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12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring,
MD 20904-6600 USA
www.ministrymagazine.org
ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org

EDITOR

Pavel Goia

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Jeffrey O. Brown

CONSULTANTS TO EDITOR

John Fowler, Clifford Goldstein,
Gerald Wheeler

EDITORIAL SPECIALIST

Sheryl Beck

FINANCE AND TECHNOLOGY MANAGER

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LEGAL ADVISOR

Todd R. McFarland

ADVERTISING

advertising@ministrymagazine.org

SUBSCRIPTION ASSISTANT

Kathleen Burton

SUBSCRIPTIONS/ RENEWALS/ADDRESS CHANGES

subscriptions@ministrymagazine.org
+1 301-680-6511
+1 301-680-6502 (fax)

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Jerry N. Page

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Janet Page

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“God, indeed, has this nation in His hands. He raised up the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in part, to effectively bring clarity about the war and, even more importantly, religious and civil liberty.”

Left to die (slavery)

I read with great interest the interview with Jud Lake about his new book (“An Interview with Jud Lake: Ellen White and the Civil War,” February 2019). I have not read *A Nation in God’s Hands* yet, but from the interview I was left thinking that another important religious event was unfolding as we were becoming a legal denominational entity during the Civil War: that of the development and formation of the National Reform Association (NRA). Their stated mission was to make Christianity the legal religion of the land, through Constitutional amendment. Those forming the National Reform Association said that the original sin of the nation was leaving God out of the Constitution. *This* sin, they

maintained, made allowances for slavery, and God was punishing the nation through the Civil War for not including Him in the Constitution. God, indeed, has this nation in His hands. He raised up the Seventh-day Adventist Church in part, to effectively bring clarity about the war and, even more importantly, religious and civil liberty. I am looking forward to reading Jud’s tome.

—Kevin James, *Religious Liberty department, Southern Union, United States*

Left alive (salvation)

In regard to Dr. Scarone’s article (“Taken or Left?,” December 2018) I have always taken the meaning of Matthew 24:40, 41 from the immediate context. Note that in Matthew 24:39 those being “taken” are the wicked of

the antediluvian world. Therefore, it follows that those who are “left” in vv. 40–41 are those who are *left alive*, as were Noah and his family.

This simple, contextual explanation makes nonsense out of *Left Behind* thinking. Only the righteous are left alive—again, according to the immediate context of Jesus’ words in the Matthew passage. Dr. Scarone quotes Ellen White’s comment on Luke’s account of this passage writing, “*The one shall be taken. His name shall stand in the book of life.*” However, the immediate context of the Luke passage doesn’t demand the same conclusion we draw from the Matthew passage. Thank you.

—Dave Moench, *pastor, Mitchell Adventist Fellowship, South Dakota, United States*

Author’s response

Thanks for your question and blessings to you. Matthew 24 is a response from Jesus to the disciples and, from verse 36 on, there is a rapid sequence of connected situations to emphasize the coming of the Lord, with a repertoire of emphases on (a) the suddenness of the manifestation (vv. 38, 39), and (b) the separation or distinction of the subjects (vv. 40, 41). *This is the core of the article.*

The verbs in verses 40 and 41 are παραλαμβάνω (taken) and αφήμι (left), so the original marks the obvious meaning as I tried to emphasize in the article, because, παραλαμβάνω never is used as being taken to destruction, as TDNT (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich) concurs and several other commentators (SDA included) agree. Matthew 24 continues with an emphasis in Christian ethics (living right), because we do not know the time of Jesus’ coming (vv. 42–44). Blessings again.

—Daniel Scarone 

Gerson Santos, DMin, serves as an associate secretary of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Shoes, subways, and cereal

—What's love got to do with it?

A few years ago, my young granddaughter Sophia came gasping into the living room. “Houston, we have a problem!” she cried. She was paraphrasing what she had heard in church during the sermon when her dad mentioned the episode of the Apollo 13 moon flight crew reporting a major technical problem back to their base in Texas. She concluded, “I can’t find my shoes!”

Yes, Sophia had a problem; way smaller than the moon flight crew, maybe, but it was a big deal for her. As a church, we also have a problem—we need to improve our efforts in finding and nurturing our members. Membership records have reported a staggering number of lost persons. During the last few decades, Seventh-day Adventist membership records reported a loss of 39.25 percent (1965–2014). For every 100 persons who joined the church, 40 left! It is even worse to recognize that more than half of those who left were considered missing or unknown.¹ Of those that we did find, 17 percent said they were visited by the local elder, 9 percent said they were visited by the pastor, and 40 percent said nobody ever contacted them.² It is crucial to reconsider the importance of pastoral care.

Lost and found

New York City Transit is trying to make it easier for subway and bus riders to retrieve lost items. A few years ago, 19,000 items were logged into the agency’s database, and 42 percent of them were claimed, according to the agency—including a fake limb, a used cooking pot, and a trumpet. One

person even lost a set of dentures on the subway. The Gospels also have a lost-and-found department. In Luke 15, Jesus stressed the need to care for the lost. When 1 percent of the flock is lost, the Good Shepherd searches tirelessly and relentlessly until the sheep is found (Luke 15:1–7). In the parable, the shepherd goes out to search for one sheep—the very least that can be numbered. “So if there had been but one lost soul, Christ would have died for that one.”³ How important is one person?

I was astounded to see a dashcam recording of the moment a toddler fell out of a moving van onto a busy road. The child struggled to its feet and tried to chase after the van as it drove away. Another driver jumped into the traffic to save the child, then ran toward the van. Provisionally, the vehicle stopped at a traffic light, and the child was returned.⁴ This was only one child, but one lost child is of incalculable significance.

Peter Wagner says there are three prominent symbols of the shepherd mode: home visitation, hospital visitation, and personal counseling. “In the healthiest of churches, the pastor is doing the leading while the lay people are doing the ministry.”⁵ More than pastoral care, church members desire pastoral leadership to help them discover, develop, and deploy their spiritual gifts. Russell Burrill says that in the early church, “the laity were seen as the performers of ministry and the clergy as the trainers and equippers of ministry.”⁶ Perhaps if people feel loved and needed, they will stay.

Every time I come back from a trip, I cook a meal for my wife. I’m not

a great cook, but I try to impress her. She always expresses her amazement, saying the meal is delicious and asking what ingredients I used. I always say that I put in a secret ingredient—love. I discovered that this ingredient is more tangible than I thought. In a letter to the owners of a New England bakery, after inspecting their facilities, the United States Food and Drug Administration itemized several violations. One violation was listed as misbranding: “Your Nashoba Granola label lists ingredient ‘Love.’ Love is not a common or usual name of an ingredient and is considered to be intervening material because it is not part of the common or usual name of the ingredient.”

I cannot disagree more. In the context of church ministry and pastoral care, love must be the most common ingredient. And the Lord of love pleads with us as He pleaded with Peter, “Do you love Me? . . . Feed My sheep” (John 21:17, NKJV). ❧

1 David Trim, “Retention and Reclamation: A Priority for the World Church” (PowerPoint presentation, Annual Council, October 11, 2015), Seventh-day Adventist Church Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, adventistarchives.org/ac2015-retention-report.pdf.

2 Trim, “Retention and Reclamation.”

3 Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941), 187.

4 Dominique Mosbergen, “Caught on Video: Toddler Falls Out of Moving Van onto Busy Road in China,” *HuffPost*, Feb. 3, 2016, huffpostbrasil.com/entry/toddler-falls-out-of-van-video_s_56d6816ce4b0bf0dab33e678?ec_carp=3187869952427092757.

5 C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 117.

6 Russell Burrill, *Radical Disciples for Revolutionary Churches* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1996), 29, 30.

Magdiel Perez Schulz, MEd, is assistant to the General Conference president, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Finding the way home

I first met Juan¹ in second grade, and we quickly became best friends. We loved playing soccer together on the dirt field outside our school. After classes, we often walked home together, choosing to keep the money our parents had given us rather than spend it on bus fare. Together we had a lot of fun, and looking back on it now, it seems as if we have always been friends.

We grew up together, went to Adventist schools, were both baptized when we were 12, and attended Sabbath School and church each week. Through the years, however, our lives drifted in different directions—I drew closer to the church while he wandered farther away. But in spite of our increasing differences, we kept in touch.

Nearly 20 years after Juan stopped attending church, we were corresponding by Messenger when I noticed that he seemed to be becoming more open to spiritual things. As time passed, we continued messaging back and forth on deeply spiritual topics. One year later, realizing that he was ready to come back, I invited Juan to attend church with me, and he agreed.

Two weeks later, as we walked through the church door together, a well-meaning but misguided church elder who had known Juan since we were kids greeted us. Trying to be funny, the elder exclaimed, “Juan! What has the devil done to you that you haven’t been in church for so long?”

They were the first words my friend heard after not being in church for 20

years. I wanted to disappear through the floor. Fortunately, Juan did not disappear. He was rebaptized and has remained in the church. I’m glad I was there to support him. But what about those who do not have such support? What about those who do not remain? What about those who do not return at all?

My experience with Juan got me to thinking about the many members who slip away and never return. What can we do to bring them back?

When I was serving in the South American Division in 2011, this question came to the forefront. While the church was baptizing many people, we were aware that many were also leaving, and not necessarily just the newly baptized ones. Some had been members for 5 or 10 years. Realizing that we were losing about 30 percent of our members every year and that the church had no specific plans for how to bring them back, we began to pray and plan.

We discovered that an important responsibility of the church clerk, according to the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, is to review the list of members and keep in touch with those absent.²

Since the church clerk is a frontline worker in reclaiming members, we offered full-day training for all church clerks throughout the division—union by union and conference by conference—encouraging them to go over their membership lists, look for inactive members, and take a leading role in reclaiming them for Christ. In addition,

we suggested that they share the list of inactive members with their church boards so that the elders could visit and pray with such individuals. We instructed the churches to give the lists to active members, inviting them to review it for those whom they might know, pray for them, and then reach out to them in some way.

The division made plans for an annual special Sabbath during which every local church focused on welcoming back former members. The congregation would prepare a warm, uplifting program for that Sabbath. Everyone—from Sabbath School teachers to deacons, elders, the pastor, and all other members—would then be ready to welcome the special guests and let them know that they had been missed. During the sermon itself, the pastor would make an appeal for the inactive members to return. Each guest would receive a special gift, such as a musical DVD, and be individually invited to a fellowship meal that would follow the service.

Leading up to this special day, the division prepared several resources, including a packet with a suggested sermon, posters, other advertising material, and an attractively printed letter intended for the former members. The letter gave a brief overview of what was happening in the church, and stated that the person was missed and that we would dearly love to have them back. Church members were to hand deliver the letter to those for whom they had been praying and then invite them to attend the special Sabbath service.

What were the results? We were amazed to see how God blessed. The next year, in 2012, 14 percent (24,732) of the total 174,767 baptisms across the division were rebaptisms. The following years have continued to reveal a high percentage of rebaptisms, ranging from 12.8 to an incredible 15 percent, as reported by the division's executive secretary, Edward Heidinger.³

While undoubtedly other factors contributed to the growth in rebaptisms, we believe that the intentional, personal outreach to former members played a significant role. Rosani Biondo shares her experience of coming back:

"I was born into a very active Adventist family. My father loved music, and we practically lived at the church. I was very fond of camping. When I was a teenager, my father was the cook, so we always participated in church camps, and I loved it.

"I married young, and after seven years, my husband and I separated. And then I found myself drifting away from the church. I think I used it as an excuse to leave, but I was still very sad. I got involved with another person who was not from the church.

Who in your community, in your congregation, in your family, is waiting for an invitation to return to Christ?

"At first, I felt that I was so free, doing the things I wanted. It seemed attractive at the time. But what really happened to me was that I was far away from anything meaningful. I never sat down to play the piano again, never opened my mouth to sing, although I had loved singing in the choir. Although I was very apathetic toward the church, I still felt that the right religion was the one in which I had been raised. I knew that if one day I wanted to attend a church, it would be the Adventist Church. And I still remembered what my parents had taught me when I was a child.

"Achieving worldly success, I bought what I wanted because my job

paid well, but it did not satisfy me. You buy something, something else, and then you buy more, and more. You walk out of a store unsatisfied. No matter what or how much I bought, I still felt sad and didn't understand why.

"Then, I met someone who is now my husband. Although he didn't belong to the church, his cousin did. So he knew all about Adventism but hadn't been baptized. When I started our relationship, his cousin said, 'Tomorrow we are going to church. Do you want to go?'

"That was when I started back to the Adventist Church. But I hated appeals, and when an appeal began that Sabbath, I walked out. Yet the

TIPS FOR RECLAIMING MEMBERS

- 1. Plan** an intentional and specific strategy for reaching inactive members.
- 2. Involve** your church members. Have them choose one or more names of inactive members whom they might know. Invite them to pray regularly for their selected individuals and engage with them in some way.
- 3. Train** greeters, deacons, and elders to be always warm and friendly (never judgmental or asking uncomfortable questions) to all who walk into the doors of the church.
- 4. Alert** Sabbath School teachers and other leaders to watch carefully for members who have missed even one or two weeks and then let them know that they were missed. It's always easier to bring someone back after two weeks rather than two months or two years!
- 5. Keep** returned members engaged in the church by immediately involving them in some type of ministry.
- 6. Work** with returning members who may be struggling with habits involving tobacco, alcohol, or other challenges. Do not condemn but offer hope and healing. If needed, consider helping the person to connect with another professional such as a health-care worker or counselor.
- 7. Pray** regularly for your members, especially your inactive ones, and follow through with your plans to bring them back.

For more resources, visit the Summit on Nature & Retention 2013 page on the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research website at adventistresearch.org/nurture_home and Nurture and Retention page on the Secretariat website at secretariat.adventist.org/nurture.

next Sabbath, I went again. Seeing the preacher, I said to myself, ‘I don’t want to listen to his sermon. I won’t listen.’ But as he began to speak, he caught and held my attention. I think it was the Holy Spirit preparing to touch my heart. The pastor made an appeal at the end aimed at certain groups. First, he reached out to those who had once been Adventists, inviting them to return. As he spoke, I did not stand in response, telling myself, ‘I won’t go up. I won’t.’

“He then turned his attention to another group—those who had become acquainted with the Adventist Church but had not yet had the opportunity to be baptized. Suddenly, though, as he was making that appeal, he paused and said, ‘No. I will go back to the previous group. I feel that someone needs to come who did not join those who responded.’ My legs started shaking, my heart raced, and I felt as if my heart were in my throat.

“‘I know that there is someone who needs to come,’ the pastor continued,

‘and if you want to come and cannot, if you feel stuck to the bench, take the hand of your friend and come.’

“Then I said to myself, ‘He is not calling us—God is. The Holy Spirit wants us there.’ Standing, I went to the front, crying. The pastor walked forward to meet me, and I said, ‘How much time I have lost! Wow! Do I need more signs from God? God is calling me. He cares for me. Even amid all of those in this world, He did not give up on me.’

“The day of my (re)baptism was like a victory! My whole family was there. That day I realized how long I had been out—17 years. My mother hugged me and said, ‘Seventeen years I have been praying for you, my daughter.’

“I had not realized that it had been so many years. When I walked out of the baptismal tank, I felt very light. Even though I realized there would be new tests, I knew that I would not be alone anymore.

“I lost so much time that I could have helped the church. But today, I am

back, and whatever comes, I remember that God takes first place in my life. I saw the importance of how Christ rescued me.”

Like Juan, Rosani is one of the tens of thousands of former Seventh-day Adventists who have returned. Who in your community, in your congregation, in your family, is waiting for an invitation to return to Christ? How many people are on the membership roster of your congregation who, like lost sheep, have wandered away? Does your heart long for those who are “groping in darkness yet longing and weeping and praying for light?”⁴ If so—do you have a plan to help them find their way home? ❧

1 Pseudonym used.

2 *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016), 82, 174.

3 South American Division Executive Secretary’s Report, South American Division Year-End Meetings, Brasilia, Brazil, November 2018.

4 Ellen G. White, Manuscript 46, 1900.

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Joys and Challenges of the Pastoral Family



Melak Alemayehu Tsegaw, PhD, is the director of the Master of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies program, Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.



Refocusing on discipleship:

The heart of the Great Commission and the hub of all local church ministries

Matthew 28:19, 20 captures the Great Commission: “ ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ ”¹ These verses significantly contain three participles and one main verb. “In the Greek, ‘go’—the same as ‘baptizing,’ and ‘teaching’—is a participle. Only the verb ‘make disciples’ is imperative. . . . The main emphasis, then, is on the command to ‘make disciples,’ which in the Greek is one word *matheteusate*.”² Unfortunately, it is widely recognized that non-discipleship is the elephant in the Christian church today. Dallas Willard calls this dismal reality the “Great Omission from the ‘Great Commission.’ ”³

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not immune from this predicament. In fact, despite its exponential growth, it has at the same time suffered disturbing membership losses. Aborting the task at the level of *going* and *baptizing* without gearing the whole effort to *disciple-making* can only lead to a serious spiritual hemorrhage in the church. Thus, it is high time to refocus on discipleship—the heart of the Great Commission. This article has a threefold purpose: (1) to briefly present the biblical portrait of discipleship, (2) to

highlight three significant moves the Seventh-day Adventist Church has made in its mission strategy to restore the focus of the church back to discipleship, and (3) to offer suggestions on how to develop an active discipleship plan.

Defining discipleship

A careful study of Jesus’ teaching about the life of discipleship yields three irreducible core elements that we must cultivate by the power of the Holy Spirit. They are worship, fellowship, and witnessing. Let us briefly consider them.

Worship. Worshiping God is the first irreducible element of discipleship according to Jesus’ statement in Luke 14:26, 27: “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” The metaphors of hating family members, including ourselves, and of carrying the cross vividly depict an absolute surrender to Jesus. It is foundational in becoming and growing as His disciples. Indeed, biblical worship is all about loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matt. 22:37).

Ellen White concurs with this thought when she writes about one of those who sought to be a follower of Jesus: “When this young ruler came to Jesus, his sincerity and earnestness

won the Saviour’s heart. He ‘beholding him loved him.’ . . .

“But first, he must accept the conditions of discipleship. He must give himself unreservedly to God.”⁴ Disciples of Jesus must continually grow in their worship experience, offering their lives as a holy and living sacrifice to Him. Without such worship, it is impossible to become His disciples, for disciples are those who love their Master with all their being.

Fellowship. Another element is fellowshiping with other disciples of Jesus Christ. John 13:34, 35 depicts this aspect: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” The love God bestowed upon us through Christ not only initiates a loving response to Him in worship but also inspires us to love each other.

Paul employed the imagery of a human body to portray the solidarity that exists among the followers of Jesus Christ. “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.” “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Cor. 12:12, 27). The unity and interconnectedness of a healthy body should characterize the fellowship of Jesus’ disciples. Ellen White emphasized this point: “The great

lesson that Christ taught by his life and example was that of unity and love among brethren. This love is the token of discipleship, the divine credentials which the Christian bears to the world.⁵ Thus, a life of discipleship cannot exist without such authentic fellowship.

Witnessing. The third irreducible element of biblical discipleship is that of witnessing to the everlasting gospel. Such witnessing seeks to make more disciples for Jesus through sharing His love in words and deeds. Jesus used the imagery of fruit-bearing to teach this reality. “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples’” (John 15:8). According to Jesus, true disciples are those who bear fruit by making others into disciples and hence bringing glory to God. Ellen White aptly depicted this truth: “Every true disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary. He who drinks of the living water becomes a fountain of life. The receiver becomes a giver. The grace of Christ in the soul is like a spring in the desert, welling up to refresh all, and making those who are ready to perish eager to drink of the water of life.”⁶

We should also emphasize that only those who love God (worship) and love one another (fellowship) can effectively depict the love of God to the world. Consequently, the three irreducible elements have a synergistic power that we can experience only when we have embraced all of them. As an illustration of this point, a house simply cannot long survive without a solid foundation,

sturdy walls, and a strong roof. The experience of Jesus’ first disciples in the early church portrays how these three irreducible elements were defining characteristics of their lives. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. . . .

“So continuing daily in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42–47).

Certainly, their success in witnessing and bearing the much fruit of many disciples for Christ resulted from their vibrant worship (devoting themselves to the study of the Word and prayer) and authentic fellowship (meeting and eating together every day).

Lastly, discipleship “is not static, but a growing and developing way of life. Always the true disciple is becoming more fully a disciple.”⁷ True disciples should continually grow in worship, fellowship, and witnessing.

Developing an active discipleship plan

Discipleship does not happen without intentional efforts for growth in worship, fellowship, and witnessing. Consequently, an active discipleship plan is vital. In developing an active and ongoing discipleship plan, first and foremost, each local congregation should affirm discipleship as the heart of the

Great Commission and the main purpose for the church’s existence. To make that happen, its pastor and church board should own this vision wholeheartedly and instill it in every member. Besides restoring discipleship as a vibrant vision of our local churches, it is important to address the following issues.

First, the leadership of each church should present a correct understanding of biblical discipleship with its three core minimums, or elements. Evangelism/witnessing must be viewed as a subset of discipleship together with worship and fellowship. In fact, witnessing/evangelism occurs as an outgrowth of the other two. Hence, each congregation should direct the same amount of effort it exerts in mobilizing members to engage in witnessing to helping them grow in worship and fellowship.

Second, we should not consider discipleship as relevant only for newly baptized members. In fact, if the rest of the membership is not growing in discipleship, they can be a stumbling block to the new converts who are being discipled.

Third, discipleship should not be incorporated into the structure of the church as only an additional ministry or be relegated just to certain specific ministries. Rather, it should be the main focus of every ministry.

In sum, the first step in developing an active discipleship plan for a local church is to affirm the centrality of discipleship to its existence. That should be reflected in the communal as well as the personal lives of believers.

I have been working as a discipleship coach with the New Life church in Nairobi, Kenya. What an honor it is! The church leadership team has been able to articulate the vision of their local church as follows: “To become a CENTER of DISCIPLESHIP, where disciples grow in their loving relationship with God, one another, and the world.” They have also fully endorsed the mission statement of the global church: “Make disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witnesses and proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels’ Messages in preparation for His soon return.”

The most fulfilling part of our strategic planning happened when the ministry leaders of the church engaged in

the process of aligning their activities to the vision of the local church, namely, becoming a CENTER of DISCIPLESHIP. The deputy head elder emphasized that all the activities of the church should be aligned to the three irreducible minimums of discipleship—worship, fellowship, witnessing. A union president received our materials and declared, “I have read through this document on discipleship. All I can say is that it is a very powerful and relevant document. The most catching thought is, ‘Discipleship is not only for newly baptized members.’ This is where we have made a costly blunder. We don’t see discipleship as an all-member and on-going requirement. Can you give me permission to use this document to challenge my pastors?”

The work of the church board

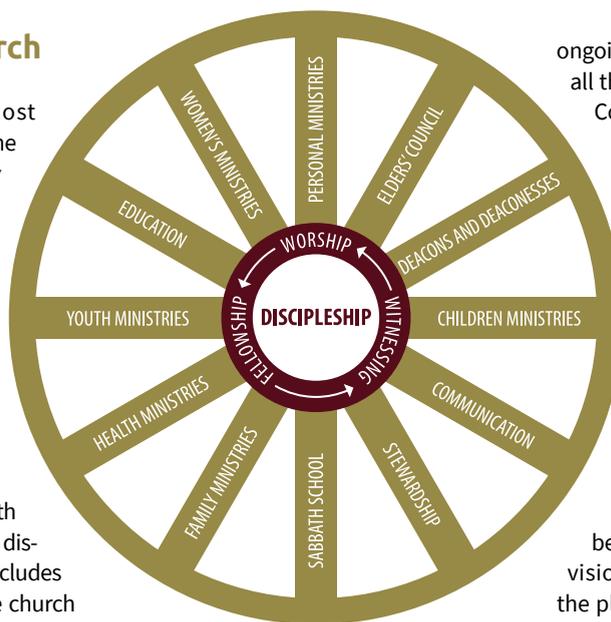
Arguably, one of the most significant revisions made in the 19th edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* was its articulation of the task of a church board, the executive committee of a local church. The 18th edition had expressed the definition and function of the church board as “the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism in all of its phases.”⁸ However, the 19th edition stressed “having an active discipleship plan in place, which includes both the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism”⁹ as the chief concern of the church board.

Similarly, the 19th edition presents a more comprehensive emphasis on the church board’s primary task: “The board is responsible to: 1. Ensure that there is an active, ongoing discipleship plan in place, which includes both spiritual nurture and outreach ministries. This is the most important item for the board’s attention.”¹⁰

In sum, the *Church Manual* now presents discipleship, comprising worship, fellowship, and witnessing, as the purpose for the existence of the local church and stipulates that the most important task of the church board is to have an active discipleship plan. But no matter how important the above actions might seem, if they do not lead the local church to refocus on discipleship, the desired goals will not materialize.

Discipleship: The focus of the local church master plan

Arguably, the usual model in preparing a local church plan is to assign different ministry leaders, who are members of the church board, to come up with plans for their respective ministries and compile it as the local church’s program. This model runs all the ministries in parallel. It is as if pastors are coaches of football teams who have assigned



their players to design their own game plan and then attempt to coordinate them. Obviously, that is doomed to failure. There must be a game plan that enables all team members to play their roles effectively, one that places discipleship at its heart and then mobilizes all the other ministries to flesh it out by their specialized activities.

The *Reach the World* strategic plan document of the General Conference can serve as a template in preparing such a master plan.¹¹ Consider discipleship as the hub and all the other local church ministries as its spokes to help illustrate this second model of planning (figure above).

Once this has become a shared conviction among the church board members, who are also the leaders of different ministries of the local congregation, they should have answers to the following question: In what ways can the ministry or church office that I am leading contribute to fulfilling the heart of the Great Commission by helping members to grow in the three core elements of discipleship—worship, fellowship, and witnessing? The model prepared by the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department is a good example of such plans that local church ministries can then develop.¹² If the master plan of the local church is prepared this way, it could rightly be called an active and

ongoing discipleship plan that engages all the ministries in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Great Obsession

In conclusion, discipleship, the heart of the Great Commission, needs to be the great obsession of the church, not the great omission. The three irreducible elements of discipleship—worship, fellowship, and witnessing—should be the focus of every believer and all local church ministries. Discipleship should be the single focus of local church vision, the church should center all the plans of its ministries on this focal point, and churches should encourage members to develop personal, active discipleship plans to ensure their growth in the three core elements of a life of discipleship. Our dedication to placing discipleship at the heart of the mission of our individual churches will determine our effectiveness in retaining new members. ❖

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- 12 GC Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department, *Total Sabbath School Involvement: Sabbath School Revitalization Strategic Plans 2017–2020*, [sabbath-school-personalministries.org/sabbath-school-strategic-plan-\(2017-2020\).pdf](http://sabbath-school-strategic-plan-(2017-2020).pdf).

Claudio Consuegra, DMin, and Pamela Consuegra, PhD, are Family Ministries directors of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Columbia, Maryland, United States.



Sticky churches

It may be difficult for us to accept, but the reality is that Seventh-day Adventists are very friendly people—among ourselves. When it comes to visitors or new members of the church, we are not always open, welcoming, or friendly.

Research shows that between 30 and 50 percent of all new members who are baptized do not stick to the church.¹ They fall away. Sometimes we notice only after it has been several months or even years. What happened to them? Where did they go? Why did they leave? And, most important, what could we have done to help them stay connected to God’s family? Research conducted across denominational lines indicates that many of those who leave their church do so within six months after having joined.

One of the greatest challenges new members face is trying to break into well-established church cliques, lifelong relationships, or friendships that often involve family relationships. In some churches, two or three families make up the vast majority of the congregation who do not seem to be welcoming or even willing to open their doors to outsiders, even when the outsiders are also Seventh-day Adventists or newcomers to the church, much less those who may just be searching. Therefore, if a church wants to retain these new members, it must provide the fellowship and nurture activities they need.

New members who establish relationships with other members of the church within the first six months

tend to stay in the church.² New people who join the church, through the loving effort of a member of the church with whom they already have a relationship, will more than likely remain in the church past those first six months.³ Church researcher George Barna stresses that for it to be more effective, this assimilation process must take place within six months from the time they join by connecting them with the members of the church.⁴

Adventist researcher Monte Sahlin comments that “the dropout problem raises serious problems with issues of responsibility, fellowship, and the effectiveness of our nurture activities.”⁵ The last two items are of

suggests that the more friends a person has in a congregation, the less likely that person is to become inactive or leave.⁹ James Cress and Win and Charles Arn agree that the number of new Christian friends a person makes during the first six months¹⁰ of his or her church life directly influences whether that person continues as an active member or drops out.¹¹ In the table below, the Arns compare 100 people who recently made a decision to follow Christ in baptism and church membership, 50 of whom are now active in their church and 50 of whom have since dropped out, and the number of friends each group made in the church during the first six months.¹²

	NUMBER OF NEW FRIENDS IN THE CHURCH									
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9+
Actives	0	0	0	1	2	2	8	13	12	12
Drop-outs	8	13	14	8	4	2	1	0	0	0

special importance. Sahlin’s research indicates that new members of the church need and long for fellowship in their new congregation. “There is evidence that the dropouts are people who never bonded with the core group of their congregation, never felt part of the ‘inner circle.’”⁶ Sahlin adds that “when they are asked why they left the church, about one in four will cite a lack of fellowship.”⁷ Sahlin concludes that “three out of four leave for reasons having to do with their relationships with people and groups.”⁸

Other research has confirmed Sahlin’s conclusions. Lyle Schaller

Out of the 100 new members of the church, of those that had no friends within the first six months, 8 had dropped out. If they made one friend, 13 dropped out. If they had two friends, 14 dropped out. It is when they made three or more friends that you begin to see a change in the tide. Of those that made six friends, only 1 dropped out. Of those that made seven friends, none left the church. In other words, the more friends they made, the greater the chances that they stayed in the church.

Pastor and author Rick Warren concurs with the Arns regarding the need of new members to develop

relationships with existing members if they are to remain in the church. He writes, “Christians need relationships to grow. We don’t grow in isolation from others; we develop in the context of fellowship.”¹³ So we realized that it was time for us to act.

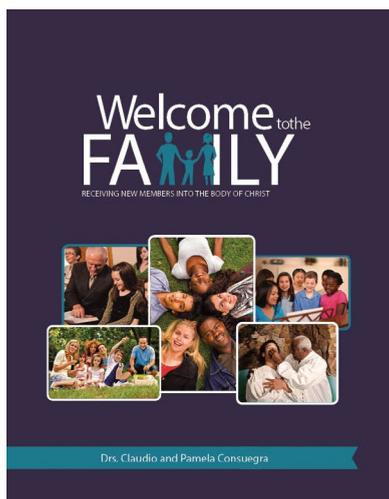
Welcome to the family

As a pastoral couple, we implemented a simple program to integrate newly baptized congregants into a Midwest church plant. We believed that most people who are new members face basic challenges in their personal relationships. The devil works hard to discourage those who have chosen to join the church, and one area he attacks most is relationships—including blood family and church family.

Our plan was quite basic. Following an evangelistic meeting, we invited the entire church, along with the new members, to make a commitment to attend a weekly program lasting two hours, for just six weeks. The program began with a fellowship meal and music. Then we transitioned to a time of learning. We spoke about their devotional life, church dynamics, church organization, health, stewardship, and Christian education. But, for the most part, we concentrated on relational issues: communication, conflict resolution, improving marriage, and parenting.

Seventeen of the 20 newly baptized members attended the sessions. A year later we discovered that all 17 new congregants who went through the series still attended church!

At the request of pastors and churches in the North American Division, we created a resource entitled *Welcome to the Family*.¹⁴ This resource can be used by any pastor, elder, family ministries committee, or lay leader. You can adjust meetings and topics to fit your local church. While some people may have never been properly introduced to the doctrines of the Adventist Church, most of those who slip out have not been able to form relationships with other church members or are facing challenges in their lives.



Closed circles?

Why is it so difficult for new members to form relationships with existing members? You would think that Seventh-day Adventists would be thrilled to see people make a decision to be baptized and join the church. Albert Winseman writes that after about 18 months, a group tends to become closed, in that the members now have a history together, and because of that shared history, it becomes difficult for new members to join such a group.

How long has your church been in existence? Longer than 18 months? If so, it probably has become a closed group. And the longer the group/church has been together, the stronger their bonds are and the harder it is for a newcomer to break into that closed circle. Churches that are serious about making newcomers feel welcome in collective experiences are constantly forming new groups of new people—who can then create their own shared history.¹⁵

The challenge lies in how to make a change within that closed attitude. Warren emphasizes that “you can’t just hope people will make friends in the church; you must encourage it, plan for it, structure for it, and facilitate it.”¹⁶ Henry Cloud and John Townsend add that the New Testament teaches that the body of Christ is to be people deeply connected to one another.¹⁷ Arn and Arn warn that if, after six months, the new member can identify few or no

close friends in the church, the chances are extremely high that the person will soon be inactive.¹⁸ The “friendship factor,” writes Ronald Sider, is the most important element in whether a person remains active in a local church or drops out. That combination of food, friendship, song, prayer, and Bible study “invites and sustains many broken people along the slow, ongoing path of personal transformation.”¹⁹

We want to underscore the importance of the emotional connection that new members need with those already in the church. Winseman writes, “Neurological research confirms that our emotional connections are far stronger than our rational connections—it’s not enough to know that belonging to an organization has positive benefits; one must also *feel* it. And more often than not, we feel it before we *know* it.”²⁰ Gallup research has discovered that the two primary causes of spiritual health are spiritual commitment and congregational engagement,²¹ and that “belonging is far more likely to lead to believing. . . . The more engaged people feel in their congregations, the more spiritually committed they become.”²² For Arn and Arn, an effective incorporation strategy will help new members build additional relationships beyond the friend or relative originally responsible for bringing the person to Christ. He adds that the evidence that the incorporation strategy is working is when you see new members continue on as active members even when the original friend or relative moves to another city or dies.²³

Jane Thayer writes that, as people are led to Christ and His church, there are times when the church members run into resistance on the part of their family members.²⁴ Karen Flowers and Ron Flowers write about a dilemma new converts to the Adventist Church often face as they try to adapt to their new church family, especially when certain elements in these practices conflict with the new members’ family life: “In such times, let us not be quick to pass moral judgment upon those things in diet, dress or recreation or other family lifestyles which, if they were caused

to cease, would threaten to diminish marital or family bonds.”²⁵ Diana Garland explains that family ministry helps reshape congregational life so that its members can accomplish the goal of community life, that is, “caring for one another, ministering to others, worshipping God.”²⁶ She goes on to describe some of the programs and services through which congregations can help strengthen Christian families as well as encouraging them as they reach out in ministry to the communities where they live. A few examples of these “family resource programs” include sharing meals, recreational or social activities, retreats and camps, family networks and support groups.²⁷

Providing opportunities for fellowship and teaching, especially among newly baptized members, helps to glue them to the body of Christ.

Conclusion—stick together

Have you ever gone to the hardware store to purchase glue only to be bewildered by a vast array of adhesives: synthetic glues, solvent glues,

and super glues; water-based glues and plant-based glues? Which one you choose depends, of course, on what you want to keep held firmly together. By analogy, the kind of “glue” we use in the church is critical.

Research confirms that most of those who leave the church do so not because they were not properly instructed or did not believe the doctrines. Instead, more often, there have been deficiencies in the relational aspects of the discipling process, and as a result, new members are not well assimilated into church fellowship. Nor are they assisted in resolving relationship challenges in their families, some of whom are not Seventh-day Adventist and see their loved ones’ decision in conflict with their own faith and practice.

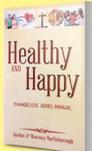
What is critically important is how we help new members become assimilated into the church within the first six months after joining. And when people describe your church—faithful to Scripture and passionate about doctrine—may they be able to add open and friendly, and warm and sticky.²⁸ ❏

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- 22 Winseman, *Growing an Engaged Church*, 44, 45.
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- 25 Karen Flowers and Ron Flowers, “Module 10,” *Your Family: An Evangelistic Center* (Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, n.d.), 211.
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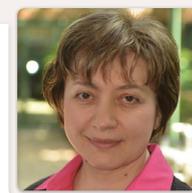
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Galina Stele, DMin, is the research and evaluation manager for the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Spiritual life, involvement, and retention

Have you ever wondered whether the Seventh-day Adventist Church has reliable data on its members' spiritual lives and practices? The answer is yes.

Twice in the recent past, the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (GC) commissioned a Global Church Member Survey (GCMS) to obtain data on members' beliefs, practices, attitudes, and other data illustrating current trends to enable strategic planning. The 2013 GCMS covered 9 divisions,¹ while the 2017–2018 GCMS surveyed all 13 divisions. The GC Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (ASTR) supervised both projects. ASTR director David Trim presented key findings at the 2018 Annual Council.² This office also publishes a blog that includes results from both surveys.³

So what does the research data reveal?

Respondents' profile and overall well-being

The 2018 GCMS is the largest global church member survey ever administered by the Adventist Church. Its sample (n = 63,756) is more than double that of the 2013 GCMS sample (n = 26,343). Each gender was well represented: 51 percent females and 49 percent males, although some divisions had more respondents of one gender than the other. Young people 26–40 years old composed about 30 percent of the sample, 27 percent were adults

41–55 years of age, and respondents of 56+ years old comprised 21 percent.⁴

While most participants (59 percent) were married and living with their spouses, 28 percent had never married, while others were divorced, widowed, or separated (11 percent). Overall, 51 percent of households have 3–5 family members, and 47 percent have at least one child at home. The data shows that 91 percent of respondents live in a household in which at least one additional family member observes the Sabbath, and a majority (64 percent) live in households in which all its members observe it. Regarding their religious commitment, 30 percent saw themselves as having had a relationship to Christ since childhood, 38 percent gradually developed their connection to Him, 16 percent experienced a sudden change and commitment, and the same percentage of respondents either had lost their relationship or were unsure about it. A significant number (41 percent) reported that they were the first generation of Adventists in their family.

By and large, Adventists are happy people: 88 percent said that they are very happy or rather happy, with the highest results from North American Division (NAD) and Northern Asia-Pacific Division (NSD) (93 percent each). Adventists in West-Central Africa Division (WAD) and Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) scored higher than others in a “very happy” category (54 percent and 57 percent respectively). The surveys also asked respondents to imagine

themselves on a ladder of life (a 10-point scale from best to worst) and rank their current location. Only 11 percent of respondents considered themselves at points 0–4, while an overwhelming majority (89 percent) found themselves in the middle of the scale and beyond it, with 65 percent at points 7 and above. Additionally, 83 percent said that they found their lives filled with meaning and purpose either often or sometimes often.

Spiritual well-being

One of the important dimensions of Christ's followers is their close relationship with Him. The survey showed that the “Revival and Reformation” initiative has become one of the most well-known GC programs among church members: only 22 percent have not heard of it. “Revival and Reformation” has influenced members' spiritual lives and involved more people (44 percent participated) compared to any other global program. Figure 1 shows what their spiritual journey looks like on both a daily and weekly basis.

If we compare these results to the data from the 2013 GCMS, we see progress during the five-year period in the following daily practices: reading of the Bible, from 42 percent to 48 percent; personal devotions, from 39 percent to 52 percent; reading of the writings of Ellen G. White, from 14 percent to 17 percent. Results for family worship stayed the same for daily but dropped from 22 percent to 17 percent in option “more than once a week.” Interestingly,

Figure 1: How often do you engage in the activities listed below?

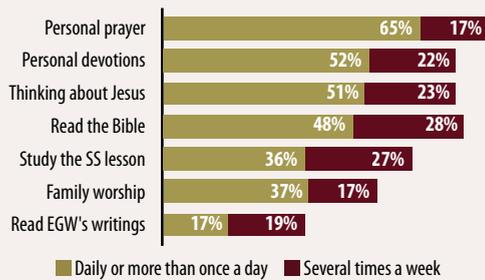
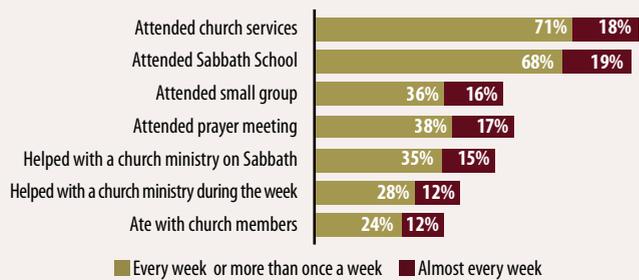


Figure 2: Attendance and involvement during the last 12 months



on a daily or weekly basis, more people use cell phones or tablets for Bible study or personal devotions (41 percent) than for reading Ellen G. White’s writings (24 percent), perhaps reflecting fewer readers of her works.

Almost the same number of respondents that read the Bible daily or more often reported that they had grown a great deal spiritually during the past 12 months (47 percent), changed their priorities as a result of their spiritual growth (46 percent), and spent more time thinking about spiritual questions (44 percent). Although these are good numbers, they represent less than half of the total sample. What is even more troubling—between 28 percent and 30 percent responses fell under “not true at all for me,” or “rarely true,” or “neutral,” with the rest of respondents picking “somewhat true.”

The surveys also indicated growth in the emotional sphere for more than 50 percent of respondents who said that it was true “a great deal” that they tried to avoid anger and bitterness in their hearts (51 percent) and experienced a sense of gratitude more frequently (57 percent). About 17–27 percent said this was “not true at all for me,” or “rarely true,” or stayed “neutral.”

Overall, three in five were confident in what they believe and said their faith had not been shaken (64 percent) and that they had not lost the important spiritual meaningfulness that they had before (52 percent).

One observes high scores for principles applied to personal life: 84 percent strongly agreed or agreed that they apply to their daily life what they

learn from the Bible, 79 percent said the same about Sabbath School, and 68 percent about Ellen G. White’s works.

However, in spite of such progress in spiritual life, 43 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “Although I am religious, it does not affect my daily life,” while exactly the same percent strongly agreed or agreed with the idea. It shows that for many members their religious convictions have not become an intrinsic part of who they are. The highest results of strongly disagreed or disagreed came from NAD (90 percent), Trans-European Division (TED) (79 percent), Euro-Asia Division (ESD) (72 percent), suggesting that a strong majority of members there live their faith.

Additionally, some people admitted that they had struggled spiritually during the past 12 months and regarded it as true or somewhat true that they thought they were spiritually lost (25 percent), their faith in what they believe had been shaken (18 percent), or they had lost some important spiritual meaning that they had had before (24 percent).

Ellen White writes, “Are we hoping to see the whole church revived? That time will never come.”⁵ Nevertheless, what such survey results indicate is that we have room for improvement in disciple-making and our daily connection to God.

Involvement in church activities

Local congregations vary in size and attendance. The GCMS research showed that, in churches with membership up to 100 people, perceived attendance

on a typical Sabbath exceeded their membership. In contrast, congregations with membership more than 100 typically had fewer people attending than the actual number on their roles.

How regularly did members attend church services and how frequently were they involved in church-related activities during the 12 months before taking the survey? Figure 2 presents the results.

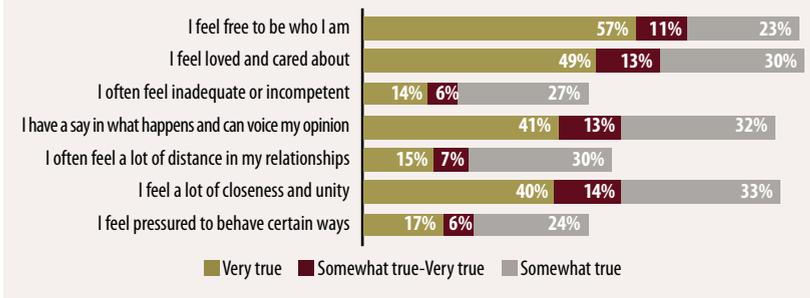
A strong majority (74 percent) participated in communion service quarterly or more often, while only 10 percent had never done so in the past 12 months. A majority (62 percent) also reported that they hold a local church office, an important sign of active involvement in the life of the local congregation.

However, more should be done to involve the other half of the congregation in weekly prayer or small group meetings and church ministries on Sabbath or during the week. Slightly more than half (54 percent) said “very true” to the question of whether they were able to use their spiritual gifts at church. A surprisingly small number shared meals together with people from their congregation other than their family. Social events and involvement in different ministries could help create stronger bonds between church members.

Congregational climate

Are Adventist church members happy with their church atmosphere? The Valuegenesis studies have demonstrated that church climate plays an important role in developing intrinsic religion.⁶ It is also a powerful factor

Figure 3: When I am at church . . .



in making members feel at home and prompting visitors to return.

A strong majority agreed or strongly agreed that their pastors (74 percent), Sabbath School teachers or leaders (71 percent), and other people in the church (80 percent) cared about them. A majority also sensed unity between pastors and lay leaders and that they worked together as a team (75 percent) and that youth and young adults play an important role in decision-making in their congregations (65 percent).

However, in response to more specific questions on how they feel in their churches, the results were different, especially for the “very true” category (see figure 3).

While they possibly appreciated the efforts of church leaders and members who cared about them, on the individual level many people felt disconnected and under pressure, albeit to varying degrees. Unfortunately, 41 percent also responded affirmatively to the question about whether church leaders, people, or incidents in their congregations had hurt them.

Given these responses, it is clear why only about half (48 percent) of respondents were very satisfied and 26 percent somewhat satisfied with their local churches. Although 64 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the local church provides programs for everyone in their families, more than a third (37 percent) disagreed, strongly disagreed, or were not sure. It would be helpful if we could determine what, if any, groups were not having their needs met. Also, a correlation appears between satisfaction with the local congregation and lifetime

commitment to the church. About 94 percent of respondents who were very satisfied with the local church said it was very likely they would stay in the church.

Witnessing and meeting needs

Two other well-known global initiatives are “Christ’s method of reaching people” and “comprehensive health ministry.” Only slightly more than a third of respondents had not heard about them. Additionally, a majority agreed or strongly agreed that their local congregations offered training on Christ’s method of reaching people (70 percent) and had the ability to communicate across cultures, clans, tribes, and religion (60 percent), although 24 percent were not sure and 16 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the latter.

Research results show that, overall, we have about 31–41 percent of members actively involved every or almost every week in witnessing and service to non-Adventists while 14–17 percent of respondents had never done so during the past year (see graph below).

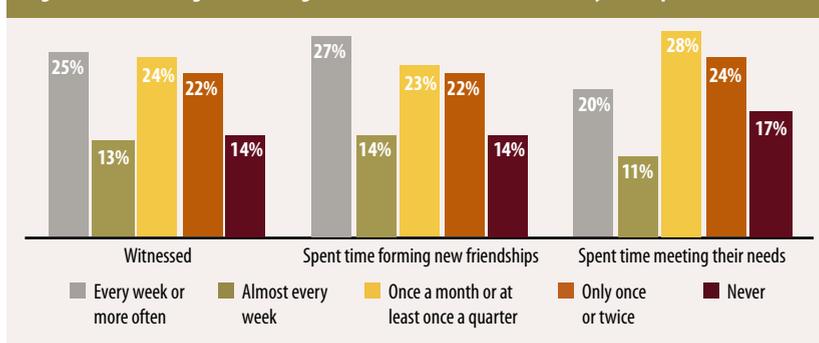
Obviously, church members need more training and equipping to reach total member involvement in local outreach.

The data reveals that we have, overall, a significant number of members who demonstrate a mature faith in various aspects of their lives. Combined results for “often or sometimes often” score highest in the following areas: feeling a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world (69 percent), helping others with their religious questions and struggles (64 percent), and giving a significant amount of time to aid other people (58 percent). Half of the respondents stated that they cared a great deal about reducing poverty in society (50 percent), and close but less than half “often” or “sometimes often” give a significant amount of money to assist others (45 percent). About half (49 percent) apply their faith to political and social issues.

Visitation

Pastoral or member visitation is vital in discipleship and retention. However, overall, 38 percent had never received a pastoral visit during the previous 12 months, while a quarter received a visit once or twice during this period. In contrast, a sizeable group, but still only one-quarter, enjoyed regular pastoral visits, varying between once a month to more than once a week. Lack of pastoral visitation could result from differing systems of member care in the many cultural contexts existing in the 13 world divisions. However, elders’ visitations were even rarer: 41 percent reported that a church elder never visited them;

Figure 4: Witnessing to or serving non-Adventists in local community in the past 12 months



23 percent noted that an elder visited them once or twice; 10 percent had elder visitation at least once a quarter, while a quarter experienced such visitation once a month or more often.

Interestingly, more members received visits from other church members than from pastors or elders: 40 percent reported such visits from between once a month to more than once a week during the previous 12 months, 26 percent received one or two visits, 13 percent had visits at least once a quarter, and only 21 percent said that they were “never” visited by a church member. Such results reflect the findings of the retention study,⁷ which show that, when former members were visited at all, it was largely by their friends and church members rather than by pastors or elders. Interestingly, a majority of survey respondents felt that church efforts for caring for and nurturing members (70 percent) as well as for reclaiming of former members (75 percent) should increase.

Challenges and implications for discipleship

The research data suggest several discipleship challenges that face the church:

- Given the large number of those who are the first converts in their families (41 percent), it is not surprising that a majority of respondents were not raised as Adventist from their birth and that 69 percent did not grow up in the church since birth. Such figures mask great diversity between divisions, an aspect still under study. It has huge implications for discipleship and retention and explains some confusion that respondents have on doctrines, such as the state of the dead.⁸
- Results of the 2018 GCMS show that fourth- and fifth-generation Adventists constituted 19 percent of the overall sample. Some divisions have larger populations of such members, and they are not limited to the traditional Adventist

“homelands.” Divisions in Africa and Southeast Asia have significant populations of fourth- and fifth-generation Adventists. It calls for special efforts to keep the faith alive and be involved in church-related activities and outreach.

- We have about 28–30 percent of members—and in some areas even more—who seem to have halted in their spiritual progress.
- A majority (65 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that their local church offers training in nurture and discipling. Additionally, the local church must have programs that involve all members in active discipleship.
- Half (50 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that their local church offers training on conflict resolution while the other half did not: 27 percent were not sure, and 23 percent “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed.” Such training could tremendously help in member retention as conflicts and perceived hypocrisy are some of the major reasons why members leave the church.⁹ Introducing such training was one of the recommendations of the 2013 World Summit, and yet it is clear that there has been little follow-up from church administrators.
- An overwhelming majority of church members globally (89 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for them that their local congregation is part of a worldwide church. This is encouraging, although it is even more important to find a better way of communicating about global initiatives from the top to the local church level and then involve members in such programs.
- The overwhelming majority of church members are proud of their church and its role and reputation in their community: 79 percent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. However, only up to 41 percent were involved in ministry to non-Adventists every or

almost every week. More efforts are needed to involve more members in such service and to improve the spiritual climate in local congregations. Discipleship could strengthen this area and help the local church successfully become a center of influence and “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa. 56:7, NKJV).

In conclusion, it is very encouraging that 82 percent of respondents said it is very likely that they will be attending a Seventh-day Adventist church for the rest of their life. Additionally, 11 percent said it is somewhat likely. You may feel that this article is overloaded with research data. But that is its purpose—to share with you the voices of thousands of Adventists around the globe with the hope that we will hear them. Each number speaks volumes, and behind each response is an invaluable person. ❑

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- 1 Divisions’ 2013 CMS reports can be found on the ASTR Research website at adventistresearch.org/research_reports.
 - 2 David Trim, “Reaching the World: How Did We Do? The Global Church Member Survey 2018” (PowerPoint presentation, 2018 Annual Council, Battle Creek, MI, USA, Oct. 15, 2018), adventistresearch.org/sites/default/files/files/AC2018%20-%20Global%20Church%20Member%20Survey%20Data%20Report.pdf.
 - 3 See ASTR research blogs at adventistresearch.org/blog.
 - 4 Figures are rounded for readers’ convenience and based on the 2018 GCMS Codebook, database, and *Meta-Analysis Final Report*, October 2, 2018, written by a research team at Andrews University: Karl G. D. Bailey, Duane C. McBride, Shannon M. Trecartin, Alina M. Baltazar, Petr Cincala, and Rene Drumm.
 - 5 Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2002), 195.
 - 6 Andreas Bochmann, “Valuegenesis Europe: Family Matters,” *Spes Christiana: Valuegenesis Europe* 24 (2013): 40.
 - 7 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, ASTR, *Leaving the Church: Why Some Seventh-day Adventist Members Leave the Church and Why Some Come Back*, April 2014, adventistresearch.org/sites/default/files/files/Revised%20Leaving%20the%20Church%20combined.pdf; Paul Richardson, Monte Sahlin, Petr Cincala, Curtis Rittenour, and Melissa Sahlin Bruno, *Survey of Former and Inactive Adventist Church Members*, Center for Creative Ministry, 2013, adventistresearch.org/sites/default/les/les/2013-retention-study.pdf.
 - 8 Trim, “Reaching the World.” See also research blogs on the state of the dead at adventistresearch.org/blog.
 - 9 “The Narrow Road,” ASTR blog, May 2016, adventistresearch.org/blog/2016/05/narrow-road.

Kirk Thomas, DMin, CFLE, is the director of the Personal Ministries and Sabbath School Departments as well as of missions and evangelism for the British Union Conference, Watford, Herts, England.



Nurture, retention, reclamation: *Can you hear their cry?*

I started pastoral ministry 25 years ago in a district that had 14 churches, a senior pastor, and a Bible worker. The Bible worker and I were given the task to seek out, visit, and reclaim missing members. Because the mobile phone was not as widely available then, we used the only means of transportation at our disposal: legs and bicycles. It was through this work that we met Joe and Mary.¹

Joe was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in his late teens. Within a year he was elected as a deacon and continued his spiritual journey and faithful service. By 23, he was elected an elder-in-training, followed by (at 25) an ordained elder. Joe served faithfully, preaching, teaching, conducting evangelistic campaigns, and doing the duties of a servant leader. A couple of years later, Joe became ill and was hospitalized for a long time; he lost his job, and a few of his family members died—and the church showed no care, no visitation, no compassion. Upon recovering from his challenges, Joe stopped attending church.

Mary was baptized as a teen but also became pregnant as a teen. The father of the child was another teen at the church; both names were promptly dropped from membership. They were

never visited, counseled, or treated decently. In fact, they heard of the church's decision through a friend who happened to have been at the business meeting. They both stopped attending church.

We began a ministry of compassion and contrition. Through genuine caring and with an honest apology for the attitude of the church, both Joe and Mary, following a very long and painful process, came back.

The retention question

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is losing members at an alarming rate. Even though the evangelism in our churches is winning people, we lose about 49 of every 100 baptized. This hemorrhaging of our members cannot continue. It is expected to get worse, especially in countries where soul winning is difficult; and if it continues, entire conferences maybe closed for lack of members.

General Conference Secretary G. T. Ng, in addressing this issue, made a serious statement: "This 49 percent apostasy rate is alarming and is a serious drain on the human and financial resources of the church." Then he asked some pertinent questions: "What happens to an army with 49 percent

desertion among its soldiers? What happens to a school when 49 percent of its students drop out of classes? What happens to a factory when 49 percent of its employees decide to defect?"²

I hope we know the answer to these questions. Ng concluded by admonishing church leaders that their job titles did not make them the most important people in the church. That designation, he said, belongs to the ordinary member. The ordinary member, sometimes underused and often unappreciated, remains the church's greatest asset. It is the ordinary member who is needed to nurture new members and to reach out to those who have left the church.³

The statistics concerning people leaving the Seventh-day Adventist Church are alarming. Practical guidance is needed to help our members organize themselves in order to reclaim former members. Some conclude that this is an impossible task; or, by stating that in the last days there will be a falling away, some may excuse themselves from the effort. Others may simply shrug their shoulders and try to reason it away by saying that salvation is a personal choice. Though it is true that one's eternal destination is based upon choice, it is also true that we are our brothers and sisters' keepers, and they are souls for

whom Christ died and still part of our family, the family of God.

Making disciples

Relying on a series of church outreach events and activities is not enough to keep new members. While that must be done, our initiatives must also focus on transforming the life and conduct of the local church. Local church members should strive to model the traits that they want to see in new members.

In response to this problem, evangelism must return to its biblical foundation of disciple-making. Missiologists agree that the loss of members in mainstream denominations is symptomatic of a much deeper problem: a breakdown in relationships and a failure to make passionate disciples, all as a consequence of an

insufficient reservoir of social capital. This problem is directly related to a potential misinterpretation of our mission: are we called to grow the church through large numbers of baptisms, or are we called to make disciples?

The two goals are not mutually exclusive, but they are distinct. Every disciple is a member of the family of God, but not every member is a disciple. Dr. Mario Philip, in his article “Stopping the Leaking Bucket Syndrome,” writes that “a disciple is fully converted and demonstrates a commitment to the master’s cause. I believe that we must begin by linking discipling with membership-retention initiatives because if these two are separated, the entire missional mandate is eviscerated.”⁴

Ellen White posits that “those who have newly come to the faith should be patiently and tenderly dealt with, and it

is the duty of the older members of the church to devise ways and means to provide help and sympathy and instruction for those who have conscientiously withdrawn from other churches for the truth’s sake, and thus cut themselves off from the pastoral labor to which they have been accustomed. The church has a special responsibility laid upon her to attend to these souls who have followed the first rays of light they have received; and if the members of the church neglect this duty, they will be unfaithful to the trust that God has given them.”⁵

Solstice

The cry for nurture from the brothers and sisters in our churches can be heard if we listen. The same cry—and even louder, from those who have left—must be heard.

In my quest to explore new words, I was excited when our six-year-old daughter came home with a word to learn: *solstice*. *Solstice* is when the sun appears to meet its most northerly or southerly excursion relative to the celestial equator on the celestial sphere. The day of a solstice in each hemisphere has either the most sunlight in the year (summer solstice) or the least sunlight (winter solstice) for any place other than the equator.

Where is the solstice in your church? I believe that our churches can experience much more sunlight by adhering to the following recommendations:

1. *It is the duty and responsibility of church leadership to plan spiritually, lovingly, sensitively, and practically for the return of former members.* One of the most damning statements I ever read from Ellen White is this: “I am sorry that there are those in positions of trust who very sparingly cultivate the sympathy and tenderness of Christ. They do not even cultivate and manifest love toward their brethren and sisters who are in the faith. They do not exercise the precious tact that should bind and heal those who go astray, but instead they exhibit cruelty of spirit, that drives the

Making it real

It has been quite a few months now that I have been making efforts to reclaim Maggie and her son. I first met Maggie and her son when I preached at the church they visited. She seemed very eager to learn the Word of God, and her son struck me as quite intelligent and a remarkably smart boy who was also interested in Bible study.

After their months of study with the pastor and elder, I received a personal invitation from the family to attend the baptismal service. It was a joyful occasion as Maggie and her son entered the baptismal pool together. The entire church seemed very happy and supportive. Maggie testified that while she was receiving Bible studies, she studied via Skype with her cousin in America, and he was being baptized the same day in the United States.

But soon after the baptism, the problems began. Her enthusiasm for evangelism was seen as a threat

to those who did nothing to win souls. She decided to get a divorce because she was in a very abusive relationship, and that made matters worse in the eyes of the members. She now had to find a job, home, and other necessities, and there was no support. She and her son eventually stopped attending church. No one called, visited, or enquired.

One day I visited that congregation and asked about those precious people, only to be told they no longer attend. I managed to make contact and am working with them to be reconciled with the church. It is a painful process. The membership of the church also needs help to change.

It is not enough for a father to say he loves his children when he abuses them. It is not enough for me to say that I love my wife; I must demonstrate it every day. The challenge for the church is not just to state what it should do but to actually do it so. Can it be embedded into the very fabric and DNA of our being? ❖

wanderer still further into the dark, and makes angels weep. Some seem to find a sort of pleasure in bruising and wounding souls who are ready to die. As I look upon men who handle sacred truth, who bear sacred responsibilities, and who are failing to cultivate a spirit of love and tenderness, I feel like crying out, ‘Turn ye, turn ye; for why will ye die?’⁶

2. *We must understand that nurture, reconciliation, and reclamation do not happen overnight.* It is a Holy Spirit-led process that takes time. These also require a great deal of human investment. Priority must be given to the needs of others over our own real or perceived challenges. We must get to a place where an investment in people must not be measured in monetary instruments.
3. *Each church should go through a planned cathartic process of dealing with conflict resolution.* The church should establish a robust structure for reconciliation when quarrels, disputes, friction, and discord arise. Of those who left the Adventist Church, 62.12 percent said that the primary trigger for leaving was conflict-related, 31.6 percent said conflict was their secondary trigger, and 32.87 percent said it was their tertiary trigger.⁷ Based upon hard evidence, it makes sense to have a robust conflict resolution program in each congregation, or at the least accessibility to such expertise.
4. *We must cultivate a revolutionary prayer and fasting culture in the congregation.* Not just prayer, but intercessory prayer—agonizing, self-deprecatory prayer. Joel 2:17 reads: “Let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar; and let them say, Spare thy people, O LORD, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them: wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God?” (KJV). The real strength of any congregation is the participation and predominance of prayer.

5. *We must establish a ministry of reconciliation in every congregation.* God has given to the church a message and ministry of reconciliation: “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18, 19, KJV; see also Ephesians 4:29–32). There is a great cry in our congregations for such an innovative ministry, so do it.
6. *A values-led ethic and ministry should define the very core of our churches.* In *Values-Led Lives*, Llewellyn Edwards posits that love is the highest value and that we should be creative and practice abundant, wasteful, indiscriminate, and excessive love.⁸ A values-led church would seek to place the needs of people high on the agenda. Such a church would take offense at the creation of hoops for people to jump through in order to experience the grace of God.
7. *We must develop a model of discipleship that focuses on one person or family at a time.* Sam Neves identifies six principles of discipleship in a postmodern context: identifying the disciple within an existential crisis; establishing a spiritual gifts model for the team; instigating a trail of discovery of God’s purpose for the disciple; offering a choice of world views and guiding the disciple to experience the reality of the great controversy; and training the disciple to rescue others.⁹ Whether you subscribe to this model or not, we should be intentional in working with individuals and families to make discipling a very positive, involved, and spiritual experience.

My story

I gave my life to Christ when I was about 15 years old. I never missed a service. I attended every church program

and found my church to be quite loving and caring. One Sabbath morning, about a year and a half after my baptism, I decided not to go to church. I was not sick but, discouraged, just decided to sleep instead. About two o’clock that Sabbath afternoon, I heard my name being called. I looked out of the window, and what I saw I will never forget. The men of the church—very concerned about my absence—had come to visit me. I never missed another service again.

After a quarter of a century of being a pastor, I can point back to that event as the one that really opened my eyes to the fact that church should be about companionship. People are still yearning for love, care, and nurture—twenty-five years later.¹⁰ People are still looking for that connection between words, action, and deeds—25 years later. I found it in the church where I was a member. I hope people will find it in the church where I am a leader—twenty-five years later. ❧

1 Pseudonyms.

2 G. T. Ng, “The Leaky Bucket Syndrome and How to Fix It,” Summit on Nurture and Retention, November 19, 2013, Silver Spring, MD, United States. See Andrew McChesney, “Every Adventist Urged to Help Stem Membership Losses,” *Adventist Review*, Oct. 9, 2016, adventistreview.org/church-news/story4451-every-adventist-urged-to-help-stem-membership-losses.

3 Ibid.

4 Mario Philip, “Stopping the Leaking Bucket Syndrome” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 42, no. 1 (January 2018): 69–79.

5 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 351.

6 Ellen G. White, Letter 43 (June 14, 1895, to J. H. Kellogg).

7 “Adventist Survey of Why People Leave the Church,” Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research.

8 Llewellyn Edwards, *Values-Led Lives: The Way Jesus Wants Us to Think and Act* (Grantham, England: The Stanborough Press Ltd., 2017), 25.

9 Sam Neves, “The Matrix Model of Adventist Discipleship,” in *Narrative Meaning and Truth: Fulfilling the Mission in Relativistic Contexts*, 2nd ed., ed. Bruce A. Bauer and Kleber D. Gonçalves (Washington DC: Global Mission Center, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2017), 162, 163.

10 Adrian Peck, *Being Church: Missional, Accessible, and Engaging* (Grantham, UK: The Stanborough Press Ltd., 2017), 126.

Samuel Telemaque, MAs in religion and intercultural studies, is director of both the Sabbath School Department and Adventist Mission in the Inter-American Division, Miami, Florida, United States.



It's rescue time—15 crucial steps for reconciliation

Fordyce Detamore, a great evangelist of yesteryear, declared that when it comes to seeking God's lost sheep, "Be as persistent as the FBI." He says, "It was Friday afternoon, the last week of our evangelistic series. We had tried every way possible to get in touch with a certain backslider. While the pastor was inquiring about her at a nearby dry cleaners, I spied an old fire escape at the rear of the building. We had been unable to get any response at the front of the three-story apartment. As I reached the third section of the fire escape, I began calling the woman's name quietly. Soon she appeared at the window. I went down to the front of the building and there made proper contact with her and had prayer before leaving. The next day she took her stand for rebaptism. She said it was the thought that someone would even climb a fire escape to rescue her that made her decide to come back into the church. But firemen do that all the time."¹

We want to sound a global alarm. An unprecedented crisis exists in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: members around the world are leaving. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. He calls us to participate with Him in reconciling former members unto Himself and the church. Reasons for leaving the church are varied: personal conflicts, emotional instabilities, doctrinal disagreements. Sometimes believers, as Jesus expressed in Matthew 13, do not allow the Word of God to truly sink in and change their lives, and when trials come, they lose their bearings and leave the

family of God. These are God's lost sheep, and time is running out for many of them. We desperately need a rescue timetable, and here it is: plan a homecoming event for God's missing sheep, and prepare for it by following these crucial steps in the ministry of reconciliation.²

1. Praying for—April-May

First, we need to pray. Intercessory prayer is a consistent petition to God for accessibility to the hearts of former members. Many former members are hostile to their local church. Some members show indifference to former ones. The ministry of reconciliation occurs in the context of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Intercessory prayer gives God access to the hearts of former members and current members. Church members should be encouraged to pray for former members. People who pray for others are inclined to think and feel favorably toward those for whom they pray. Time spent in private prayer will be rewarded with high *receptivity* among members and former members for reconciliation (Matt. 6:6).

The local church can make a list of all its former members and present those persons to God at weekly prayer services, family worship, prayer conferences, and special days of prayer and fasting.

2. Recruiting—May-June

Recruiting means selecting people to implement the ministry of reconciliation. The Sabbath School council or church board may select these persons. They should have a good reputation and

demonstrate conviction and commitment to reconcile former members to Christ and His church. The gift of discernment may be a vital asset for recruits. This ministry requires persons who will implore the Holy Spirit to give them access to the hearts of former members. The Holy Spirit will teach them how and when to listen or speak.

The church clerk or Sabbath School clerk should have records of former members. The profile of former members should consist of their names, addresses, baptismal date, and reasons for leaving. This information is critical for the reconciliation team.

3. Training—May-June

Training will equip people. The content of the training should include the theology of conversion, discipleship, conflict resolution, empathy, listening skills, emotional healing, and spiritual healing. Trainees are required to complete 20 hours of training. Find trainers in your congregation or a sister church who have the skills and knowledge in the areas listed. Students also need to learn how to apply their knowledge in real-life situations of reconciling former members.

4. Contacting—June-July

Contacting is a series of informal conversations with former members. The initial conversations greet former members as brothers or sisters. Such a greeting implies acceptance and belonging to a family that still cares for and loves them. This assurance sometimes

provides the springboard for former members to vent their anger and bitterness with the church. When this occurs, listen to the pain and express apologies. Follow the counsel of James: be slow to speak and quick to listen (James 1:19). Interruptions tend to delay the outflow of pain and bitterness. Just listen with empathy to their pain, anger, hurt, whatever they are feeling. These initial conversations primarily help former members experience *release* from their anger and bitterness.

Listen for hidden meanings and feelings behind words. Then reflect those feelings to the communicators. Reflective listening facilitates emotional healing.

5. Acknowledging—June-July

Acknowledging consists of verbal or nonverbal responses to former members' emotional expressions. You may acknowledge emotional expressions with relevant exclamations: "Terrible!" "Awful!" "I feel your pain!" Acknowledgments encourage former members to pour out their anger or share their joy.

You are not to acknowledge or deny the authenticity of their statements. Rather, acknowledge the *feelings* conveyed by the statements of former members. Sometimes a former member might say: "The pastor is a wicked person." Though you can acknowledge the pain in their sentiment, do not affirm that sentiment.

6. Empathizing—July-August

Empathizing means identifying and reflecting a person's feelings to assure him or her that you care. Sympathy means you feel sorry for someone's situation, even if you have never been there yourself; empathy, in contrast, is when you truly understand and can feel what another person is going through. In empathizing with former members, seek to understand the issues; but, more importantly, try to *feel* with them. By accurately reflecting the feelings of former members, you identify with their feelings of infirmity.

7. Apologizing—July-August

Apologizing means taking responsibility for the pain caused to a person. You may not have caused the pain; however, you may apologize on behalf of those who *did*. The apology comes after the person has released their anger or bitterness. It may go something like this: "Brother/Sister, we apologize sincerely for the pain and sorrow we have caused you. Our actions have caused grief and frustration to you and your family and have caused you so much sorrow. On behalf of the church, I apologize sincerely for the heartaches."

Sometimes a former member may refuse to accept your apology. If this happens, remain calm. Look straight at the person and repeat: "We are sorry for the pain we have caused you." Keep the focus on the apology.

Sometimes a former member may request apologies from specific persons. You can arrange for such a meeting of apology in a neutral place. A special orientation should be given to persons making the apology. These persons (members) should be encouraged not to defend themselves or rehearse incidences or feelings. The task is simply to apologize. Reconciliation is the goal.

8. Assuring—August-September

Assuring means giving former members assurances of God's love. Some may be aware of God's love for them but still be reluctant to return to church. Church leaders should convey feelings of appreciation and belongingness to the family of God. Always address former members as brothers or sisters. If a former member should reject these salutations, you should *maintain and insist* that the church *still* considers the person to be a brother or sister. Your verbal and nonverbal communication should convey assurance, appreciation, and acceptance.

9. Testing—August-September

Testing is an informal evaluation of the readiness of former members to

reconcile with their church. You may test their readiness in several ways.

First, you may offer an appropriate book to read. Second, extend an invitation to fellowship with the church *one of these days*. The initial invitation should be indefinite. Such a statement helps build an expectation in former members. It helps them make mental adjustments for returning to their local churches. A specific date for returning is given to them at an appropriate time. Give former members time and space to heal.

Third, ask former members to make decisions between positive alternatives. For instance, to request a follow-up visit, you may say, "Would you prefer my second visit to be on Thursday or Sunday?" Or, "In the morning or afternoon?" You are requesting a follow-up visit between two positive alternatives. Make it very easy for former members to decide to reconcile with their churches.

10. Anticipating—September-October

It is necessary to help the local church to anticipate the return of former members. The pastor should inform his local congregation ahead of time. The specific date should be announced six to twelve months in advance to allow the local congregation to make mental adjustments for the return of former members. Both former members and the local congregation should anticipate reconciliation.

11. Praying with—September-October

Seek an opportunity to pray not only for but *with* former members. This prayer time is more effective after former members have poured out their anger or concerns to you. The former members may be more receptive to prayer after you have apologized on behalf of your church. Ask if they would prefer to pray together in their kitchen or dining room, or inside or outside the house. The freedom to choose between two possible alternatives is the critical issue. The choice indicates the readiness of the person to pray. Once the place is chosen, move quickly. Look into the eyes of the

former member and begin to kneel. The person follows your nonverbal communication and kneels with you. If the person refuses to kneel, then pray in whatever posture is convenient to that person. The content of the prayer should focus on four things:

1. Confess the sins of your church.
2. Ask God to forgive your members.
3. Pray for God's blessings upon the former member.
4. Express the hope that the former member will fellowship with you one of these days.

It is appropriate to pray with a soft tone of voice. Make a deliberate effort not to mention *misdeeds* of the former member; simply pronounce God's blessings on the person.

12. Reconciling— October-November

Reconciling means restoring a broken relationship with a friend or community. Sometimes members may need training on how to reconcile with former members. This training should be given to the entire church. This training is different from the 20 hours of training for the recruits. This basic training is for *all* active church members. In that way, every member has the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to restore broken relationships. The training may include listening, acknowledging, empathizing, apologizing, and an understanding of Ephesians 4:31, 32. Members should practice listening *without defending themselves* from true or false accusations. They should avoid rehearsing past experiences with former members. Such rehearsals retard reconciliation. The Holy Spirit makes it possible for willing hearts to be reconciled.

13. Hosting— October-November

Hosting requires three types of readiness:

1. *Mental preparation.* The host church needs to be aware of the date, and members need to be informed of the

contents of the program. The information includes seating, protocol, modes of greeting, arrival, use of words, nonverbal communication, and principles of conflict resolution. Such information increases the expectation of church members and reduces their anxiety.

2. *Emotional readiness.* One month prior to the homecoming, a reconciliation service should be convened to provide avenues for members to reconcile with each other. This reconciliation service is based on Ephesians 4:31, 32. These verses emphasize the exchange of negative emotions for positive emotions. They inspire members to forgive each other. Why? Because God has forgiven them. Therefore, forgiveness means extending grace to others just as God freely extends it to us. Forgiveness means freely sharing the grace of God.

3. *Physical preparation.* This may include seating design, painting, cleaning, consideration of aesthetic impact, and a prayer or reconciliation room. It is the responsibility of the church board and Sabbath School department to prepare the church for the homecoming. It is a time of rejoicing (Luke 15).

14. Homecoming Sabbath— November-December

The homecoming Sabbath is a celebration of the return of former members to their local church to worship. Homecoming Sabbaths for former members have their origin in Luke 15:1–32. These verses convey the love of God for former members. He is always waiting to welcome home the “lost sheep in Israel” (Matt. 10:5, 6).

The rejoicing includes welcoming, eating, singing, preaching, testimonies, drama, teaching, reconciliation, forgiveness, crying, and laughter. The love of God is at the center of a homecoming Sabbath. The purpose of a homecoming Sabbath is to demonstrate the *love of God* for former members and church members.

The theme of the homecoming Sabbath is “O love that will not let me go.” It communicates the persistence of God's love for His people. The goal is to remind the former members of the

love and goodness of God, which leads both former and current members to repentance.

A homecoming Sabbath needs to be authentic. The words and actions of members need to be congruent. Our smiles, hugs, and commendations should be genuine. The former members can detect hypocrisy or masking. The homecoming Sabbath is a time for transparency, simplicity, and authenticity. It is a time to be vulnerable. Members should not be afraid to admit their own failures. This is authentic religion.

15. Reintegration— November-December

Reintegration means restoring former members into the fellowship and ministries of the local church. The process of reintegration takes time. Members who began the reconciliation process should continue to work with former members to prepare them to reenter the ministries of the church. The former members may need (a) reconciliation with church members, (b) indoctrination, (c) rebaptism, (d) training for ministries, and (e) placement in ministries. The church board should supervise and coordinate the reintegration process. It is the final stage of the reconciliation process.

Conclusion

It is our privilege to participate with God in the ministry of reconciliation. He has reconciled us to Himself and now invites us to participate with Him in the process of reconciling others—including former members. Before we can give them the Bible, we need to create an environment of relationship, love, kindness, and laughter that leads to an environment of love for the study of the Word. Former members need time and space to experience emotional and spiritual healing. Some stages overlap with each other to create a movement toward reconciliation with Christ and His church. This process takes time. We recommend one year for completing the process.³

God initiates the ministry of reconciliation. He gives us an impulse to turn

or return to Him. He also gives us the ministry and message of reconciliation. If God chooses to reconcile former members unto Himself, who are we to resist His initiative? ❖

- 1 Fordyce W. Detamore, *Seeking His Lost Sheep* (Nashville, TN: Southern Pub. Assn., 1965), 65, 66.
- 2 Adapted from Samuel Telemaque, *Christ's Ambassadors: Reconciling former Members to Christ* (Grantham, UK: The Stanborough Press, 2019).
- 3 Libna Stevens, "Adventist Church in Inter-America

Embarks on Mission to Seek Former Church Members," Seventh-day Adventist Church, Inter-American Division, Jan. 16, 2019, interamerica.org/2019/01/adventist-church-in-inter-america-embarks-on-mission-to-seek-former-church-members/.

A must for a Christian

A survey of 2,900 protestant churchgoers called "Bible Engagement of Churchgoers" was conducted in 2012 by LifeWay Research.* This study brought to light some interesting statistics. Of those surveyed, 90 percent stated, "I desire to please and honor Jesus in all that I do." In this, I was encouraged. In the same study, I read that only 19 percent of those surveyed read their Bible every day, and that happy feeling started to fade. The question arose in my heart, How could one desire to "please and honor Jesus" if you don't know Him on a daily basis? It seems to me that in order to please those you profess to love, you must study them and know them well enough to know their likes and dislikes. By knowing them better, you can go on and "please and honor" them with your actions and words.

It is one thing to profess to know of Jesus, maybe, from word of mouth or in observing others' actions. It is quite another to *know* Jesus and who He is by studying Him, learning of Him, seeing Him in the reading of His Word. The professed Christian should be praying that the Holy Spirit will continue to reveal His love and mercy to him or her as he or she reads and meditates on Scripture. The reader will then learn how to "please and honor Jesus" as revealed in Scripture and convicted by the Holy Spirit.

In the same survey, it was noted that the desires of the Christians differed between those who read the Bible and those who did not, and reveals six actions that positively impact the Bible engagement scores of individuals: (1)

the desire to pray and ask forgiveness of sin was increased; (2) the need of a Savior was increased; (3) 61 percent read a book about increasing their spiritual growth, in the past year and were able to notice an increase in their faith in Jesus; (4) there was an increased desire to make decisions to follow and obey God, even with the knowledge that it might be costly; (5) those who read daily had a prayer life that included prayers for their friends who did not profess Christianity; (6) the belief that Jesus was the only way to heaven was elevated. Among those who had the habit of daily study, almost half revealed that they had been disciplined and encouraged by other sincere believers.

"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (John 17:17, KJV). Without daily communing with Jesus by reading the Bible, we will remain an unsanctified people. With the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and the sanctifying influence of God's truth contained in His Word, we become more and more like Him. Our choices, our desires, become ennobled; our will aligns with His will, and we fall endlessly in love with Him. The desire to "please and honor" becomes a true reality, woven into the fabric of our character and mind. The very innermost desire of our soul then yearns to please, honor, and love Jesus.

I remember hearing the testimony of a man who lost his wife; she was his very best friend. They did everything together. They would prayerfully study the Bible together every day, regardless of what was going on in their lives.

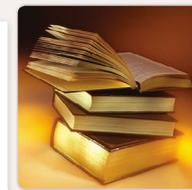
Revival & REFORMATION

When she passed away, he fell into a deep depression. During that time, he faithfully continued his devotional life, the habitual daily study of God's Word. The depression lasted over a year, but he remained true to his time in the Bible every day. When he finally broke free from the depression that had enshrouded him those many months, he proclaimed that it was his devotional life that kept him alive. "I would have died if I would not have had my daily time with Jesus and the Bible!"

The old hymn "Give Me the Bible" should be the cry of this generation of Christians. If 90 percent of Christians want to learn to "please and honor Jesus" as they go about their lives, then they should make it a reality. We as a people need to prayerfully spend time in God's Word, inviting the Holy Spirit to transform us into a people who would love from our hearts to "please and honor Jesus" in everything we do. I believe that the world would be a much better place to live in if we Christians would study our Bibles; then, we really would know Jesus and how to love Him. ❖

—**Brian Cowin** pastors the Central Louisiana and Marthaville Seventh-day Adventist Churches, Louisiana, United States.

* Russ Rankin, "Study: Bible Engagement in Churchgoers' Hearts, Not Always Practiced," LifeWay, January 1, 2014, lifeway.com/en/articles/research-survey-bible-engagement-churchgoers.



How to Become a Multicultural Church

by Douglas J. Brouwer, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017.

Our world is awash in nationalism, xenophobia, populism, and nativism. Political movements respond with Brexit, wall building, and tribalism. There is decreased tolerance for things that are different, exacerbated by the echo chambers of social media, where the most strident shouts are amplified and moderate voices are attenuated; where privileged people groups are losing their power, feeling overwhelmed by the hordes who do not look, talk, or act like them.

These trends are the pushback that comes from decades of mass migration, globalism, and population mixing. For example, in the United States (US), those with European ancestry are projected to be a minority within a couple of decades.

Politicians and dictators nimbly surf these waves of angst, but what about the kingdom of God—specifically, the congregation? How does a congregation navigate these swirling waters? What does an authentically Christian congregation look like in these xenophobic times?

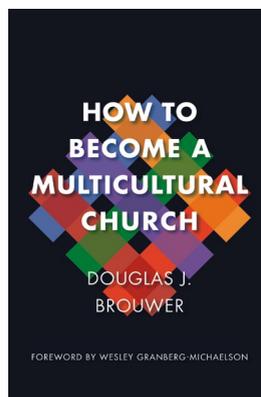
Pastor Doug Brouwer is finding some answers as he reflects on his first 18 months of leading the International Protestant Church of Zurich. Brouwer, a Presbyterian who grew up in a homogeneous culture and then pastored homogeneous congregations, suddenly finds himself in another country leading a thriving multicultural nondenominational congregation. He writes as an American pastor with little experience in the heterogeneous, about the constant epiphanies of ministry revealed in this rich cultural milieu. Even though the author is steeped as a Presbyterian, readers from other faith backgrounds will find it easy to apply his insights to their own faith contexts.

There are some foundational questions lurking underneath Brouwer's

experience. Why is Sunday morning the most segregated time of the week? Has Christianity become resistant to the power of the gospel to break down racial, ethnic, and social walls that was the hallmark of this new religion that appeared in the first century? For example, currently in the US, only about 14 percent of congregations are multicultural (and that 14 percent is a very generous definition of multicultural, counting as multicultural a congregation with as little as 20 percent from different racial groups than the dominant majority).

Brouwer suggests that despite the apparent retreat into cultural narcissism that many are taking, some consciously or unconsciously need to, or want to, surround themselves with people of different cultures. For example, kids growing up in multicultural countries, going to multicultural schools, may question the efficacy of a faith that divides into cultural or racial factions on the weekend.

This book is a must-read for someone from a homogeneous setting wanting to put their toes in the water of heterogeneity, or someone who intends to plant a multicultural congregation or increase the multicultural element or take a pulpit in an existing multicultural congregation. However, this is not a how-to book on transitioning to the multicultural; it is not a research project studying many congregations and settings; it is not in the genre of "9 tips to become multicultural," nor is it a church-planting guide. Rather it is a personal story of insights discovered as a pastor changes his context from



homogeneous congregational life to his new pulpit in an existing multicultural congregation.

He discovers that multicultural is hard. Struggles emerge in worship style, dress code, theology, and, most of all, communication. He finds that business meetings take three times as long, the role of the pastor is culturally

understood and diverse, relationships take time and are complex, and doctrine is viewed through cultural lenses.

Yet through the struggles, the author shares insights such as: (a) a congregation is at its best when it fights hard for consensus; (b) there should be no privileged culture; (c) the pastor must learn leadership styles from other cultures; and (d) all must move beyond cultural stereotypes. He adds tips, such as humility going a long way, avoiding patriotism, being deliberate and intentional about multicultural, and eating together often.

Brouwer, amid the crucible of the multicultural, begins to see a gospel rising above the slag of a cultural gospel. This pure gospel is not confused by or equated to cultural norms because these norms are challenged daily by the diversity of his congregation. The church becomes more than a congregation; it becomes a home. The church now becomes a foretaste of Revelation 7:9, "There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (NRSV). ❧

— Reviewed by **Dave Gemmell, DMin**, associate Ministerial director of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.



► Women lead out in reunion of church friends

Brazil—A Reunion program conducted in the North Brazil Union Mission brought together about 220 women, half of them former Adventists.

Rose Santos told her story and what led her to sever her connection with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. With much emotion, she also described the events that made her decide to return. “It was a privilege to have this chance to tell a little about my life to so many people who, perhaps, go through the same situation and still have not found the strength to change,” she says.

The whole concept of the Reunion program, pioneered in the South American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was based on rebuilding life. It is proposed that every Adventist woman try to “rescue” a woman who has previously been a member of the church. During the following months, friendships are built or rebuilt.



A final event is planned, and invitations are given out. The event starts with a skit where a clay pot is broken, symbolizing the end of the “old” life. At the end of the program, a potter makes a new pot from scratch, which represents what Jesus can do in the lives of those who allow themselves to be molded.

“Motivating Christian women to reach out to other women who were part of the Adventist family, inviting them to participate in projects developed by

the Women’s Ministries, such as Tea With Friends, prayer groups, and others,” is how teacher **Ironilde Bussons**, organizer and Women’s Ministries director for the North Brazil Union Mission, defines the project.

The crowning moment of the whole project was four women being rebaptized in the first edition of the Reunion. Adventist women who were by their side throughout the process accompanied them. The

strategy became a model and was developed in other cities as well. In all, between 2017 and 2018, 527 women were baptized as a result of the project.

The next edition of Reunion will be in the state of Maranhão, in São Luis. It is expected that 400 people will participate in the event and achieve the goals. In order to reach former Adventist friends, 2,587 volunteer missionaries participate in the step-by-step discipleship process. [*Mosaic* newsletter, Summer 2018]

► Theological forum looks to recapture the importance of discipleship

Silang, Cavite, Philippines—At the 21st AIIAS Annual Theological Forum, held at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS), regional and international Adventist scholars addressed the issue of discipleship and disciple-making to gain a deeper understanding of Jesus’ commission for all believers. The event brought together almost 350 theologians, pastors, and administrators.

Plenary speaker **Dr. G. T. Ng**, executive secretary of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, cautioned

against making baptism the goal of the Great Commission, the call of Jesus in Matthew 28 to make disciples. “The end product of the Great Commission is not to baptize but to disciple. Baptism is just the beginning of the story,” Ng emphasized. “After baptism, teaching continues until the church becomes a disciple-making church.” Ng urged participants to make discipleship the strongest feature of the church.

Throughout the three-day event, several forum presentations emphasized the need to balance the quantitative



G. T. Ng [Photo: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies]

concern with qualitative checks that will help the church fulfill the Great Commission.

Chair of the forum committee **Remwil Tornalejo** noted that disciple-making is a relevant topic in the context of church growth and membership retention. By having participants from different disciplines, he said, everyone has a better grasp on this vital topic.

“Through the theological forum, AIIAS shares biblical, theological, and practical insights of what is the essence of the church existence—to do mission,” AIIAS professor of Intercultural Studies and Missiology

Cristian Dumitrescu said. Pastors and administrators present at the meetings concluded that the loss of membership was not to be blamed solely on those who left the church but also on the church’s desire to meet baptismal goals. The Great Commission and other messages of the Bible indicate that careful instruction before baptism and continuous growth after baptism are necessary, they said.

According to AIIAS Seminary dean **Ricardo González**, “Everybody in the church has a practical role in the Great Commission. Discipleship is a task given to the Adventist Church, to reproduce

in this world the life, message, and testimony of Jesus.”

Participants unanimously concluded that changes are needed in the overall mission strategy to improve effectiveness and faithfulness to God’s missionary calling. “We have also agreed to oppose unbiblical methods of discipleship and realize that approaches focusing on numerical growth come with a cost to the kingdom of God,” they said. [Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies and *Adventist Review*]

The original version of this story appears on the AIIAS website under “News.”

► Adventist Church in Inter-American Division embarks to seek former church members

Miami, Florida, United States—It is no secret that people are leaving the church. This alarming fact has Seventh-day Adventist leaders in the Inter-American Division (IAD) focused on a major initiative to seek and reconcile thousands of former members across the more than 22,000 churches and congregations in their territory.

Inter-American Division’s “Ministry of Reclaiming and Discipleship of Former Members” initiative was officially launched through an online program on January 12, 2019.

Dr. **Elie Henry**, president of the IAD, pointed out a clear invitation in the Bible for this ministry as he reflected on Ezekiel 34, appealing to leaders and members to take note of those who were once were at church and for one reason or another are no longer attending.

Pointing to a recent survey conducted by the Adventist General Conference’s Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, Dr. **Leonard Johnson**, executive secretary for the



Pastor Samuel Telemaque (left), with translator Roberto Brown Jr. (right). (Photo: Libna Stevens/IAD)

IAD, said the findings revealed that nearly 14 million members have gone missing during the period between 1965 and 2015 across the world church.

“That means that one out of three members has been lost over the past fifty years,” reported Johnson. For the IAD, that translates to just over two million members during that time period. “If we had those members up to 2015, our membership could be more than six million today. So it’s not a world problem only but a problem in the IAD.”

From 2016 to 2018, more than 153,000 members have dropped out

and/or gone missing across the IAD, according to the official tallying done throughout the IAD’s 24 unions, or major church regions, said Johnson. Among the many issues that the survey pointed out was how relationships are important to prevent members from leaving the church.

Building relationships is a key element in retaining and seeking members, so the initiative is being driven by the ministry of the Sabbath School class structure.

“Our mission is to search for former members and invite them to be reconciled to God, reconciled to the church through a process of seeking to appeal to the heart of the member,” said Pastor **Samuel Telemaque**, Sabbath School director for the IAD, who is spearheading the initiative. “Before we can give them the Bible, we need to create the environment of relationship, love, kindness, and laughter in the Sabbath School class that leads to an environment of love for the study of the Word.”



A practical guide, voted by top administrators and leaders during IAD's Year-End Executive Committee Meetings, focuses on the stages of reconciliation and gives practical instructions on how to implement a ministry of reconciliation for former members, in addition to discipleship of former members and reintegration into the fellowship life of the church.

The program also touched on the cost of discipleship, the importance of intercessory prayer, the call to the

ministry of reconciliation, and more, not only to take place through Sabbath School ministries but also through youth ministries, the pastoral ministry, and public campus ministries, among others.

"This is not an event, it's a process," said Telemaque. "The process includes recruiting and training those individuals who will seek out former members, thoroughly identifying all missing members, searching, contacting, listening and acknowledging their pain,

apologizing on behalf of the church, and welcoming them back."

The initiative will see a scheduled homecoming Sabbath celebration on September 7, 2019, where thousands of former members are expected to flood churches and congregations across the IAD.

"Let's work together through the Sabbath School, youth, and all departments to restore and reclaim former members," Telemaque said. [Libna Stevens/IAD]

► eHuddle reinvigorates passion for evangelism

San Diego, California, United States—For two and a half days, on February 18–20, 2019, evangelism directors of conferences and unions, church administrators, pastors, innovators, and other leaders gathered at eHuddle in San Diego, California, United States of America, to share, learn, and dialogue on how the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America can more effectively reach people in a growing, secular culture.

More than 200 people attended the eHuddle event, sponsored by the North American Division (NAD) Ministerial Association, and more benefitted from the presentations via Facebook. During the meeting, more than 30 presenters shared tried and tested ways along with innovative, creative, and new approaches for how they engage their local community and church.

"For this year's event we wanted to address two needs that we see in our churches: First we focused on how churches can grow young and ensure retention of young people. Presentations were shared how to disciple children and to help them make a serious decision for Jesus," said **Jose Cortes Jr.**, event organizer and associate director of the NAD Ministerial Association. "Second, we engaged with the epidemic of dying

and plateauing churches in our division. We are concerned about the health of our churches and, therefore, wanted to address these issues."

Various presenters spoke on these two themes, sharing practical solutions and ideas on how they were addressing them in their local context. In one presentation, **Tim Gillespie**, lead pastor of the Crosswalk Seventh-day Adventist Church in Redlands, California, spoke about how his church helps remote churches connect to Crosswalk. The satellite congregations reap the benefits from the programming at the main church.

During his presentation, Gillespie challenged the audience: "We live in a time where Uber is the largest taxi company in the world, and yet it doesn't own a car. Airbnb is the largest hotel chain, but it doesn't own a room. Perhaps we need to rethink the model of church in our current time."

Tom Evans, president of the North New South Wales Conference in Australia, sees value in this event. "We need to consistently search for new and relevant avenues and methods in ministry. I like how eHuddle creates space where projects can be refined and developed."

Many attendees of this year's event left invigorated by the ideas that

presenters shared. First-time attendee **Vanston Archbold Jr.**, general field secretary for the Southwest Region Conference in the Southwestern Union, said, "I am inspired by what others are doing. I have the same amount of resources, and this encourages me to figure out what I can do in my field."



Panelists answer a question from Ivan Williams, NAD Ministerial Association director. (Photo: Enno Müller)

The meeting this year encouraged attendees throughout the NAD to try new things and, at the same time, also served as a reminder that evangelism is not the same in every community.

"It is important to find a way to create relationships and connect with people in the community. This requires an understanding of what their needs are," said **Dr. Ivan Williams**, director of NAD Ministerial Association. [Enno Müller, communication director of the Southeastern California Conference] ❏

Ron E. M. Clouzet, DMin, is Ministerial Association Secretary for the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, Gyeonggi-do, Republic of Korea.



Evangelism and retention myths

After leading and teaching evangelism for 25 years and in several countries on three different continents, I have seen some misguided views about the practice of evangelism. I call them myths. What follows are a few of them and why they are misleading myths.

Myth # 1—Evangelism is an event

For the Christian, evangelism is a lifestyle—thus, a process. For the local church, evangelism will consist of a well-orchestrated plan that may include community outreach, prayer for the lost, friendship contacts, Bible studies with nonmembers, youth and school evangelism, and other components.

Myth # 2—The objective of reaping meetings is to have them

Many pastors and church members believe that the objective of evangelism is to be able to say they held meetings. But the objective of evangelism is not meetings; the objective is a transformation! Everything should focus on giving people the opportunity to make decisions. When decisions are made, a transformation is possible.

Myth # 3—Two to six nights of meetings is sufficient

Many churches hold public evangelistic meetings for two to six nights. They do so, in part, because they believe that having more meetings will meet with resistance from the members because everyone is always busy. But this is a very dangerous myth. It is nearly impossible for people to make decisions for Christ, His teachings, and His church in such a short time and with so little exposure to God.

Myth # 4—The extended series of meetings no longer work

Years ago, most fields had meetings several nights each week over multiple weeks to cover all the major teachings of the Bible. If evangelism is a carefully

planned process and the messages are biblical and Christ-centered, the Holy Spirit will make sure to send guests, as well as members, to attend. People will keep coming. People need enough exposure to the Bible to make life-saving decisions.

Myths # 5—Weekend-only reaping meetings are good

Having meetings only on Sabbath and Sunday may be convenient for the church members and pastor, but it is not good for those we want to reach. People need consistent and sufficient exposure to God in order to decide to follow Him. So reaping meetings should be held at least four times a week, and for at least two weeks. And on Sabbath, at least two meetings should be held, dealing with two different topics.

Myth # 6—Public evangelism is no longer necessary

Many today believe that since “Christ’s method alone” has to do with personal evangelism (see *The Ministry of Healing*, page 143), there is no need for the public preaching of God’s Word. However, when people hear the preaching of the Word, their chances of making eternal decisions are increased considerably. Public appeals in the church work hand in hand with personal appeals in the home. The Holy Spirit works in a special way for those who hear the faithful preaching of His Word.

Myth # 7—People cannot come for evangelistic meetings during the week

We may think it is too much to expect people who work long hours to go to evangelistic meetings after work. But people seeking answers will adjust their schedules. If they are prepared to make sacrifices, shouldn’t we?

Myth # 8—Practical topics on family or health are best for public meetings

Some Adventists assume that because they have heard prophetic preaching many times, it would not be of interest to nonmembers, therefore we should offer only health and family life presentations. However, this is misleading. God raised the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a last-day church of prophecy. It is our sacred duty to share the prophecies of Scripture with everyone.

Myth # 9—The biggest challenge to evangelism is lack of time and resources

It is true that lack of time for church members and lack of resources in the church are challenges. But the biggest challenge to evangelism is the Laodicean condition of the churches. True spiritual renewal is our greatest need. Once Jesus is first in our lives, others will become important to us. And regardless of lack of time or resources, we will find the time and the way to reach out to others.

Myth # 10—Converts from public evangelism leave the church soon after

Statistics show that many more members leave the church who were born to Adventist parents and raised as Seventh-day Adventists than people who became Adventists through public evangelism. It is true that some leave the church after conversion, but that is often due to lack of proper indoctrination or careful assimilation of the new believer. In many cases, the fault lies with the church. If the pastor provides a good mentoring plan for new believers and seeks to engage them in ministry soon after their baptism, most new converts will remain active in the church.*

* This is a condensed version of “Evangelism and Retention Myths” first published in the November 2018 issue and “Dangerous Myths about Evangelism” in the December 2018 issue of the NSD Ministerial Newsletter. Used with permission.

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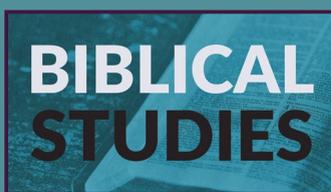
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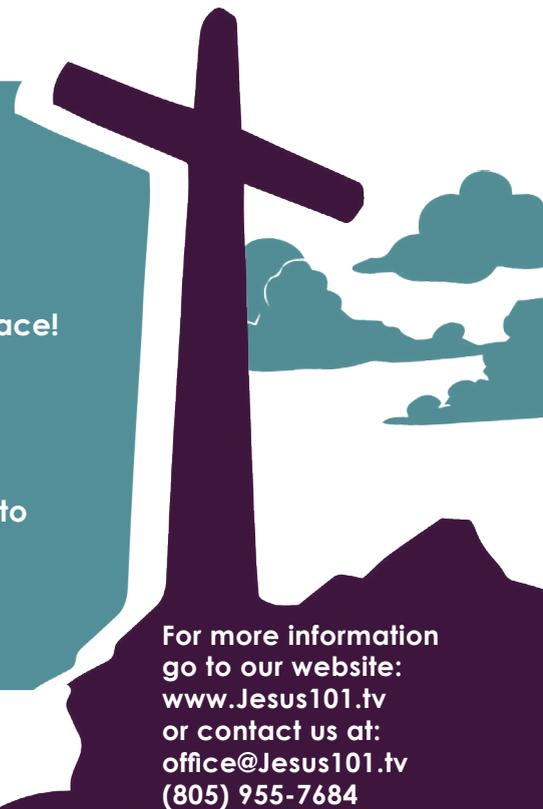
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