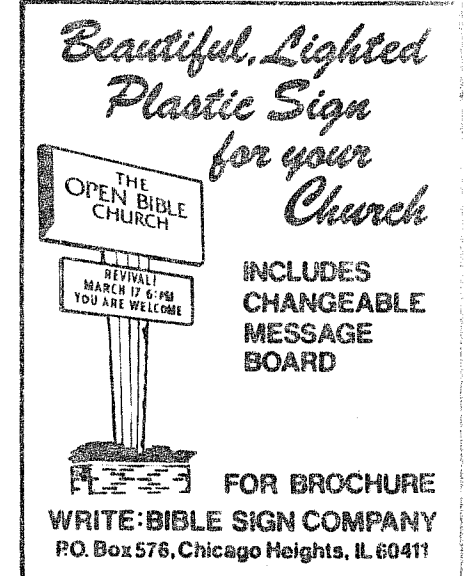


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