



### **Transitioning from Sunday School to ABFs: Wayside Chapel - May 06**

After several months of prayer, discussion and research, the Elders at Wayside Chapel Evangelical Free Church in San Antonio, Texas unanimously voted to approve the transition from Adult Sunday Schools to Adult Bible Fellowships (ABFs) in April 2005.

### **Background – 50 Years of Sunday School**

Historically, Wayside had about 15 Adult Sunday School classes that were primarily led by one individual (teacher driven) and the members of each class did not have much involvement with each other outside of Sundays mornings. The average life span for our Adult Sunday School Classes was about 2 to 5 years. Normally, the teacher would get overwhelmed or overburdened with the class as it grew in size. Eventually, the teacher would step down and the class would dwindle. This was also caused by job transfers or some other outside event that would leave the class with a teaching void. We called this a “Lone Ranger Class.”

However, there were a couple of other classes that had been around for a long time. One was the Genesis Class that started as a singles class 30+ years ago and it changed over the years as the class members matured. Another class for young married couples started at Wayside Chapel in 1998 with the idea to grow old together. The class was called Homebuilders and was led by a teacher/leader format that had evolved based on a need rather than by design. Over the years, the Homebuilders class grew in size to about 90-100 people in regular attendance. It has since planted three other classes, which have all, modeled some form of ABF principles.

### **Tools Provided for Change**

These events did not go unnoticed at Wayside Chapel primarily because of the community shared within those four classes and the way that the members of each class came alongside of one another. In January 2005, some Wayside members attended a seminar led by Steve Lizzio at the Evangelical Free Church in Austin, Texas. At this conference, the leadership of Adult Education Ministry at Wayside learned more about the structure of the ABF concept.

Over the course of the next four months, Wayside looked at ways to make this transition. The Elders at Wayside decided that the ABF concept was the way that God was leading Wayside to implement and use not only for Bible study but also to develop community and outreach in local ministry. ABFs gave Wayside an intentional means to reach its membership. As of April 2005, Wayside had approximately 25% of its 1,200 members in Sunday Schools.

### **The Great Transition**

Prior to kicking off the transition, we met with each of the Sunday School classes to discuss the transition and communicate the vision for ABFs. We did this by creating a Wayside ABF Manual based on Lizzio’s ABF Class Leader Training Course (CD Version) and gave everyone a copy of Knute Larson’s The ABF Book. Also, several of the unhealthy Sunday School classes were merged into larger groups that became functional ABF groups.

To implement the transition, we started with an in-house church conference on ABFs and invited Steve Lizzio to do an informational presentation to educate the leadership at Wayside on the principles of ABFs. We expected about 70 to 75 church members to attend to be comprised of Elders, Pastors and the existing leaders of the Sunday School classes. However to our surprise, we had 120 members of the church present at the all day conference. At the conference, the existing Sunday School classes were seated together at round tables instead of a lecture hall format so that they could discuss the ideas that were presented during the conference. Lizzio’s message was very well communicated and very well received.

The conference kicked off a transition period of about 2 to 3 months where each of the Sunday

School classes made the transition to ABFs by picking their leader and teacher and forming leadership teams. Some of the classes were already using some of the ABF principles and the transition went very smoothly. For others, the ABF principles were new and some were skeptical. Some struggled to understand why community was as important as Bible study. Others questioned if this was just a program and wondered how long it would last.

Two months after the conference, we met with each of the new ABFs individually. What we found was that if we met with them together in a big group there wasn't enough time to personally address the questions and issues they were facing. With one-on-one meetings, it was more of an accountability type format and we could talk to them about what they were doing, where they were going and what questions or situations were unique to their ABF group. One of the intentional things that we did was to make sure that each Sunday School completed the transition before they were given the "ABF" designation. We did not want to just repackage an existing Sunday School with a new name. There was a reason only 25% of the membership of Wayside was going to Sunday schools when the national average for evangelical churches is 50%. We found that our church family was hungry for fellowship and community as much as Bible study.

### **Highs and Lows – What We Learned**

Not everything has gone smoothly. For example, we found that the core of many of the ABFs was largely comprised of the 20% of church members that do 80% of the ministry service at Wayside. The 20% was already involved in so much that it was difficult for them to serve in an ABF leadership position. With unfilled leadership positions within some of the ABFs, it is hard to make progress on things such as Small Groups.

Also, some of the ABF Groups felt isolated from the rest of the church. This was partially due to the fact that ABFs are a layperson-led ministry. The Elders have recognized this and plan to hire a Pastor of Christian Education in the next six months to shepherd the ministry and mentor the leadership.

Despite these difficulties, ABFs are becoming an integral part of the community at Wayside and the Elders see ABFs as the key ministry to multiply disciples and reach our local community through teaching God's Word and applying it through service.

### **Transition Complete – Roll Out is Coming**

We now have 11 ABF groups that have been functioning for nine months. With this time of growth under our belt, the ABF ministry team decided that it was time to communicate the benefits of ABFs to the congregation and reach out to visitors. This delay was also intentional so that each ABF could get their feet under them and make the transition. We are now in an outreach stage to welcome visitors and members to ABFs at Wayside. This is being done with inserts in the church bulletin, improved website pictures and descriptions of ABFs, a tri-fold flyer for visitors with information about ABFs, video clips in the worship service, and a rotating announcement in the church bulletin. We have also invited Steve Lizzio back for a second annual conference and include teacher training with Brent Amato.

### **Conclusion**

We are sure that God has much more planned for us. Steve Lizzio has encouraged us to have a long-term approach to implementing these principles. We regularly see the fruit of the decision to make the transition. Our prayer is that whether our church is large or small, that we can serve God and effectively minister to His people.