

10-1975

Sunday Schools in the U.S. – The 100 Largest

Elmer Towns
Liberty University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/towns_articles

Recommended Citation

Towns, Elmer, "Sunday Schools in the U.S. – The 100 Largest" (1975). *Articles*. 28.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/towns_articles/28

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Works of Elmer Towns at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

This 8th 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.

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

SUNDAY SCHOOLS IN THE U.S.— The 100 Largest

The listing of the nation's largest Sunday Schools first appeared eight years ago, shocking the complacent church world which thought Sunday Schools were dying. The opposite now was apparent. Crowds were attending some Sunday Schools. Neighborhoods were reached by busing. Attendance contests didn't turn off sophisticated Americans, but rather got them excited.

Large Sunday Schools were getting the job done, most of them using old-

fashioned methods. Their workers canvassed neighborhoods and gathered for all-night prayer meetings. Their ministers preached to great crowds and "gave invitations" to come forward and receive Christ. These large churches had soul-winning Sunday Schools.

When 12 Sunday Schools in America averaged 2,000 or more a week eight years ago, everyone gasped. And few believed *Christian Life's* prediction that there would be 100 that large by 1980. We are one-third

there; this year, there are 33 on the list.

Christian Life also predicted an individual Sunday School would average 10,000 by 1980. Many thought it was an unrealistic guess. When Jerry Falwell of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Va., skyrocketed to 10,817 for a one-time big day in November 1970, many still thought the 10,000 barrier couldn't be broken on a weekly basis. But First Baptist Church, Hammond, Ind., averaged 13,561 this last year. Pastor Jack Hyles seems to have no limitations; he at-

Rank	Rank Last Year	Church	City - State	Minister	Weekly Attendance	Change in Attendance From Last Year
1	1	First Baptist Church	Hammond, Ind.	Dr. Jack Hyles	13,561	+2,258
2	2	Highland Park Baptist Church	Chattanooga, Tenn.	Dr. Lee Roberson	7,453	+617
3	3	First Baptist Church	Dallas, Tex.	Dr. W.A. Criswell	6,703	+764
4	†NL	Akron Baptist Temple	Akron, Ohio	Dr. Charles Billington	5,801*	-
5	†NL	Thomas Road Baptist Church	Lynchburg, Va.	Dr. Jerry Falwell	5,566*	-
6	4	Canton Baptist Temple	Canton, Ohio	Dr. Harold Henniger	4,574	+34
7	†NL	Landmark Baptist Temple	Cincinnati, Ohio	Dr. John Rawlings	4,315*	-
8	†NL	Temple Baptist Church	Detroit, Mich.	Dr. G.B. Vick	4,043*	-
9	5	First Baptist Church of Van Nuys	Van Nuys, Calif.	Dr. Harold Fickett, Jr.	3,829	-
10→	6	Trinity Baptist Church	Jacksonville, Fla.	Dr. Robert Gray, Jr.	3,776	+230
11	8	Indianapolis Baptist Temple	Indianapolis, Ind.	Dr. Greg Dixon	3,517	+255
12	7	Calvary Temple	Denver, Colo.	Dr. Charles Blair	3,418	+38

tracted an unbelievable 30,527 to Sunday School last December.

"Hyles is unreal; he shouldn't be counted with other churches," one pastor exclaimed. "He's a whole denomination in one building."

Hyles challenged Alvin Dark, manager of the Oakland A's, to an attendance contest. The world's largest Sunday School believes they can have more in Sunday School than the world champion A's can attract to a baseball game.

"That's one game I want to lose," replied Dark.

Eight years ago, most of the large Sunday Schools were independent Baptist. "We were shocked to discover we were not the leaders," declared a Southern Baptist magazine. The independent Baptist basked in the light of new-found glory.

Then *Christian Life* discovered the growth of the Baptist Bible Fellowship and labeled it "the fastest growing denomination in the U.S." (from 13 churches to over 2,700 in a short 25-year span).

But the spotlight now has shifted to the Southern Baptists with 32 on this year's list. There are 20 independent Baptist churches on the list, 15 Baptist Bible Fellowship churches, as well as churches from other denominations such as Nazarene, Assemblies of God and Foursquare. A total of 19 different denominations or Protestant groups are represented on this year's survey.

For the first time, the Baptists comprise the ten largest (Calvary Temple,

Denver, Colo., slipped off the list as other churches registered faster growth). The Baptists also still dominate the chart with 75 listings. However, they are slipping in strength. There were 84 Baptist churches on the listing two years ago.

When the listing first appeared, it

WATCH FOR THE FASTEST GROWING

Next month, *Christian Life* reports the fastest growing Sunday School in each state. Some of these Sunday Schools are infants only a few years old. Their growth is just as impressive as that of the massive Sunday Schools. Whereas your Sunday School perhaps couldn't become one of the largest, it could receive nationwide recognition for the fastest growing in your state. Read November's *Christian Life* to discover the fastest growing Sunday School in your state last year. Then prepare to enter next year's contest!

included several Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. At one time, the Cross of Glory Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, was 27th. However, these mainline denominational churches appear to have experienced stagnation while newer evangelistic-oriented Sunday Schools have leap-

frogged over them to get on the list.

Three new churches are on the list this year that were not in existence when it was first published eight years ago: The Open Door Church, Chambersburg, Pa.; Canyon Creek Baptist Church, Richardson, Tex.; and Calvary Temple, Springfield, Ill., which has exploded to 2,017 in attendance in seven short years.

Fourteen come from Texas, the highest listed state. Eleven come from California, with Florida having nine, and Georgia and Ohio having eight each. The greater Los Angeles area has nine churches on the list. The Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas has six.

Christian Life continues to receive complaints about the listing. First, some Sunday Schools are charged with lying about their figures. The magazine does not guarantee the published figures; it only requires two officers in each church to verify that the attendance figures are accurate and have been published to the congregation. It is assumed a whole congregation can't be deceived.

Second, protesting letters claim that *Christian Life* is frustrating average pastors by publicizing impossible goals.

"When you publish a story of a church growing from 150 to 1,538 in five years (the Open Door Church, Chambersburg, Pa.), you frustrate average pastors with average abilities," a critic charged.

Others become desperate. One pastor of a (continued on page 61)

Church	Number of Baptisms	Total Income	Number of Buses	Number of Elders	Denomination	Literature
1	7,273	\$3,740,000	220	7,101	Independent Baptist	Write own
5	1,249	1,342,502	15	950	Independent Baptist	Write own, Baptist Pub., Regular Baptist Press
7	537	5,297,062	18	500	Southern Baptist	Southern Baptist
-	-	-	19	640	Baptist Bible Fellowship	Write own, Baptist Pub.
-	-	-	41	1,201	Baptist Bible Fellowship	Baptist Pub.
-	-	-	40	1,200	Baptist Bible Fellowship	Regular Baptist Press, Baptist Pub.
-	-	-	-	-	Baptist Bible Fellowship	Write own
-	-	-	-	-	Baptist Bible Fellowship	Write own
-	-	-	10	350	Independent Baptist	Southern Baptist, Gospel Light
4	1,223	600,000	60	2,700	Independent Baptist	Write own
2	284	750,409	39	1,515	Independent Baptist	Write own
-	-	2,028,495	4	150	Interdenominational	Gospel Light, Scripture Press

small Free Will Baptist Church set a goal of 5,000 in Sunday School. When he couldn't reach 300, he wrote a suicide note and left his clothes on the bank of a lake. After a short time, his conscience smote him and he returned to town confessing to the "embarrassment of failure."

However, although some Sunday School workers may have been frustrated, thousands have written appreciation.

"I read where Dallas Billington built the world's largest Sunday School with an eighth grade education, so I figured I could do it too," wrote Pastor Bill Monroe

who began Florence Baptist Temple five years ago and averaged 1,034 this last year.

Critics also have accused *Christian Life* of emphasizing quantity while neglecting quality. This is a reckless charge. A careful count of the articles in our pages will reveal more space given to small churches with good programs than to large churches.

Criticism also has been leveled against single services which combine Sunday School and worship services.

"They are not a Sunday School," claimed one West Coast pastor. "If I counted my 11 a.m. crowd, I'd be larger." However, because they call themselves Sunday Schools, they are listed by *Chris-*

tian Life. Also, those who have visited the single service note that it is much like an adult Sunday School class than worship service.

Finally, cries of foul-play have been heard over the years about large Sunday Schools that list chapels. Highland Park Baptist Church, Chattanooga, averaged 6,819 last year. Half the attendance was 73 chapels away from the main campus yet they were listed at the higher level because (1) the church could have built them to the main location but chose to keep a neighborhood witness, (2) the property (assets and liabilities) is controlled by the mother church, and (3) the chapels are pastored by students from Tennessee Temple College, located in the mother church. Since the attendance thrust of all the Sunday School missions has come from the mother church, *Christian Life* has listed the total attendance.

Busing Boom Tops Out

Many large churches rode the busing crest to new attendance heights. A few years ago, everyone seemed to be buying buses. Today the picture has changed. The Sunday School bus movement seems to have "topped out." There are many who still reach communities with buses, and thousands are won to Christ through bus visitation. But we no longer find unbridled optimism. Some churches are selling extra buses.

"What happened to all the bus conferences?" someone asked recently. Interest has slackened. Thomas Road Baptist Church once registered over 5,000 to study its busing program; this year a reported 300 were there. Many others closed down their busing seminars.

There are several reasons why super-enthusiasm over the buses deflated. First the recession hit. Soaring gas prices and spiraling costs of used buses forced some out of the ministry.

"We once bought gas for 17 cents, now we pay 47 cents. It used to cost us 85 cents to bring one child to Sunday School, now we pay \$2.25 per bus rider," says Dr. Greg Dixon, Indianapolis Baptist Temple.

Those who bought buses like instant mashed potatoes found that the bus ministry is *hard work*. When they discovered it took 10 hours of visitation on Saturday to get 100 riders, the superficial enthusiasts sold their buses. Those with a compassion for the lost stuck by the stuff. Their bus ministry continues to prosper.

Others found that when they brought busloads of kids to Sunday School, they had no space or teachers to get the job done. They were just babysitters. The First Baptist Church, Riverdale, Md., came back so they could do a better job teaching those they reached.

Guarded Optimism

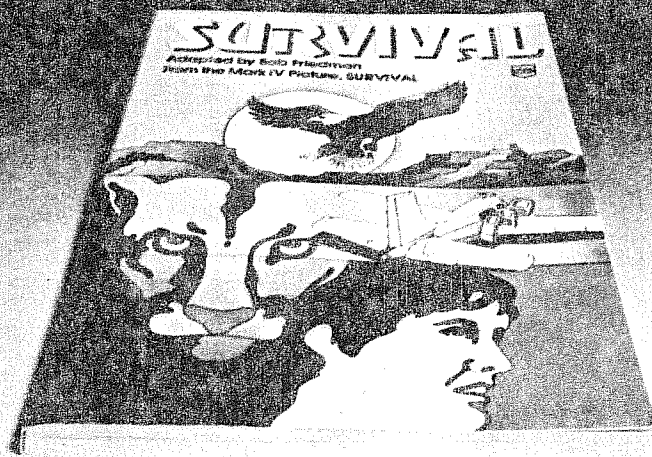
A few years ago, the super-churches ran with wide-open throttle. Most planned to

(continued on page 66)

Times of Refreshing

High Adventure for the Whole Family Survival

Five people stare disaster in the face. After a crash landing, a young boy, his parents and sister, and the plane's pilot are forced to come to grips with God and life. Available at your regular Christian bookstore.



(Adapted by Bob Friedman)

GL-105a

Regal
Times of
Refreshing
Glendale CA 91209



SENIOR ADULT MINISTRIES

By Sam Stearnman

Increasing numbers of churches are recognizing the wide-open door in the area of ministry to retired and near-retired persons. "Brother Sam" shares what has been happening in one congregation and offers valuable ideas born out of his experiences in developing and directing this exciting, flourishing program. 128 pages. Paper.

\$1.95

PUPPETS GO TO CHURCH

By Wilma Powers Perry and Earl Perry

Puppetry has become a popular media for conveying gospel truths to both old and young. The Perrys discovered it an effective way to present children's sermons in their worship service.

Here you will find a history of puppetry, instructions for making screens and puppets, and 19 complete scripts on a wide variety of subjects. 88 pages. Paper. \$1.50

BH

BEACON HILL PRESS
OF KANSAS CITY

Box 527, Kansas City, Missouri 64141

double their attendance. To do this, they went on television and radio, built larger buildings, hired more staff and incurred debts.

"The super aggressive churches ended up with super debts," one pastor noted.

Today's sky has some clouds for the large churches. Both Rex Humbard and Jerry Falwell had an encounter with the Security and Exchange Commission, but appear to be pulling out of financial trouble. Others pulled in their financial belt when the recession hit. Expansion slowed with less money to advertise and hire staff. When others reached their

RUNNERS-UP

Willow Meadows Baptist	1,308
Houston, Tex., Dr. R. H. Langley	
Lavon Drive Baptist	1,304
Garland, Tex., Dr. Gary Coleman	
First Baptist Church	1,296
Elkhart, Ind., Rev. D. E. Gelatt	
College Ave. Baptist	1,291
San Diego, Calif., Rev. R. E. Luther	
The Peoples Church	1,253
Fresno, Calif., Rev. G. L. Johnson	
North Valley Baptist	1,249
Redding, Calif., Dr. Royal Blue	
Calvary Temple	
Ass'y of God	1,232
Modesto, Calif., Rev. J. D. Wright	
Blue Ridge Bapt. Temple	1,214
Kansas City, Mo., Dr. P. Dailey	
N. Highland Ass'y of God	1,214
Columbus, Ga., Rev. C. B. Wasdin	

debt ceiling, they hit another snag in their growth pattern.

The large churches continue to push upward at their own rate. Those whose mushroom growth was tied to media, advertisements and busing have topped out.

"Why does First Baptist Church of Hammond continue to grow?" many ask.

"Because our growth has been tied to soul-winning," Hyles answers. He notes that their aim is not church growth but soul-winning. The lost are won to Christ in the homes, streets and factories of the Calumet region of Indiana; busing happens to be the way to get these people to church. Their growth has not been tied to expensive techniques. Then again, the explanation of growth is Jack Hyles. He will never be quenched in his desire to win the lost.

Today most pastors feel they will still grow, but few boast a goal of 10,000. *Guarded optimism* is the by-word for those in the large churches; they have become realistic.

Excitement that grabs the public is no longer being generated only by the largest Sunday Schools, however, even when Hyles had 2,258 more this year than last. Just as there is more happiness in the maternity ward than in the old folks home, today's greatest excitement is sparked by the start

(continued on page 94)

**Why doesn't
my class
pay attention
like hers does
every Sunday?**



Maybe they would. Sometimes all it takes is the right lesson materials. Or the "extras"... stimulating little teaching helps that can make a world of difference in getting the attention, interest and response that make Sunday School teaching so rewarding! To see a truly involving curriculum and a complete line of contemporary supporting materials, mail the coupon below today for your free copy of our all-new *Christian Education Resource Book*. It's your "idea book"! (Ask for free departmental Preview Paks, too.) No obligation.

Send for FREE "Idea Book"

☐ Send my free "Idea Book" (*Christian Education Resource Book*.)

Also send free sample lesson materials for:

☐ Nursery ☐ Kgtin. ☐ Primary 1-2
☐ Pri.-Jr. 3-4 ☐ Jr. 5-6 ☐ Jr. High
☐ Sr. High ☐ Adult

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Phone # _____ Denom. _____

(circle) Pastor DCE Supt. Teacher

Approx. S.S. attendance _____

David C. Cook Publishing Co.


ELGIN, ILLINOIS 60120 DLPAB



100 Largest Sunday Schools (continued from page 66)

of new churches. The focus of Sunday School growth in 1976 will be with a new breed of church "planters" who believe the old denominations have had it and that the stagnant churches are filled with problems. He rebels against bureaucracy and professional Christianity. He wants to win souls and teach his converts.

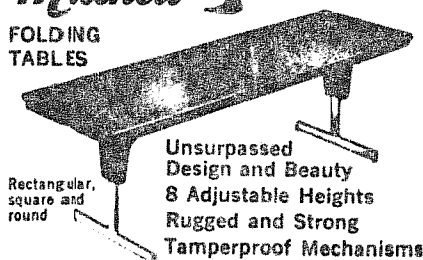
God will always have His large church because He is a great Lord who is concerned about the millions. He will raise up His gifted servants to reach them.

The 70's and the 80's are still the decades of the large church. 

For more information check 77 on back page.

Mitchell Saturna®

FOLDING
TABLES



Rectangular,
square and
round

Unsurpassed
Design and Beauty
8 Adjustable Heights
Rugged and Strong
Tamperproof Mechanisms

Choose from many top materials and colors

MITCHELL MANUFACTURING CO.
2730 S. 34th St. Milwaukee, Wis. 53215

For more information check 78 on back page.

I FIRE WRITERS!

Fire them with
enthusiasm for develop-
ing God-given writing
talent and extending
their ministry in this
exciting profession.
You can "get fired"
too! Write for my

FREE STARTER KIT



Norman B. Rohrer, Director
CHRISTIAN WRITERS GUILD
Box 707-G
La Cañada, California 91011

Send me your FREE Starter Kit. Show me how
to develop my writing talent and how to sell.

MR. MRS. MISS

ADDRESS

CITY, STATE, ZIP

For more information check 79 on back page.

**CHOIR
ROBES**
by...

OAK HALL

QUALITY
SELECTION
DEPENDABILITY

write for more information

OAK HALL
CAP AND GOWN COMPANY

2734 COLONIAL AVENUE, S.W. • ROANOKE, VIRGINIA 24015



Update on Argentina (continued from page 29)

not against flesh and blood, not against people or political parties, but against the unseen principalities and powers of darkness. It is no secret that a spiritist medium high in the government has had tremendous influence over what has been taking place in Argentina until recently.

So we are praying earnestly that God will not only spare our lives to continue preaching the Gospel, if that is His perfect will; but we are crying out to the Sovereign Lord of the universe to bring Argentines to a place of national repentance for the sins that have crippled all efforts to find a solution to the chaos that is coming upon us.

It is with a deep sense of joy that I report that there is a powerful moving of the Holy Spirit in Argentina today. In many different denominational groups, there is a stirring of the dry bones, an awakening, an increasing impatience with the doldrums of the status quo. In some cases, those of us who have restudied the Scriptures and have returned to New Testament beliefs and practices, have been "frozen out" or directly expelled; but in other cases, Spirit-transformed Christians have been able to stay on, carrying whole churches into a marvelous new dimension by manifesting love and patience, while emphasizing "new" truths that have been in the Bible all the time.

Undoubtedly there has been some wild-fire and personality clashes, especially at first; but by and large, there has been a refreshing new working of the Spirit, marked by a strong increase in attendance and spiritual activity, especially among young people. Meetings have come alive with the singing of hundreds of newly-composed choruses that run the entire gamut of spiritual expression, from joyous praise to deep and moving worship. Some are translated from English, but more than 50 percent are Bible passages set to beautiful Argentine-composed melodies. At times one has the feeling that the Holy Spirit has actually returned to us the very music composed by David and others of ancient times.

Meetings run much longer now (in the

groups that are experiencing this renewal) and preaching may last an hour, but no one thinks of the time. And usually when meetings are over, there is much lingering for prayer and precious fellowship in the Lord. The outstanding mark of present-day communion among Spirit-led Christians is love, love and more love—love that leaps over all barriers of race, class or denominational differences. We have learned in a practical way that blessed co-operation is possible in spite of some lack of agreement as to modes of baptism, or the work of the Holy Spirit, etc.

Bible messages constantly emphasize such basic truths as the absolute Lordship of Christ, the oneness of the Body, discipleship, holiness in daily living, and humility and understanding in all human relationships. Families are adjusting to Biblical

For more information check 76 on back page

FREE CATALOG

- Folding Chairs & Tables
- Stacking Chairs
- Hot & Cool Racks
- Laundry Furniture, Bins
- Carpets & Rugs
- Lecterns • Chalkboards

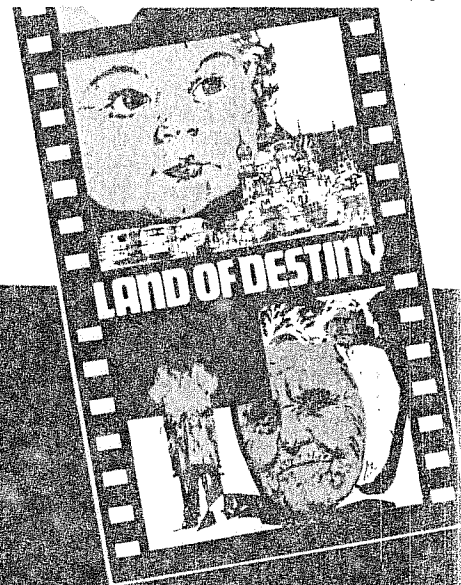


Adirondack

276-A Park Ave. So., N.Y.C. 10010

Shipping Points — PITTSBURGH • CHICAGO
BOSTON • DALLAS • ATLANTA • LOS ANGELES

For more information check 51 on back page



LAND OF DESTINY

A totally Russian film

— produced by

Russian Christians
about Russian believers.

Filmed on location in Russia

16mm COLOR/SOUND MOTION PICTURE

Length: 30-Minutes

Rental: \$27.50

ORDER THROUGH

CRUSADE VENTURES, Dept. SMS

P.O. Box 371

Fair Lawn, New Jersey 07410