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Sunday Schools of the Decade

Phenomenal growth has been experienced, over the last ten years, in Sunday Schools across America—largely because of *Christian Life* magazine's "100 Largest Sunday Schools" listing, according to Elmer Towns, Sunday School Editor.

The critics who, ten years ago, were claiming that Sunday Schools would be gone by 1980, must be thoroughly chagrined. As a result of *Christian Life's* "100 Largest Sunday Schools" competition, the "top ten" have doubled in attendance in the last decade; others have experienced phenomenal growth. First Baptist Church (Hammond, Ind.) had an average increase of more than 10,000 pupils per week; but, more astounding, it attracted more than 101,000 to a series of satellite Sunday Schools in May 1976. Now few talk of setting a higher attendance record.

Many churches were motivated to grow by the "100 Largest" listing. The Rev. M.C. Johnson began Calvary Temple the year the listing first appeared, and wrote *Christian Life* that his church would one day "make it." Last year it was 17th. This year he pointed out that his church would have been 9th if the listing had been continued.

Churches were founded because of the "100 Largest" listing. *Christian Life* has a file of more than 200 pastors who wrote of the inspiration they received to build a church.

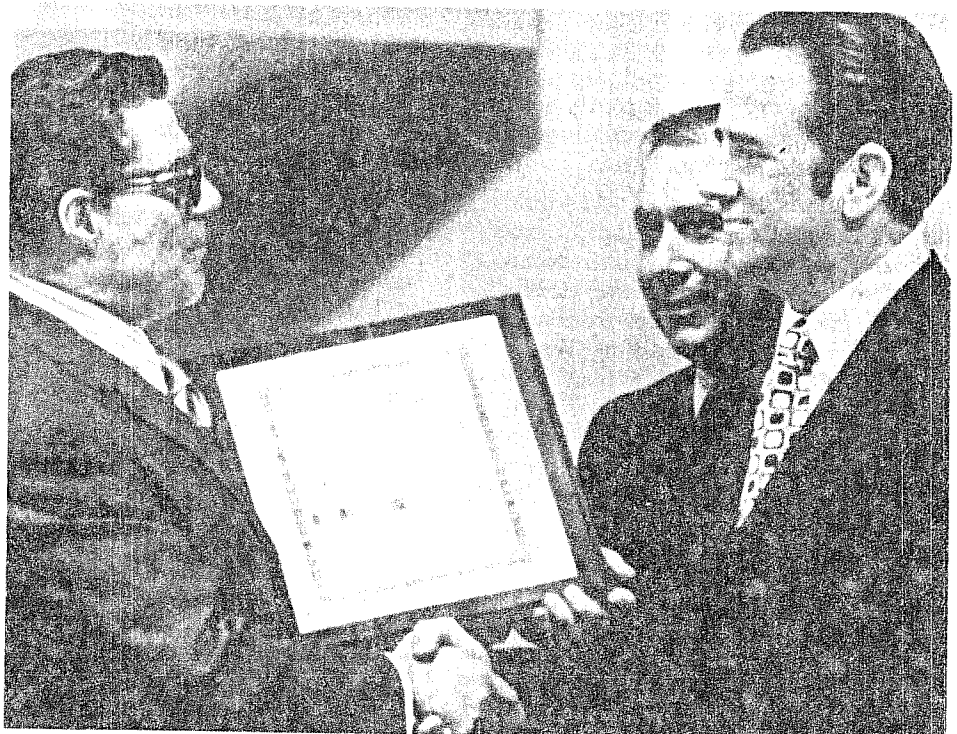
For example, Bill Monroe resigned a position in Indianapolis after reading that Dallas Billington built America's largest Sunday School (listed 1968) with only an eighth grade education. Monroe moved to Florence, S.C., and rented an abandoned movie house on a deserted army air base. Seven years later, Florence Baptist Temple Sunday School averages more than 1,200 in attendance.

Sunday School growth has occurred in communities of different size. Six of the churches with the greatest growth in the last ten years are located in large metropolitan areas, but four are located in mid-size communities: Lynchburg, Va.; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Davenport, Iowa; and Springfield, Ill.

We have learned a number of significant basic principles of Sunday School growth from these leaders. Growing



Left: Jack Hyles, pastor of the Hammond (Ind.) First Baptist Church, holds undisputed record for being "the largest"—with a one-Sunday attendance of 101,000. Above: In 1968, Dallas Billington (left) was recognized for having built America's largest Sunday School with only an eighth grade education. Robert Walker, editor of *Christian Life*, presents the award. Below: Jerry Falwell (right), pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Va., is congratulated by Walker while Elmer Towns, Sunday School editor, looks on.



Sunday Schools are well-meshed with the church, and there is an evangelistic fervor to win people to Christ. Growing Sunday Schools have an energetic pastor who teaches with persuasion, organizes with skill, and promotes with the talent of Madison Avenue. These Sunday Schools seem always to be surrounded with piles of dirt and the smell of new concrete because they are constantly expanding.

The teacher (to student) ratio is high, and the best teachers lead the classes. A weekly teachers meeting is held, and a paid staff supervises the program.

These schools are old-fashioned in their commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture and basic Christianity. Prayer, soul-winning, and Bible teaching have been vindicated as workable techniques for the space age.

The listing of the 100 Largest Sunday Schools also is important for its predictive nature. It has become an indicator of coming trends. Innovations, techniques, and ideas often appeared first among the largest because of their financial base, manpower, and lack of inhibition to try new programs. Then, in three or four years, the average Sunday Schools followed suit.

The "100 Largest" list also motivated Sunday Schools to become number conscious and to set goals to reach the unchurched multitudes. In the early days of the listing, Landmark Baptist Temple (Cincinnati, Ohio) set a goal of 10,000 in Sunday School. Back then, the reading public considered that an impossible dream. Two years later there were 10,187 at Thomas Road Baptist (Lynchburg, Va.), and eyebrows were raised. Next, First Baptist Church

(Hammond, Ind.) had over 30,000, and many thought the peak number had been reached. A few years later, the same church counted 101,000.

The emphasis by large churches on numbers was followed by smaller Sunday Schools. Canyon Creek Baptist Church set a goal of 1,000 and reached it on its first anniversary. Hundreds of other churches began setting goals.

Then Calvary Temple (Denver), 9th largest, sent shudders through the church world with its financial problems and impending bankruptcy. Next, the Security and Exchange Commission investigated Thomas Road Baptist Church. Some churches went into bankruptcy. In the Lynchburg church, the commission found nothing wrong, and also gave a clean slate to The Cathedral of Tomorrow (Akron, Ohio). These churches paid off their indebted-

Sunday School History Marches On

The 100 Largest Sunday Schools

The following list of the 100 largest Sunday schools in the United States was compiled from the 1977 edition of the "100 Largest Sunday Schools" listing published in *Christian Life* magazine. The listing is based on the number of children in the Sunday school classes, as reported by the churches themselves. The list is arranged in descending order of attendance.

Rank	Name	Location	Attendance
1	First Baptist Church	Hammond, Ind.	101,000
2	Calvary Temple	Denver, Colo.	30,000
3	Thomas Road Baptist Church	Lynchburg, Va.	10,187
4	Landmark Baptist Temple	Cincinnati, Ohio	10,000
5	Canyon Creek Baptist Church	...	1,000
6	...	...	...
7	...	...	...
8	...	...	...
9	...	...	...
10	...	...	...

Christian Life, sponsor of the first nation-wide and then international Sunday School attendance contests, launches a third phase of promotion.

Christian Life's interest in the Sunday School is both historic and legendary. More than a quarter of a century ago, we launched the first nation-wide and then international Sunday School attendance contest every sponsored. The contest ran for 10 years. During that period the attendance increases racked up by the participating schools totaled more than 3,000,000. On one mission field alone, participation in *Christian Life's* Sunday School contest is credited with starting an unprecedented number of new churches, resulting in an astonishing number of conversions to Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, back in the U.S. the Sunday School attendance contest spawned many Sunday Schools in areas where children were totally unreached. One pastor credits his participation in the Sunday School with elevating the status of his

church from a virtual nonentity to the principal congregation in the community.

In many communities, Sunday Schools involved in the contest made such remarkable records that their successes were headlined in the local newspapers and were aired on regional radio and TV broadcasts.

Christian Life's second promotion of the Sunday School came with the launching of its "100 Largest Sunday Schools" listing. But so few Sunday Schools were "large" that when the list was begun in 1968 only 15 could be found with attendances of more than 2,000. In the 10 years since this first listing, we have witnessed an attendance explosion. Today, to appear in the "100 Largest" listing, a Sunday School must average at least 1,500 throughout the year.

Last year, Allendale Baptist

Church (Austin, Texas) was in 70th place. After publication of the list, three other Austin churches told *Christian Life* that their attendance was large enough to have put them on the list—if we had known about them. What has happened in Austin has happened in many other cities.

The almost impossible task of accurately compiling the "100 Largest" list played a key part in *Christian Life's* decision to discontinue it. But there are other reasons to end the series. Some churches refused to cooperate.

Still other churches altered the rules. Mission Sunday School classes, some 60 miles away from home base, were counted in the averages. Others counted Bible classes in rest homes, hospitals, and on Wednesday nights. Still others combined Sunday School and morning service into a large unified service.

However, through it all, the good outweighed the bad, and only heaven will reveal how many thousands were won to Jesus Christ because the listing of the "100 Largest" challenged others to reach spiritually needy pupils.

Now we believe we have come to the third phase in our continuing presentation of the Sunday School as the single most viable evangelistic tool in the hands of the local church. This is the on going presentation of our "50 Fastest Growing Sunday Schools" listing and awards. In this listing, we annually name the fastest growing Sunday School in each state of the U.S. This appears in each November issue of *Christian Life*. Watch for it!

Sunday Schools of the Decade

ness. But smaller churches which followed the example of super-aggressive evangelism and spent money for buses, television, church campuses, larger facilities (even salaries of church evangelists), often did not fare so well. Three churches in Jacksonville, Fla., recently went bankrupt. A conservative estimate indicates more than 500 in the U.S. followed this example.

Sunday School busing was a well-kept secret until the listing of the 100 Largest Sunday Schools.

"I know of no church that is growing that doesn't have a bus ministry," Bill Powell of the Southern Baptist Convention said at that time.

In the early 70s, thousands of churches began a bus ministry. They purchased equipment, employed bus workers and mechanics, and built

bus-repair facilities. Each year Sunday Schools registered phenomenal gains on the "100 Largest" listing because of busing.

The bubble burst when the oil embargo drove the price of gas out of sight. With it, inflation sent the price of insurance, equipment and operations skyward. Those looking to buses for fast growth began to have doubts. They also saw that busing was hard work. Thousands of man hours were needed to push attendance up. Those who got into bus work for the wrong reasons quickly bailed out.

Today, those in the bus ministry are convinced that spiritually lost people can be won to Christ through Sunday School buses, so they continue on in spite of the hard work and high cost.

Ten years ago most Sunday Schools were taught in tiny rooms built on the assumption, "A smaller class will produce better education." But the size of

Sunday School rooms has increased in this growth decade. Classes are bigger and more exciting. Teachers no longer sit with children in small circles to discuss the Bible. Master teachers in bright open-space rooms use puppets, flannelgraphs, film strips, and flash cards.

For example, to handle the growing crowd at West Side Assembly of God (Davenport, Iowa), the chairs were taken out of the rooms. Instead of 30 pupils per room, they sat 60 on the floor. When more space was needed, bleachers were built in each room, and 100 were accommodated.

The trend toward bigger classrooms is called many things: large-room teaching, the master teacher plan, team teaching, or activity teaching. The Southern Baptists call it open-room teaching. Growing Sunday Schools adapted their classrooms to reach the *(continued on page 65)*

CHURCH	PASTOR	ATTENDANCE	ATTENDANCE	GROWTH IN	PERCENT OF
		1968	1977	AVERAGE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE	INCREASE
(1) First Baptist Church Hammond, Indiana	Dr. Jack Hyles	3,342	14,004	10,662	419
(2) Highland Park Baptist Church Chattanooga, Tennessee	Dr. Lee Roberson	2,400	7,947	5,547	331
(3) Thomas Road Baptist Church Lynchburg, Virginia	Dr. Jerry Falwell	2,618	6,434	3,816	246
(4) Calvary Temple Springfield, Illinois	Rev. M. C. Johnson	2	3,214	3,214	1607
(5) Westside Assembly of God Davenport, Iowa	Dr. Tommy Barnett	300	3,116	2,816	1039
(6) Los Gatos Christian Church Los Gatos, California	Rev. Marvin Rickard	400	2,904	2,504	726
(7) First Baptist Church West Hollywood, Florida	Dr. Verle Ackerman	354	2,701	2,347	763
(8) Trinity Baptist Church Jacksonville, Florida	Dr. Bob Gray	1,691	3,989	2,298	236
(9) Indianapolis Baptist Temple Indianapolis, Indiana	Dr. Greg Dixon	1,784	3,517	1,733	197
(10) Forrest Hills Baptist Church Decatur, Georgia	Dr. William Pennell	1,100	2,630	1,530	239

SUNDAY SCHOOL NEWSMAKERS OF THE DECADE

Like other advancing movements, Sunday School has had its "newsmakers of the decade." Here are *Christian Life* magazine's nominees for the top ten. But behind the scenes are thousands of concerned workers who pray and lead.



CARTER



HYLES



FALWELL



JOHNSON



RICKARD

Sunday School came out of the small back rooms of the church during the last ten years to make headline news. It has been controversial, discussed and imitated—but not ignored. And, like other advancing movements, it has had its "newsmakers of the decade"—those responsible for its growth and recognition. Here are *Christian Life*'s nominees for the top ten.

□ **President Jimmy Carter.** When the President of the United States took his Bible and taught an adult Sunday School class in a Baptist church, international attention focused on Sunday School, its message, methods, and purpose. People became aware of the fact that Sunday School was not only for children, but also for adults.

□ **Dr. Jack Hyles.** The First Baptist Church of Hammond, Ind., pastored by Hyles, has grown more than any other in history—to an average of 10,662 per Sunday. More than 101,000 were at the main location and in hundreds of satellite schools in May 1976. Hyles' Pastors' Conference attracts more than 3,000 delegates each year who want to learn to build a church as he does. And the college he founded, Hyles-Anderson, has more than 1,200 pupils training to build a church similar to his.

□ **Dr. Jerry Falwell.** Known as the "Television Pastor of America" because he preaches on more than 550

television stations, Falwell co-founded the 2,000-student Liberty Baptist College. His Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Va., has the 3rd largest Sunday School in America. And his concept of saturation evangelism, "preaching the Gospel by every available means, to every available person, at every available time," has influenced thousands of other pastors.

□ **The Rev. M.C. Johnson.** When Johnson, a former contractor, began his church in 1968, he predicted it would become one of the largest in the nation. Using his skills wisely, Calvary Temple (Springfield, Ill.) was 9th in the nation last year. When he began, only two churches in America were larger than his present congregation of 3,214.

□ **The Rev. Marvin Rickard** astounded the church world by renovating a commercial building in Los Gatos, Calif., for his services. When space ran out, he added extra sessions. Last year there were four Sunday School sessions at Los Gatos Christian Church. His average increased from 1,541 to 2,521 during the last two years.

□ **Dr. W.A. Criswell,** pastor of the First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, is known for his zeal and scholarship. Both are reflected in his Sunday School. His church has a reputation for quality and growth and is one of the wealthiest in America. A former president of the Southern Baptist

Convention, Criswell has spoken boldly on significant current issues, and is a walking endorsement of Sunday School.

□ **Dr. Tommy Barnett,** pastor of Westside Assembly of God, Davenport, Iowa, is well known for "attracting the multitudes." Four years ago his Sunday School averaged 804 a week. In the next three years it averaged 1207, 1825, then 3116. His is the only church to win the *Christian Life* "Fastest-Growing Award" all four years.

□ **Dr. Beachamp Vick** (deceased) has been called "Mr. Sunday School" because he was responsible for building Temple Baptist Church, Detroit, Mich., which, in 1955, according to *Life* magazine, housed "America's Largest Sunday School." But, more important, he was founder and president of Baptist Bible College (Springfield, Mo.), America's largest Bible college which stresses Sunday School. In 1973, 23 graduates of the college were on the 100 Largest Sunday Schools listing.

□ **Dr. Clate Raymond** became leader of the Michigan Sunday School Association 16 years ago when it was floundering, and has increased its influence by reorganizing it as the International Christian Education Association. More than 50,000 attend its yearly convention in Cobo Hall, Detroit.

□ **Dr. Elmer Towns** has written 27 books; three about Sunday School are listed among the best sellers in *Christian Bookseller* magazine. His *Christian Life* reports on the largest Sunday Schools rocked the nation in the late 60s because most people thought the Sunday School was dying. Many credit his "crusading type-writer" as one of the factors in the up-swing in Sunday School attendance.

These are the *Christian Life* newsmakers of the decade. Yet there are thousands more who crammed their buses full of kids, prayed over bulging classes, and gave leadership to growing Sunday Schools. They could have been listed, for without the concerned worker, Sunday School would have come to a screeching halt. Leaders give vision, but workers carry the ball to the goal. (continued on next page)

CRISWELL



BARNETT



VICK



RAYMOND



TOWNS



WINNERS OF THE BUS RACE



"I had 173 on my bus," Jess Martin told Elmer Towns, *Christian Life* Sunday School Editor, when Towns visited the United Baptist Church, San Jose, Calif., ten years ago.

"I don't believe you . . . you can't get that many kids on one bus," replied Towns. "Oh, not at one time. I made three trips to get all the kids here."

An article was published in *Christian Life* asking if this was a world's record. Louise Seaton, from the same church, read the article and maintained a woman could outwork a man. She brought in 234 riders on one bus.

"A world's record no one can ever beat . . ." maintained *Christian Life*.

Gary Henyon took on the record and went to every home in Huntington Beach, Calif. He spent four hours a day for two weeks inviting children to ride his bus. After he visited a home, his wife phoned back to remind the parents of their commitment. A postcard followed up the phone call.

Henyon then took three buses and, when they were filled, began asking parents to drive their cars and follow his buses to Sunday School. He arrived with 3 buses full, 29 cars, and 387 riders—again, a world record.

Later an Assembly of God pastor in Iowa claimed to have more than 650 on his bus route, while a college student from Hyles-Anderson College claimed to have more than 800. While these accomplishments are noteworthy, both had workers under them covering different parts of the neighborhood with different buses. They operated as a franchise, not a single store.

In the eyes of *Christian Life*, Gary Henyon still holds the individual world record bus route attendance!

Each member in the dynamic early Christian church was free to be a vibrant prophet. Where are today's prophets?
BY GILBERT BILEZIKIAN

EVERY BELIEVER

SECOND IN A SERIES ON PROPHECY

The explosive impact of Jesus' presence and ministry convinced early Christians that with His advent a new age had dawned. God at last had revealed Himself with massive finality in Jesus Christ, and through Him, a new community was being gathered from crumbling world structures. Since God had communicated Himself decisively to His people of the new age, the Word stood at the very center of its life.

This surging, revolutionary temper vibrates through every page of the New Testament. Each of its books is alive with the proclamation that Christians were the pioneers of a new age inaugurated by the presence of the Word among them. A renewal consciousness breaks forth in multiple creative ways to proclaim that "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (11 Corinthians 5:17). The new wine of the Gospel required new wineskins. The dynamic of the Holy Spirit released a new freedom in speech, and with it new utterance, new communication forms and eventually new writing styles. These early Christian voices, proclamations, oracles and writings all came under the designation of prophecy.

The prophets of the old covenant had been men and women used by God as His messengers to warn the wicked and to exhort, guide and comfort the faithful. By using the Old Testament terms "prophet" and "prophecy," early be-

lievers claimed for the Christian message the same authoritative, divine source as the great oracles of old. The Apostle Paul, retracing the Christian faith to its origins, reminded the Ephesians that they were members of the family of God through the teaching of the apostles and prophets, themselves dependent on Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:19, 20).

The belief that the Spirit of the ascended Christ was present among them inspiring the prophetic activity of the church, pervades the totality of the New Testament. Peter's speech at Pentecost began with Joel's prediction that in the new age the Holy Spirit would enable sons and daughters, even insignificant menservants and maidservants, to prophesy (Acts 2:17, 18). Later, Paul encouraged believers to let the word of God dwell among them richly as they exhorted each other in all wisdom (Colossians 3:16). He described the practice of prophecy at Christian gatherings as each individual contributing a hymn, a lesson, a revelation in tongue, or an interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:26).

The effervescent vitality which characterized the prophetic ministry in the early church stands in stark contrast with the practice of preaching in contemporary churches. At Pentecost Jesus' disciples suddenly discovered they had received the power to change stones into bread. They were able through the Spirit's sovereign invasion of their lives, to transform the tradition veneered marble blocks of religious language into the life-giving bread of the Gospel. Unfortunately, through the centuries, the practitioners of preaching have succeeded in reversing this. Thanks to their efforts, preaching has become an exercise in changing the vibrant bread of the Christian faith into rock. Popular wisdom has appropriately christened the result with a non-Biblical pagan derivative of the Latin word *sermo*.

"Preaching has become a byword . . .

Gilbert Bilezikian, 50, professor of Biblical studies at Wheaton (Ill.) College, grew up in Paris, France. Author of the soon-to-be-released book, *The Liberated Gospel*, Bilezikian received his M.A. from Gordon-Conwell Seminary and his Ph.D. from Boston Seminary. Currently a Baptist minister at the Willowbrook Community Church, Bilezikian, (with his wife Maria and their four children) resides in Wheaton.

