



### **Creating Classes Outside of the Box – July 03**

As the Adult Ministries Pastor at James River Assembly, I have realized that one of the key components to starting an ABF class is “creativity”. Creativity is the component that will initiate the death of the traditional Sunday school class, and usher in the birth of the ABF philosophy. However, this requires thinking outside of the box and implementing ideas and resources that we would normally never imagine using. A great example of this would be the first ABF class that we started nearly 6 years ago called Mayberry JRA.

In 1997 our church reached 3000 in attendance, and our leadership came to the realization that if we were going to continue to grow and minister to our people, we needed to somehow connect them and enable them to develop authentic community. Unfortunately our traditional Sunday school classes weren’t up to the challenge. This resulted in us making the decision to move away from the traditional Sunday school model and adapt the ABF philosophy. We knew this change would be a difficult process because change, although healthy and necessary, isn’t always received with open arms. We knew we would have to be creative and give the people something that would wet their taste buds for something different.

One of the things that we realized in making this transition is that people want and need community. That’s why shows like Seinfeld, Friends, and Cheers continue to be some of the most watched television shows on network TV. These shows are based on community, and so people tune into them in order to identify with this much needed, but missing component in their lives. People want to get connected! So we decided to capitalize on that premise and through Pastor Tommy Sparger, our Adult Ministries Pastor at the time, our creative juices began to flow.

Tommy came up with the idea of using the Andy Griffith Show as the basis for a class. As many of you know, the Andy Griffith Show was based around a little town called Mayberry. In the show, Mayberry represented a community where everybody knew everybody and where right living and morality were upheld and honored. Were the people perfect? No. But in real life every community has its share of problems.

Tommy’s thought was that the Mayberry episodes could be used as a tool to launch the bible lesson for the day. He realized that each show tended to have a good moral theme that was brought out by the story line. Basic values such as character, personal responsibility, honesty, and integrity were routinely exemplified by the shows. In fact when George Lindsay, who played Goober in the series, was asked about the idea of using the series for a Bible class, he replied, “One of the incredible things about every single episode is that Andy insisted each show have a moral point, something good, lofty and moral. It’s a shame current shows on TV don’t adopt that high road.”

So in 1997 Mayberry JRA was launched and we were amazed at the response we received as the class quickly grew to a membership of 200. Today Mayberry JRA still exists at James River Assembly and continues to be our most popular and highly attended ABF class with an average attendance of 150 on a weekly basis. We have also seen great happenings in our other 26 ABF classes that we offer. Today we average an attendance of nearly 6000 at James River Assembly with an attendance averaging around 3200 in our ABF’s. We are excited about what God is doing and how He has used our ABF’s to expand His kingdom through such creative measures. I

would encourage you when starting new classes that you step out of the box, and let your God given gift of creativity go to work.

**Submitted by Pastor Brad Wicks, Pastor of Adult Ministries at James River Assembly in Springfield, Missouri.**

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