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Sunday School – The Sleeping Giant

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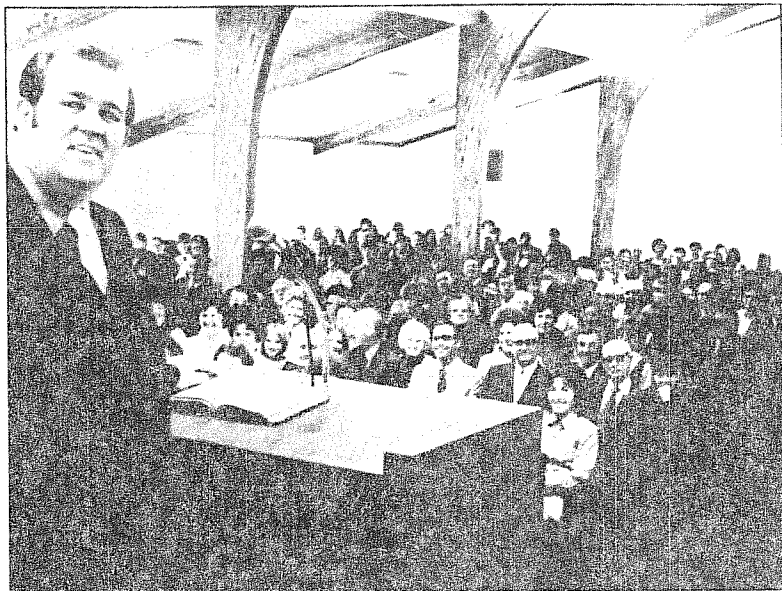
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SUNDAY SCHOOL- THE SLEEPING GIANT



Gene Parisher (l): "A positive outlook on evangelism and an unlimited vision." A tent, temporary quarters for Juniors in Newport News, Va.

Pressure from the top has caused exciting attendance jumps in Free Will Baptist Sunday Schools across the country. **BY ELMER TOWNS**

Free Will Baptist Sunday Schools, which have undergone drastic changes in the last few years, are seeing exciting attendance jumps, and a general renovation of all programs.

Revitalization began in the home headquarters, as new strategy, curriculum and promotions were planned by the Rev. Roger Reed, executive secretary, with the goal of enlarging Sunday Schools and increasing the quality of teaching. Now, examination reveals that pressure from the top has caused waves in their Sunday Schools across the country. According to Reed, the sale of Sunday School literature is the best indicator of renewed interest; the department's budget is up from \$500,000 to over \$1 million. In a denomination of 2200 churches, 2500 Sunday Schools buy their literature (many non-affiliated churches now use their literature, too).

"We are experiencing the first stages of a Sunday School revival," says Reed.

The First Free Will Baptist Church of Newport News, Va., expanded so rapidly that almost 200 Juniors spilled over into two hastily-erected tents on the parking lot. The Sunday School was averaging 119 only 17 months ago; now it averages approximately 600 pupils a week. Pastor Don Pegram organized a Sunday School bus ministry for growth; now 10 buses bring 340 riders. Visitors passing Jeffer-

son and Brooke Streets see a new 900-seat auditorium with 28 Sunday School rooms.

"I owe my renewed growth to Jack Hyles, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hammond, Ind.," Pegram says. "When I heard him speak at the Bill Rice Ranch in Murfreesboro, Tenn., I realized I could win souls every week, instead of only during

Traditionally a rural denomination, Free Will Baptists now are building in metropolitan areas.

one week of revival each year." Hyles has the world's largest Sunday School (see Oct. 1973 issue).

The Free Will Baptists have been a traditionally rural denomination, but have been rapidly building new churches in metropolitan areas. Pastor Joe Grizzle has doubled attendance at the new Sherwood Forest Free Will Baptist Church, LaSobrante, Calif., where he now preaches to 370 people each week. "I grew up under the precept that a church should never be larger than 200," he says. Now Grizzle wants to build a super-large church to reach a growing community.

The most explosive growth in the denomination is at the Bethel Free Will Baptist Church, Hampton, Va. Three years ago

when Gene Parisher became pastor, he preached to 47 that first Sunday; the Sunday School now averages over 900. The church has built twice in the last three years: an auditorium to seat 600 and Sunday School space for 1,000. In addition they have bought two houses for extra Sunday School space next to the church.

Parisher launched a bus ministry (they now have 20), introduced the master teacher plan for children's classes, and conducts a weekly teachers' meeting (approximately 90 percent attend). Every visitor and member receives a weekly church newspaper. A weekly ad in the city newspaper and a daily radio broadcast also contribute to saturating the one-million population of the Virginia tidewater area with the Gospel.

Parisher pastored three other Free Will Baptist churches, none as successful as Bethel. He pastored in Durham, N.C., where he saw the spontaneous growth of the Fellowship Free Will Baptist Church (the largest Free Will Baptist Church, pastored by the Rev. Lonnie Graves, with an average weekly attendance over 1200). Parisher confesses the large church reversed his negative attitude toward growth, giving him a positive outlook on evangelism and an unlimited vision.

But rural Free Will Baptist churches also are growing. The Fellowship Free Will Baptist Church in Flat River, Mo., has grown from 170 in Sunday School to over

350 in the last 18 months. Growing mainly through a bus ministry and renewed zeal, Pastor Ken Duggett has proved that a country church can grow.

On the West Coast, Claude Hames had been pastor of the First Free Will Baptist Church, Bakersfield, Calif., since 1964, but set growth as a goal only five years ago. First, he moved from 3 city lots to 12 lots. Next, he involved his people in soul-winning visitation, according to Acts 5:42: "Daily in the temple and in every house they ceased not to preach and teach Jesus Christ." Hames indicated he studied Jack Hyles, Jerry Falwell and other successful pastors not in his denomination, then determined he could build a great Free Will Baptist church. He now runs 6 buses and

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averages over 500 in Sunday School, with a peak of 566 on a special day.

Hames' greatest answer to prayer came on a rally day when the church rented a public school and extra buses for an evangelistic campaign in the community. Forty persons committed their lives to Jesus Christ.

Hames plans to build a Christian day school and a sanctuary to seat 768 with a 7000 sq. ft. basement, and will buy more Sunday School buses to meet their growing needs.

Keith Kenemer, a Sunday School evangelist, has been working full time among

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Free Will Baptist churches, conducting Sunday School revivals (though not associated with the Sunday School Department). When he finished a week at the Welch Avenue Free Will Baptist Church, Columbus, Ohio, the church bought three additional buses and set an attendance goal of 650 in Sunday School, up from the present average of 550. The church also adopted a plan for a new 1500-seat auditorium. Total buses in operation now number seven, and plans for the new auditorium are being developed. The Rev. Carl Valance, according to his testimony, had resigned when Kenemer came for the Sunday School revival. The people, however, voted not to accept his resignation, bought two Sunday School buses and purchased a 10-room house adjoining the church, for Sunday School. A new teacher training class is now offered, and the future looks bright.

Reed considers the Sunday School a sleeping giant among Free Will Baptists. "It can not only revitalize a denomination but help reach a nation for Christ," he says.

Recently Reed addressed 700 ministers: "There are enough men in this room to shake America through the Sunday School." The reverberating shouts of "Amen!" reflected a renewed pastoral interest in their ability to do so. 

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