



# Church Growth Myths

Discovering Truths  
That Will Help Your  
Church to Grow

By David Paul Ripley

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August 24, 2005 By David Ripley

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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to Patricia Lynn Ripley, my wife, and fellow minister of the gospel, counselor, and my one true love. You have been my best friend since we met at the age of 10. Without you my life of ministry would have been shallow and meaningless. Your insight, intuition, encouragement, and warmth have allowed me to go boldly forward. I pray that God will continue to walk with us as we minister together and move beyond the myths.

## Acknowledgments

For me to acknowledge all who have helped to shape my ministry and hence this book would take a volume as large as this book and then I fear that I would miss some names.

Surely I would not have even entered ministry if I did not have my mentor and brother, Jim Ripley. During his many years of ministry I observed a life of integrity and a love for sharing Jesus with people.

I must also share with you the great head elders that it has been my privilege to work with. They taught me valuable lessons all along the way. I speak of Bill Scarborough, Lynn Hecht, Melvin Starr, Johnny Shoemaker, Wilton Williams, Omar Brown, and Ed Fry. And in the last church I pastored, Austin First, now Stonehill SDA, head elders Chad Langley, then Fawn Escalante continued the valuable process of teaching me how to sharpen my ministry and how to avoid myths in the church.

During my six years in the conference offices of British Columbia and Minnesota I had the privilege of working with some of the finest conference presidents in North America: Dan Jackson, Harry Sackett, and Bill Miller. These men patiently gave valuable counsel to help me understand discipleship.

To the many others—college professors, seminary teachers, and the multitude of wise laypersons that shared their lives and ministry—I gratefully acknowledge your help in shaping my life and my ministry.

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# Preface

Early in my ministry I witnessed that a majority of local churches were working very hard, but did not have strong growth. The churches were full of spiritually minded, conscientious people eager to share Jesus with their world, but something important was missing. It began to dawn on me that we were assuming things that were not really so. I began to make a list, contemplating how to avoid these roadblocks so I could help these churches I served to grow. I wanted to avoid the myths that had gained wide acceptance in the church.

At first the list was short, but once I began to watch, the list of myths grew to fill a full page and eventually take the form you now have in your hands.

God has called us as disciples to ministry, a ministry of sharing Jesus with the world around us. He has promised power from heaven to assist. In John 4:35 Jesus shared that the time to harvest is now: "Look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!"

I share this book with you in hopes that all with a love for God, His church, and the Great Commission will be able to be effective disciples for Jesus. I pray that this small beginning will assist us in being effective servants of our Lord, Savior, and King. Jesus is coming! Let's work with purpose and make a difference. To do this we must let go of the myths we hold.

If you would like to dialogue on what you read in these pages, send an email to: [DavidRipley@gmail.com](mailto:DavidRipley@gmail.com).

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# Foreword

## **Myth 32. North America is a Christian nation.**

David Ripley challenges us in these pages to consider myths about the culture that you and I live in as Seventh-day Adventist Christians. I believe that Myth 32 is the heart of what he is discussing. We have assumed that because the U.S. and Canada are Christian nations there is not the same urgency to respond to our neighbors and communities as there would be if we were going “overseas.” After all, many think, we should be more concerned about the “mission field” out there—in another part of the world.

What I read in these pages is a passion to recognize that if we as a church are going to be healthy, our approach, our methods of connecting with our communities, must be effective. I submit to you that what Ripley is calling us to *do* and *be* is a missionary. To be effective, missionaries make a study of the history and culture of the place they are going. They learn the language, habits, and prejudices of its people. All this, and more, must be undertaken before they can be effective in the new situation.

## **A secular culture**

North America is a secular nation, and thus you and I are called to be missionaries in a secular culture. As church members we need—we must—be missionaries to our neighbors and communities.

This book is a call to action. Don't wait for “so-and-so” to do it instead of you. Take responsibility in the context of the body of Christ to use your gift for growing God's kingdom. Too many of us wait for “someone else” or the “church” or the “conference” to do something before we feel we can “go. We each, individually, have been to more seminars, conventions, planning sessions on how to be active, how to give Bible studies, how to visit, etc., than did the entire early church we read of in the book of Acts. And God chose to add to their numbers daily.

We need to be trained. Yes. We need the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Yes. But we need to GO. And God will add to our numbers daily as well.

Ripley also challenges us to ask questions. There are 31 myths listed in this book, each one followed by thoughtful, penetrating questions to consider about your church. But in the context of your church you may come upon even more questions. Your church may find even more myths to explore, ones unique to your situation. Go ahead. Ask the questions; identify the myths. David Ripley won't be offended. It's what he is calling us to do. He is not providing the answers. Rather this book is a tool you should use to take an honest look at the health of your church, in your context, to allow the Holy Spirit to do big things.

## **Myth 33. Our church can't grow.**

Nonsense! If you are connected to the Vine, you will grow. You will be healthy. You will be a light on a hill. You will be salt to the community. You will find lost people. You will be what God designed you to be. You will be a faithful disciple.

Thank you, David Ripley, for challenging us to think and to ask questions... and for giving us the tools to GO!

—***William Miller***

*President, Potomac Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*

# Introduction

I knew we were in trouble. As pastor and board chair, I had felt the call of God to grow

His church. It was a compelling passion, and I preached about it regularly, also sharing the conviction while visiting in members' homes. I felt that churches limit themselves because they expect church membership to remain the same, so in meetings with our deacons and elders I spoke of it often. Now our church board was discussing the growth of our church, and it didn't go as I'd anticipated.

"Pastor, we just built this new building," a deacon said. "Why hasn't the Lord filled it up? After all, we sent out flyers to every address in town."

"We are the remnant, are we not?" another board member countered. "We're *supposed* to be small! The Pentecost experience is coming again, but not until the very end."

Yet another voice piped up. "Well, if we had an Adventist hospital here in town, we could really grow." She turned to make certain she'd caught my eye. "Pastor, could you contact the conference and see what they can do about this?"

I felt myself wilt. I'd lost control of the meeting. Something was wrong, but what was it? Before I could think how to bring the discussion back around to business, someone else voiced an opinion. "Perhaps we need to wait until the youth grow up. They'll have the energy to witness," he said.

"No!" another voice quickly put in. "The youth can help with worship now. But by the way, Pastor, I'm concerned about the high degree of planning you're talking about doing for Sabbath worship." He turned his worried face toward the other board members. "Practice the worship service? Pastor, you are trying to restrict the ability of the Holy Spirit to work on Sabbath morning!"

"Well, now," I began, but our head deacon had thought of something else. "You know, for the past several months we've had two to three visitors each week, but they're never the same visitors." He paused, and seemed to be thinking. "They dressed too casually to fit into our church anyway. But you'd think that since we have the truth at least some of them would continue to come back."

As I sat there listening and praying I became more and more disheartened. What was wrong? All the different things they said held some elements of truth. But far too easily everyone in the room seemed to accept a great deal that was not true. Then it dawned on me. Our church board had accepted a growing number of the myths that flourish in the Adventist church in North America. If there were any hope that our local congregation would grow as God desired us to do I would have to expose and eliminate the myths.

## Church growth myths

What is a myth, and what do myths have to do with us as Adventist Christians? For our purpose in this book a myth is this: a belief that is widely held, considered general knowledge, but not actually true.

A myth is often based on truth but has morphed into something quite different from the original. Myths can be elusive, giving just enough of a hint of truth and/or results to lead church members to accept them readily. Clutching this nugget of truth, people will believe deeply, argue adamantly, and deny any illuminations that show the myth for what it really is—a so-called fact that simply is not true.

Myths can be attractive, but in the end they will cause our efforts toward growing the church to produce the same situation that currently exists.

### **We are all disciples**

As Christians we have received and accepted a call to discipleship. The discipleship concept should compel us to share what we know about God. Furthermore, we are Seventh-day Adventists, and the Adventist part of our name signifies our belief in the soon return of Jesus to rescue His people from this weary, dying earth. And so we have a sense of urgency. We teach and preach that people's lives are at stake and that we must be about growing the church. Friends, neighbors, associates, and strangers must be made aware of our Lord's soon return. But is this happening in North America in the Adventist Church?

### **Stagnant growth**

There is a growing frustration with the declining growth rate in the Adventist Church in North America. For the past two decades and longer, it has hovered around 2 percent. The rate of 1.44 percent that we saw in 2004<sup>1</sup> was the lowest since the tumultuous period the church went through in the early 1900s. A century ago the growing church was dealing with A. T. Jones and his attempt to take over the Battle Creek Tabernacle, with John Harvey Kellogg's attempts to seize Battle Creek Sanitarium, and with A. F. Ballenger's attack on the sanctuary doctrine and other issues.

At the same time the church was dealing with the radical changes at Battle Creek

College. With the classics as its central area of study and Bible study almost nonexistent, Battle Creek College had become all but a secular school. Then E. A. Sutherland eliminated study of the classics and made study of the Bible a major component. Manual labor was now part of each student's education, too. By design the college lost its accreditation, and it no longer granted degrees. It was decided to move the college out of the city to the gentle hills and farmland of Berrien Springs, Michigan.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the time and stress of changing the college curriculum and physically moving to another location, the church was hit with another blow. In just a few hours the building of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, also in Battle Creek, was reduced to ashes. It was decided to relocate both the publishing house and the General

Conference offices from Battle Creek to Takoma Park near Washington, D.C.<sup>3</sup> These upheavals were huge events for a relatively small denomination to deal with. We can almost excuse the poor growth rate of the first decade of the twentieth century.

As I looked for answers and discussed the situation with many, I was told variously that the Adventist Church in North America is not growing because the members are asleep, lazy, selfish, secular, materialistic, and even because they lack spirituality. I do not believe this is so! A majority of the members of the churches I have been blessed to pastor are made up of sincere Christians who are willing to give of their time, talents, and resources for both their local church and the worldwide Church. And as I have become aware of the myths Adventists hold and have challenged my church members to let go of them, I have been privileged to see God bless. Significant growth has happened in a number of the Adventist churches I have pastored, and even now substantial growth is happening in several bright spots around North America.

It is important for us to be conscious of the myths to which we cling. Then we must be willing to let them go and so allow for the changes that must occur in our local church culture, making it possible for our churches to grow.

### **Some churches are driven by myth**

The stated intention of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to prepare a people for the soon coming of Jesus.

A church growth myth is a belief that drives the culture of a church in a direction that they do not intend. A myth, sincerely believed and practiced, may still have no good effect on growing a church. When failure occurs, we may develop a fatalist attitude—believing that we were faithful disciples and the result was up to God. At other times myths do have a marginal effect or at least a perceived good result. But this can lead to a false sense that we fulfilled our duty. Worse yet is when the myth brings about the opposite of the desired church growth, for this leads to discouragement, apathy, and a fortress mentality.

It is likely that we hold on to these myths because we fear the vacuum that might occur should we let them go. What, we wonder, would we put in their place? Here's the good news. God Himself will fill the vacuum. God is eager to bless us with something that can take the place of the myth. God will bless and grow His church when we are willing to partner with Him to grow the church as He intended. God is the God of truth, and myths separate us from joining in the activities of the God of truth. As argued in the book *Experiencing God*, it is our job to discern what God is doing and simply join Him in His work.<sup>4</sup> Ellen White restates the same thing in *Christ's Object Lessons*: “As the will of man cooperates with the will of God, it becomes omnipotent. Whatever is to be done at His command may be accomplished in His strength. All His biddings are enablings.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Needed: a discipleship culture**

Of course, often myths are comforting to us, for they grow out of our perception of what our church culture should be. In an attempt to protect the local church culture, its

members, and ourselves from the stress of change, we cling to these unchallenged beliefs. However, within the culture of the North American Adventist Church, a dramatic change is necessary. Our local churches need to move from a membership culture to a discipleship culture.<sup>66</sup> We will never be able to do this unless we release our white-knuckled grip on the comfortable blanket of our commonly held myths.

As you read these myths you may think that it is obvious these are not appropriate for our churches. I would urge you to be a careful student of your church as you read, and I believe you will be surprised how many of these obvious myths are actually a part of the fabric of the culture of your congregation.

Myths can be harmless and they can be damaging. Myths can be dangerous, or even fatal. What myths are we as a church holding on to? Through 20 years of pastoral experience I have tried applying most of the myths I will share in this book, sometimes repeatedly in the face of evidence of the futility of the exercise. I argue that we have an urgent need for a completely new paradigm for the church in North America. There are many myths to lay aside and much to learn about how God actually grows the kingdom. By naming the myths, I hope to open the discussion for the church to find its footing so that it may grow in North America as it is in other parts of the world. God desires this for us as we approach His soon return.

# Myths About Church Facility, Infrastructure, and Location

## Myth 1 - If we build a nice enough church, they will come to worship.

As a young pastor just beginning my ministry I sat one Sabbath in a suburban church on the edge of a large city. This church had a dream. The dream had come about when the congregation of about 50 people had received a gift of a large amount of money as part of a former member's will.

There was great discussion on the most responsible way to use the funds. Should they remodel the old building and use a significant amount of the funds on evangelism in their community? Should they invest and let the funds grow even more? Should they use the funds to educate the children of the church? Should they send the funds overseas and help some struggling mission field? Should they build a new church, a church large enough to accommodate the number of Adventists this large community should actually have?

They chose the last option because they believed Myth 1: if we build, they will come. The new building cost multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars and would potentially seat 400 or more. Ten years later I visited the church, and the attendance on this particular Sabbath was about 50.

Jesus, speaking of Himself, said, "On this rock I will build My church." New Testament Scripture uses the word "church" more than 70 times, but not once in reference to a building. It is always speaking about a group who are together as the people of God. Members of the early church met in homes, courtyards, in caves, by the river—anywhere they could meet in peace and worship God. For several centuries there were no buildings designated as churches, yet the church grew faster without buildings than it ever has since.

Am I advocating that we not build church buildings? Certainly not! But we must realize the purpose of the facilities we build. Buildings are a great tool, but not *the* tool. We are to introduce people to Jesus, not to a building. There are a whole host of tools in your toolbox ready to help you share the truth about a soon-coming Savior—prayer, vision, evangelism, to name a few. You will need them all.

Is God against our building beautiful buildings? No way! Recorded in the Bible are His instructions to the children of Israel for building an awesome portable tabernacle. Read the descriptions in Exodus 25 through 28. God's instructions included rich embroidered tapestries and liberal use of gold, silver, and bronze. The breastpiece of the priest held 12 precious stones, including ruby, topaz, sapphire, and emerald. Later, under God's direction, King Solomon had built one of the most beautiful and expensive structures of its time, the Jerusalem Temple.

If you are in a church that is contemplating building, or if you are in the middle of a building program, I hope you will build the best and most representative building you can. Begin now to plan how you will use this building as a new tool to introduce people to Jesus. However, the greatest tool God has is you and I. As we build relationships with others, an appealing building may help people come to understand the God we worship. This is called discipleship. The church (people) is built one person at a time. It is when people learn to trust us first and then learn of our God that true church growth will take place.



### **Talk About It**

**1.** Should we build new buildings or use our resources in another way? What percentage of your local church budget is used for facility and infrastructure? Is this a healthy use of your money?

**2.** In what ways can a building help grow a church? In what ways is the building not able to grow the church?

**3.** Does your building represent Jesus well? Do you believe that people know more about Jesus from being in your building?

**4.** What do you consider God's greatest evangelistic tool on earth to be?

## Myth 2 - The automobile will go away, and we will become a true community church.

For many years as a local pastor I sat in board meeting after board meeting poring over the demographics of the community in which our church was located. We had drawn a circle on the map enclosing a five-mile radius around the church. It might encompass 20,000 people. That surely was our mission field. How could we reach so many?

A very helpful book that opened my eyes to reality was Lyle Schaller's *The New Revolution*. In it he recalls the time he was asked what he thought his greatest failure might be. As he pondered this question the answer came that he had failed to persuade church leaders “that the automobile was here to stay.”<sup>7</sup> As I deliberated on this statement the truth dawned on me—all of my church family traveled in automobiles to attend the worship service, some from a great distance.

Studies reveal that only about 20 percent of the people at a given worship service in North America travel less than five minutes to church.<sup>8</sup> Eighty percent of my congregation lived outside the circle I'd drawn on the map! I've had church members drive more than an hour each Sabbath to come and worship. No wonder it was difficult for members of our church to develop discipleship relationships within the prescribed circle. As I contemplated this fact I had to agree with Schaller: the automobile *is* here to stay.

At one church where I was pastor—it was in a large city—some of the members drove past one, two, or even more Adventist churches to attend this particular one. And I knew that some people drove right on past our church to attend a different Adventist church. They were not looking for a community-based church, but a church in which they felt comfortable and had developed relationships with other people who attended.

### **Affinity community**

I argue that an affinity community is a more valuable model for today's church. An affinity community is based not on geographic area, but on people going to worship where they feel the most comfortable. While we should continue to educate and model unity and acceptance of all, secular and sinful people (the very people we wish to be a part of our church) are more likely to be able to hear the gospel in their own “language” and in their own cultural and/or subcultural setting. Church conferences often draw lines on a map and tell pastors that this is your territory and that is another pastor's territory, but I believe these should be dotted lines that allow churches with different affinities to reach across a large area and draw in people who connect with them. Culture in North America today is not the melting pot model we spoke of in the past. Today North America is much more a patchwork quilt that, as a whole, is beautiful and useful.

The challenge comes when you are in a small church in a small community a long distance from another Adventist church. Should a community of 5,000 to 10,000 have more than one Adventist church? Before you say no, ask yourself, does the community have more than one grocery store? Why does it? It's because different people prefer one store over another. The reasons will vary—the size of the store, its layout, maybe its specialties.

Think about it. Perhaps even small communities need more than one Adventist church.

I want to suggest that a church should not simply pick a geographical region and attempt to evangelize that area. The leaders of any church should seek to understand whom they will uniquely be able to draw to Jesus because of how they relate culturally, socially, their use of language, and so forth. Not that we should not do cross-cultural evangelism, for we must, but our greatest success will be with people we understand and can befriend. Use the automobile to go wherever these people are. This is being faithful to the command in Matthew 28: Go therefore and make disciples.

### **Talk About It**

**1.**How has the automobile impacted the church? In what ways does this give advantage or disadvantage to the local church?

**2.** What is an affinity-based church? In what ways is this positive and what ways is this a challenge?

**3.** How does the affinity model of church affect our obedience to the command “Go and make disciples”?

**4.** Is your church culturally diverse? Is your community culturally diverse? How might this impact evangelism? What should your church learn and do in regard to this information?

### Myth 3 - If only we had an Adventist hospital or institution near our church, then we could really do big things for God.

While in school studying for a B.A. in theology, I worked evenings doing maintenance at a nearby Adventist hospital. It was a good place to work. In addition to a friendly working environment I could get vegetarian meals in its cafeteria. The staff understood Christian values and the facility had a Sabbath atmosphere about it. It was a large hospital, and a large portion of the employees was not Seventh-day Adventist. The hospital had a nice chapel, a very small one, but, of course, no baptistery. And I did not find the institution to be very effective in direct evangelism. While it did build goodwill in the community (and in some minds occasionally bad will), I never met anyone who said they had become an Adventist because of the hospital.

I once pastored a church that was only a few blocks from the church conference office. The people who worked there were lovely Christians who had a passion to win others to Jesus. I was glad to have them as members of my congregation. But in my four and a half years at that church I knew of no one who became an Adventist because of the conference office. There was no baptistery at the conference office; it was at the local church. We, including some who worked at the church office, used the baptistery in the church many times. During my years there we built relationships with people and brought them to meet God at the church, not at the office.

Those who believe they need an Adventist institution nearby to grow a church either do not understand or they are dodging their personal responsibility. We cannot be disciples by proxy. We cannot rely on things or institutions. Hospitals, offices, or universities do not make disciples; disciples make disciples. If you live near an Adventist institution that has a good reputation in the community, it can be an asset. But do not be fooled into believing this is a must.

In 2000 I did a study to understand better what it takes to grow an Adventist church of beyond 200 in attendance. My first step was to seek out Adventist churches in North America that had between 300 and 400 in attendance. For the purpose of my study the church could not be near an Adventist institution, because institutions do draw Adventists to the area to work at the institution. What I found surprised me. Sixty percent of the churches I used in my study were found in small cities or towns. Now remember, these were churches that had 300 to 400 in the pews every Sabbath. It became clear to me that larger Adventist churches can and do grow even though they are in small communities far from any SDA institution.

If your church is waiting to grow until there is an Adventist institution nearby, there is good news! You don't have to wait any longer. You *must* not wait any longer. Again and again God has shown that He is willing and able to bless small churches in small communities. He will help them to become significant as they share the gospel—making one new disciple at a time. Let your church (that means your people) and its baptistery become the most significant institution in your whole community.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Is an Adventist institution a help or a hindrance to growing the church? What do you think? Explain your answer.
- 2.** Why is the baptistery built at the church and not at the institution?
- 3.** Explain the meaning of this statement: We cannot be disciples by proxy.
- 4.** What might be some of the advantages of being a large church in a small community?

## Myth 4 - Having enough parking spaces is not all that important.

I stood in front of the church that I pastored. It was in a suburban setting on the edge of a large city, and many of our members felt that God wanted the church to grow to two to three times its current size. But as I surveyed the parking lot that Sabbath morning I saw that it was already full. Some of our members and even I myself had parked across the street in the parking lot of an office building. It wasn't far, but when the weather was inclement it was not a fun hike. On more than one occasion I'd watched with a heavy heart as a car slowly maneuvered through our full parking lot. Not finding a place to park, its occupants exited the lot, never to be seen again.

In the history of the Christian church the need for an adequate parking lot is a recent development. It began some years ago when we needed one parking space for every two to three families. Eventually the needs changed, until each family in the church needed a place to park. But things have changed again! Today Dad drove in early for an elders' meeting. Mom, in her SUV, got there just in time for Sabbath school, and the kids drove themselves because they're going on a youth outing after church. Three cars for one family! Three parking spaces just to have three to four people in church!

How many spaces do you need to plan for? Carl George and Warren Bird advise churches to divide the average attendance by two and a half persons per car. If your attendance includes a lot of single adults, the ratio is one and a half people per car.<sup>9</sup> If you're in an urban area where most people use public transportation, you are the rare exception to the rule. Today, if you wish to really grow your church, you need to have adequate parking. Both visitors and members need to easily find a place to park. Remember, the automobile is here to stay. We must accommodate it so that people can come and meet with God and His family.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Have the quality and capacity of your church parking lot made a difference in your attendance? How might it affect your church's health?
- 2.** Should parking spaces closest to the church be reserved? If so, for whom? Why?
- 3.** Does your church have sufficient parking? If not, in what creative ways might you increase your capacity?
- 4.** In what ways is the parking lot an evangelistic tool for the church?

## Myth 5 - Enough seating is not all that important. People can squeeze together or use the seats on the front row.

It is disheartening to sit on the church platform and see someone you've never had in church before poke their head in one door and then another, looking for a place to sit. The rows aren't packed, but the Smith family with their two toddlers needs some extra space around them and, of course, most of the church members sit toward the back. You watch with something like pain as the visitor takes a few steps down the aisle, pauses, and looks to the right, where Mrs. Jones is saving a place for her sister. The stranger turns around, still searching. You can't see from the rostrum, but you know it's likely that a sweater, a Bible, and a weekly church paper takes pew space beyond Mr. Green and his wife. When it's obvious that the search is futile, you see your visitor step to the back again. You glance at the church bulletin. When you look back, the visitor is gone.

After church you ask the deacon about the stranger and find out that they'd not found a seat, so they'd left. The deacon kind of shrugs, "I pointed out that there were some empty places toward the front," he says. "In fact, the front two rows were empty. I guess they didn't really want to stay."

Here's another scenario, one I witnessed to my distress. A guest is sitting quietly in the church when one of the "saints" comes up to her and announces that she is sitting in their seat. It's where they *always* sit. They couldn't possibly sit on the opposite side or one or two rows ahead or behind. I watched in horror as the guest got up and left, never to be seen in our church again. Is this discipleship? No! This is the membership culture at its worst. This is a membership culture that says: "I pay my dues. I am a member, and I deserve to be treated to some perks. This is my seat." May we all be willing to become true disciples and make all our guests feel welcome to come and meet God with us.

You may see empty seats in your church and so think that you're in good shape for a few guests. But those seats should be within easy reach, making it possible for the guests to be seated without drawing attention to themselves. More often than not guests arrive late when it's harder to find a place easy to slip into. Often, wanting to remain anonymous and unnoticed, they prefer a back row so they may leave before the service is over if they feel the need. It surprises most church members to learn that their church can be too full for guests even when several seats are empty.

Win Arn, in *The Church Ratio Book*, states that if 87 percent of the seats are full at worship, attendance will begin to plateau.<sup>10</sup> You will be discouraging new guests from coming back. This study was done in 1990, and I personally believe that it would be closer to 80 percent today.

If you are finding it difficult to have enough seats for the people God is sending to your church, praise God for such a problem! Churches that have struggled with this have handled it in very creative ways. The best long-term answer is to develop a building program, because the crowded conditions are a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work and will be sending even more. In the meantime, train your hosts in the fine art of helping visitors discreetly

find and fill the few remaining seats. If there is room, extra chairs can be set up in the back or down the aisle. Some churches open their foyer doors and place chairs there. Still other churches have opted to go to two services on Sabbath morning or to plant a new congregation. Whatever the need, God will help you to make your facility adequate for the people He intends to send your way.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** How does the lack of sufficient seating affect church members? How does it affect guests?
- 2.** Do you tend to sit in the same place at church each Sabbath? Has anyone taken “your seat” in the past? How did you react? How should you react?
- 3.** What percent of the seats are filled in your church on Sabbath? Are the empty seats near the front or rear of the church? How can we educate members to leave the empty seats toward the back for guests?
- 4.** If you are crowded in your church seating, what are some short-term ways to alleviate this? What are some long-term answers?



## Myth 6 - It's not important if children's Sabbath school classrooms are overcrowded.

Have you ever gone to a restaurant and found that the wait to be seated was more than an hour? I have, and I determined that the next time I went there I'd go on a different day or at a different time. Fortunately restaurants are open long hours all week long. But Sabbath school is only "open" for about an hour on Saturday mornings. Lack of space in children's departments can discourage attendance just as quickly as a lack of seating in the main worship room.

Imagine a Sabbath morning at the home of an occasional attendee or potential church guests. The parents have had a long and tiring week at work. But at 8:00 a.m. their 5- and 7-year-olds come bounding into their bedroom with smiles and pleas for Mom and Dad to take them to Sabbath school at your church. If all has gone well in past visits, the parents will tend to get up and take the children to church. But if the Sabbath school room was overcrowded and their child had difficulty finding a chair, the response might be "Let's wait until next week" or "We'll go in time for the worship service." Of course, if the children did not have a good experience, the scene will *not* include the children begging the parents to take them to church.

### **Connecting kids to Jesus connects their parents too**

The good news of having great Sabbath schools for children and youth is that they tend to bring their parents with them. This is a win-win situation. Children and youth get connected with Jesus and His family, and parents get connected with Jesus and His family. I have heard the argument that the parents should be strong enough in their relationship with God to come under any circumstances, and, of course, that's true. But it is the spiritually weak that God has called us to seek out and introduce to Jesus. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mark 2:17). It is more likely that people will become spiritually strong if they are in Sabbath school and church on a regular basis.

I was visiting with a group of elders one day when the discussion turned to the children's Sabbath school divisions. One elder suggested, "We should work to have good Sabbath schools. After all, children are the future of the church." But another disagreed. "Children are not the future of the church," she said. "They're part of the present church!" The second speaker was right. Children and youth are valuable disciples of Jesus now.

Here is a suggestion for your nominating committee and its relationship to youth and kids. If you wait to select leaders for the Sabbath school divisions after the most gifted people have already been placed in other positions, your Sabbath school ministry will suffer. I suggest that your nominating committee first choose leaders for the children's Sabbath school divisions. Putting your strong leaders there will strengthen your church and improve the classes you offer to families.

Whether your church is large or small, the facilities for children and youth are important. Are you low on personnel? Do you lack resources? Pray and seek answers from God who is eager to give good gifts to His children.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** How does the capacity of the children's departments affect your church's health?
- 2.** How does the capacity of the children's departments affect guest care?
- 3.** How can adequate children's department capacity affect evangelism?
- 4.** How might Sabbath school be used to teach even young children to be disciples of Jesus?

# Myths About Church Family Life

## Myth 7 - Tasks are more important than people.

To Jesus, people were more important than tasks. Therefore, people should be more important to us. A great example is given in Luke 10:38-42. The story unfolds as Jesus is visiting the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. Martha, eager to provide a good meal for her guest, is working in the kitchen. Mary, on the other hand, is sitting at Jesus' feet and soaking up every word He says. Some time must have passed, for Martha grew weary and perhaps even irritable. There must have still been a lot to do for she left her cooking to step into the living room. "Jesus, tell Mary to come help me," she said.

Jesus' reply shows that to Him people were more important than tasks. "Martha, Martha," He said, "you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Jesus shows that a relationship with Him is the most important thing in the universe. That shouldn't surprise us because in the beginning we humans were created to be companions of God. The plan of redemption is to restore us to our place as friends of the God of the universe.

This is an important biblical principle that will change the paradigm on several of the myths we will visit in this book. The Scriptures continually show that the mercy of God is in favor of preserving relationships with Himself. The love of God shows Him to be an indulgent Father. Here are a few examples.

The Lord created Adam and Eve and gave them a garden home. They could eat of any tree that grew there, except one. The warning was "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." But Adam and Eve lived far beyond that day. God loved so much He kept them alive for many years. Eventually, He would die in their place. We, too, live today because God is a God of relationships and people are important to Him. His love and His death to save us from our sin are for men and women just like you and me.

David, while running from Saul, was hungry and ate some of the consecrated bread kept in the sanctuary, though it was unlawful for anyone but the priest to eat it. Jesus later retold this story to some Pharisees as the rationale for it being OK for the disciples to pick and eat grain in a field on the Sabbath (1 Sam. 21:1-6; Mark 2:23-28). People and relationships are far more important to God than rules and laws. Jesus went so far as to tell them "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath."

We could mention the woman trapped in adultery (John 8:3-11), or Naaman, who when asking forgiveness because one of his duties was going into a pagan temple and bowing down with the king, was told, "Go in peace" (2 Kings 5:18, 19). These and many other examples show that God is not task-oriented, but people-oriented. Relationships with human beings are of the highest priority to God. It is in relationship with God that we find salvation.

What does all this have to do with your local church today? We are to follow the

example of God and make people and relationships our highest priority. This is where the phrase “church growth” often gets its bad press. Sometimes looking for principles and applying them in the hope that they’ll help grow the church lowers new members to not much more than a commodity, a resource to grow the church larger.

In its correct usage, “church growth” is not a science in which you discover the “laws” and apply them for a predictable result. Church growth in its godly form is an art. To be an artist is to be gifted. To be able to grow the church is to be gifted by God. To be a true disciple is to have gifts and power from above. We cannot change one human heart by our own abilities and talents. We can’t even change our own hearts. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). We are to grow the church, yes, but that is only accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit as we build relationships and build people into disciples through our relationship with Christ, and theirs.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** How has God worked in your life in a more relational way than a task-oriented approach? What does being the companion of God mean to you?
- 2.** What does it mean when we say that God is an indulgent Father? Why is this important to you? How has God been indulgent in your life?
- 3.** The example of Jesus teaches us how to relate to guests in our church. How does this affect our approach to tasks in the church?
- 4.** Is discipleship a task or a relationship? Explain your answer.

## Myth 8 - What church members do is more important than who they are.

**I was** at a church business meeting in a small rural church, attempting to share some principles on making disciples. The dozen or so people in attendance felt a great need to have an evangelist come to their church for a series of meetings. I was glad they wanted to grow their small church but dismayed at their motive. They said, “We need to do evangelism and get more members because we’re having trouble paying the light and heat bills, and we need more people to run a Sabbath school program for the three children.”

What they were really telling me was *what people do is more important than who they are*. Their purpose for having people join their church was to have them give offerings, help with potluck, work with the children, mow the lawn, and paint the fellowship hall. They did not verbalize the following, but I am sure they would like to have added: “And if they do come, we only want them to bring resources. I hope they will be quiet in church, and not have noisy children or any bad habits. They surely better stay out of my personal life. It’s complicated enough already. But for their resources we can put up with them.”

Why are we so judgmental about others in the church? It is because we have forgotten—or maybe never learned—that the Lord is a God of relationships. I even had someone quote Matthew 5:48 to me: “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Then the person said, “The church has to be perfect before Jesus can come back, and new people keep messing this up!”

In its context Matthew 5:48 is speaking of our love for each other. It’s saying that our love is to be like the Father’s love. It speaks of perfect love. This matches the paradigm we have been sharing here. Perfect love will bring about authentic relationships with less than perfect people and will develop us and our church into a culture of discipleship instead of our merely being members. To God it is more important who you know (God) than what you do. God knows that what you do will change when you truly know Him as your Lord, Savior, and Friend.

Of course, we should evangelize our families, friends, neighborhoods, and communities. But let’s make it for the right reasons. As we become disciples of Jesus we become like Him. Then His love will spill over and flow out of our lives. This will draw people to Jesus. We need to learn and exercise our discipleship skills; then we will make new friends and have relationships that will last for eternity.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** What is the motive behind your church’s desire to grow? Is this healthy? Why or why not?
- 2.** What should be your motive for wanting to bring new members into your church?
- 3.** In what ways does our motive affect our ability to draw new members into our church?

**4.** Is there a standard for people who attend your church to uphold? Should there be? If so, what is it? If not, why not?

Myth 9 - It is necessary to set a particular standard beyond the gospel to which people must rise before they can become an integral part of the church.

We must uphold the standards. Your hair must be longer!” It was 1961, and the unfortunate student stood before the academy school faculty. He had been called in because his hairstyle was too radical; he'd had a barber cut it in a flattop. Now he was being threatened with being suspended until his hair grew out.

Now fast-forward to 1967. I carefully read the student handbook and descriptions of the hairstyles unacceptable at the school. Flattops, butches, Princetons (real short, slightly longer in front)—all were strictly forbidden. Fine with me. I wanted my hair down to my shoulders. New rules were quickly put in place. No hair on the collar, over the ears, or below the eyebrows. Times had changed, and there were new rules. If your hair did not meet the guidelines, you were not to have the full privileges of the “good” students.

What about the church today? How do we deal with new members who are not culturally Adventist? They may fully accept salvation, the Sabbath, the condition of humans in death, the Second Coming, the sanctuary doctrine, and all the rest of the 28 fundamental beliefs. They may bring friends to church, beginning the practice of being a disciple. They don't yet speak the Adventist lingo, they still eat meat, and they come to church in casual dress (as post moderns are likely to do). Are we uncomfortable with these things? Can we accept new members who aren't quite like us?

Too often I have seen a person such as this placed on probation to prove themselves before they're allowed to be an integral part of the life and leadership of the church. They become second-class citizens of the church. Feeling their distance from the “old-timers” like you and me, they eventually drop out of church. And the members are reassured that it was right not to trust that person. He or she just never fit in. The church members do not realize they created a self-fulfilling prophecy. They created the very thing they feared.

It seems that 50 years ago the predominant question asked by those who came to investigate Adventism was “What do you believe?” If someone could understand and believe our doctrines, usually they were willing to join the church. Today, in our postmodern world, this has been turned on its head. The predominant (unspoken but very real) question asked today is “Can I belong?” Post moderns want to know that they belong before they will believe.

This is a powerful insight. It can work for good or evil. Some have marveled at the percentage of highly educated people who died in the Branch Davidian fires near Waco, Texas, in 1993. These adherents to David Koresh's ideology felt they belonged; therefore, they were willing to believe anything. How important it is to help the people coming to our church to feel that they belong so they can believe the great truths we have to offer. How vital that all feel they belong!

This means we need to facilitate less than perfect people coming into and being a part of



the church. People should be *expected*, not *suspected*. If they know they belong it's likely that they will embrace the truths found in God's Word. The church is a hospital where people are to find healing, not a museum where we display saints. Hospitals can be messy places when the battle to save a life is raging.

Am I suggesting that you place brand-new Christians and Adventists into top leadership in the church? Of course not. This would be foolish and dangerous for the new disciple. But there are places of leadership appropriate for the gifts and abilities of the new church member. They should be mainstreamed as an integral part of the church as soon as possible. They should be mentored and trained for responsibility to God and His church.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Is there a standard for people to join your church? Should there be? If so, what is it? Is there a difference between biblical standards and cultural standards for church membership? How do we determine the difference?
- 2.** Can standards for membership change over time? If so, in what ways? Who decides?
- 3.** Does the postmoderns' question "Can I belong?" challenge us to relate differently to biblical and cultural standards today? How so, or not so?
- 4.** What are some ways we can make new people feel they belong without compromising on biblical standards?

## Myth 10 - We will just wait until the day comes when our youth and young adults can lead out in our church.

In a church of about 100 members I saw a scene that is likely repeated in Adventist churches across North America every week. You could see a direct correlation between the closeness to the front of the church and the color of the hair. The very grayest hair was up on the platform and in the front rows. The long hair, the streaked hair, the spiked hair, and the buzz cuts were found on the back row. On the back row the young were restless; on the platform the gray heads were oblivious. One of the deacons, no doubt feeling self-conscious about the row of restless youth, whispered to me, "They'll outgrow it someday." I thought, *"That's true. They likely will, but what they outgrow may not be their restlessness, but the church itself."*

Our children, teens, and young adults should be a part of today's church—yours, and mine—and they are generally willing to be. They must feel they belong, just as we do. And truly, they can lead *now*. A real sense of belonging is a key to their long term believing in the gospel the church is attempting to share with them.

I believe that the youth of today are more inclined to spirituality and are more serious about being involved in the church than were the youth with whom I grew up. I find that youth have a sense of urgency and want to be part of what happens in the church. However, they are not as interested in accepting all the Adventist cultural trappings that are demanded of them. Why should they accept these cultural things? These haven't yet moved the older generation into the Kingdom and can be part of the myths about growing the church. They are membership based, not discipleship based.

Adventists today find themselves needing to learn cross-cultural evangelism to reach postmodern America, and our youth are better tuned to understand how to do this. If we have any hope of reaching the culture and society in today's world, our teens and young adults need to be an integral part of the outreach to these people.

Do we dare wait another day, month, or year before we invite the youth into the mainstream of church life? They must be incorporated into the life of the church now if we want them to be a part of the church in the future. Children and teens can and should be a part of all the different aspects of the church. They can be mentored and trained for assistance and leadership in both the Sabbath schools and the worship services. They can plan and exercise their God-given call to be and make disciples.

When you meet with your nominating committee, don't forget to consider the younger members of your church family. While you do not want to give them a responsibility without support and training—something you do not want to do with adults, either—children and teens will bring great energy to a ministry in your church. Children and youth can make powerful disciples today. Sabbath school is not about babysitting. It is about preparing disciples to share Jesus with their world and make more disciples.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Where are the youth of your church today? Back row, front row, platform? How can you help them move forward—both literally and figuratively?
- 2.** Why is it important for the children and teens to be a meaningful part of today's church?
- 3.** Why do youth today often resist or reject Adventist culture?
- 4.** In what ways might youth as disciples be better suited to evangelize postmodern people? Is it safe for them to do this? Why or why not?

## Myth 11 - Women need to know their place, doing such things as VBS and women's ministries.

Recently I visited an academy on Career Day to share about working for the church in pastoral ministry. About 30 students came to my session. When I asked how many were interested in the possibility of pastoral ministry, 10 raised their hands. Seven of the 10 were young women. Was I seeing the future of the church? If we are going to expand discipleship ministry in North America, we must allow all whom God calls to ministry to be involved. This includes some incredibly talented, dedicated, spiritual young women. Time is short, and we must all work together to prepare a people for the soon coming of the Lord.

I know of a young theology student who, for the student pastor portion of the program, was assigned to a conservative church about 10 miles from the college. The student would spend the next semester as a student pastor, helping and learning at the church. Now, this church was used to having student pastors. They'd seen many of them come and go, and mostly they were greatly appreciated. But this time it was different. As usual, the new student pastor was introduced during the church service, but what a stir the introduction caused in the congregation. In fact, that very day an emergency church board meeting was called immediately after the worship service.

The problem? The new student pastor was female. This church had not had a woman speak from their pulpit, ever, and it was not going to start now. A delegation went to the conference office to protest. After long negotiations the young woman was allowed to stay, *if* she would continue to remember her “place.”

Undaunted, the new student pastor went about doing ministry: children's Sabbath schools, young adult groups, visitation of members, Bible studies, and so on. During the time of this assignment the local conference hired her to be a part of their pastoral team and felt it best to move her from this church to another for her internship. But by then she had so thoroughly won the hearts of her congregation that another emergency board meeting was called—and another delegation sent to the conference office. Now they wanted the student to stay and, in fact, said that she could do anything she wanted—even preach from the pulpit.

This congregation had seen that serving God as a pastor is not about whether it is a man or a woman in the pulpit, nor is it about women's ordination. Instead, it is about growing the kingdom. They could not deny what the Holy Spirit was doing in the life of this student and in the life of their church through her ministry. And they wanted to keep her.

When we as Seventh-day Adventists reject women in the various ministries of our church, we stray a long way from our beginnings. After all, one of the major founders of this church was female, Ellen White, and over the decades many other women have served in dramatic ways. Also, nearly two thirds of today's church members are women,<sup>11</sup> and more than half of the potential for evangelism out in the community are women. What seems to happen in some places is a false reading of cultural norms, past and present, and then inserting these into the church.

The apostle Paul was inspired to write: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27, 28). From an evangelistic standpoint, culture must be taken into account. God calls for us to make disciples, and we do not want the cultural nearsightedness of a particular cultural group to stop the gospel from reaching people. We need to work within cultures to share the gospel. Yes, there are times and places where only men can best share. However, in most of North America I would argue that this is no longer the case. Everyone can be effective in sharing, and God calls for all of us to fulfill the gospel commission and be true disciples. Yet some He calls to be much more: special ministers of the Word. God has called and still calls both men and women. I have no right to tell God whom He can and cannot call to minister for Him.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Are women called to be disciples of Jesus? Is the call the same, or is it different than the call for men?
- 2.** How do you relate to women who believe that God has called them to ministry? Do you agree with the Adventist Church that encourages women into ministry and leadership? Why or why not?
- 3.** Are there ways, times, and places that women may be able to minister better than men? Explain.
- 4.** Does your local church discourage or encourage women in ministry? What are some ways that your local church can support, mentor, and equip all in ministry, including women?

## Myth 12 - Our children will automatically become Adventists. It's genetic.

As a child I attended an Adventist grade school that had four large classrooms. In my two-grade classroom were about 30 students. Of those 30, only two besides me are still in the church. I also spent my high school years at an Adventist academy. The ratio of those who remained in the church to those who left is not much better for those in my graduating class than it was for the kids in my grade school. In the same way, the ratios are not promising for those who attend public school, either. Satan is alive and well and working hard on the lives of our children and teens. By the time they are young adults, an alarming number of today's youth are no longer in the church.

Our greatest evangelistic efforts should be for our children. George Barna researched ages of children and youth and the rates they are accepting Christianity. It is clear that children aged 5 to 12 are the most likely to accept Jesus as their Savior and remain in the church.<sup>12</sup> This may seem young, but these are the facts. By the time a youth is nearing adulthood they are past the prime time when we can most easily reach them for Christ.

Someone once asked me if I was a first-generation Adventist. "No," I proudly responded, "I can trace back and show that I am a fifth-generation Adventist." But as I thought about this it dawned on me that there is no such thing as a fifth-generation Adventist. There are only first-generation Christians and Adventists. Each one of us must make up our own mind and decide to follow Christ and be a part of His church. I am a first-generation Adventist, and if you have chosen to be a part of this church, so are you.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** If you attended an Adventist school, what percent of your classmates remain in the church today? Why is this so? Why do you think that a large number of today's youth do not remain in the church? What is the cure?
- 2.** When you consider approaching a young person and asking them to accept Jesus as their Savior, what do you think is the most appropriate age? Explain your answer.
- 3.** Who is responsible for asking young people to accept Jesus? How can the church see that every child and youth has an invitation to accept Jesus in his or her life?
- 4.** Does your local church do a good job at helping young people to accept Jesus as their Savior? What is now being done and what should be being done?

Myth 13 - In order to talk appropriately as an Adventist, we need to use our own particular vocabulary.

As I said in an earlier chapter, while studying for my undergraduate degree I worked evenings at a local hospital. I was in the maintenance department and spent the evenings painting, changing light bulbs, doing small plumbing jobs or electrical projects, and a myriad of other tasks. I carpooled to work with a load of other hospital employees who happened to be nurses. As we drove the 25 minutes home after work they'd be debriefing their evening shift, and I'm not sure if they were even speaking English. The terminology and language was that unfamiliar to me. I felt like an outsider. On a couple of occasions I said something like "Hey, are you guys interested in the water test I did on the boiler this evening?" or "Did any of you know that the electrical system in the OR is an isolated ground system, two 55-volt lines, no connection to the electrical ground in the rest of the building?"

My questions were met with an uncomfortable silence. Then they resumed talking as if I'd said nothing at all.

What does my experience say about how we talk around our visitors or new members in our churches? Do we expect them to struggle to learn our dialect? If you use a lot of in- group language or abbreviations, are you really communicating?

"Let's go to vespers. There's going to be a group from CUC who will talk about the Spirit of Prophecy and what it says about our Dorcas work."

"Well, Joseph Bates had a lot to say about the Sabbath!" *Joseph who?*

"Have you heard the latest from the NAD? There's a lot going on between them and the GC!"

"A bunch of kids from AUC, PUC, and SWAU are going on a Maranatha trip."

To the new person in our midst, this sounds like a foreign language. We should not expect visitors or new members to learn our dialect before they can converse with us.

The Sabbath school class and the sermon are another two places we should be careful of our terminology so that we actually communicate with those in attendance. My rule of thumb is always to preach so the sermon will be beneficial for the first-time attendee in my congregation. I want them to understand and see a clear picture of God. At times, I do use some theological terms, perhaps "theophany" or "hermeneutics," for example. These terms are appropriate for a sermon, but I always explain what they mean. This is true of strictly Adventist titles and abbreviations, too. I can use them if I explain them. Do we not expect our members to be disciples and bring guests to church? Then we should teach and preach for the guests we believe to be present.

### **Talk About It**

**1.** Can you think of some words or terms commonly used in your church that likely are understood only by Adventists?

**2.** If you are someone who is relatively new to the church, please share your experience in learning the Adventist dialect.

**3.** How good is your local church at making guests comfortable with what is said and preached? How could this be improved?

**4.** How could this principle of careful explanation of words be used when guests observe activities that are culturally Adventist? Foot washing, perhaps.



## Myth 14 - There's only one kind of Sabbath school class appropriate for our adult church members.

Can you imagine going to a grocery store and encountering only one kind of each item: only bananas, no other fruit; only onions, no other vegetables; only one kind of breakfast cereal; just one type of bread? The toothpaste is not your brand, but there's only one kind. Everyone is to wash his or her clothes with one kind of detergent. The store sells only combs, no brushes. You may say that all that would be sufficient, and yes, people would not starve. Teeth and clothes would be clean, and hair would more or less be in place. But in today's society people want and expect more! We may be spoiled, but it is the culture in which we live, and this is the culture in which the church must be prepared to minister. The grocery stores that have the greatest variety of choices for the customer are the ones that keep planting new stores.

This is the society in which we must share the gospel. This postmodern culture expects a wide range of choices. What better place for them to learn than in the Sabbath school. This great invention that we borrowed from denominations that began before we did can be one of the best evangelistic tools we have. Here people can have appropriate study of God's Word, Bibles in hand.

If you visit a grade school classroom, you will find the teachers using several ways to help students learn a concept. They may verbally tell their students about the nutrients in the earth. Students may be assigned to read about the ways a farmer plants and grows crops. The teacher may have some shoeboxes of soil for students to run their hands through; what better way to learn the difference between rich loam, sandy soil, and clay! Students may even plant seeds in a schoolyard garden. Then they can see the baby plants break through the dirt. They can water and cultivate the growing plants, and eventually pick the harvest.

The best teachers will have a multitude of ways for students to learn. So it must be in our adult Sabbath schools.

One size does not fit all. Because of different learning styles, we need different types of Sabbath schools. In one of the churches that I pastored more than 250 adults attended each Sabbath morning, so we could easily offer several types of Sabbath schools. Around

50 people attended a class in the sanctuary where the teacher lectured. The students listened, and were blessed. Across the hall was a class of about 30 who sat in a circle. There the lively discussion bounced back and forth like a ball, and they were blessed. A couple classes met in smaller rooms. These used a small group model where relationships were key in learning about Scripture and God. These small groups chose to study materials other than the regular Sabbath school lesson quarterly.

One small class met to exegete Scripture. Of them we joked that in three months they were on the fourth word of verse 3 of chapter 1! Still another class wanted to do more than study Scripture. They wanted to do something about what they were learning, so some Sabbaths and often during the week they were out as a group doing ministry in the community. And our young adults created a class that often met at the church, but sometimes met in a nearby

park.

In reality, most of the churches in North America do not have the people, infrastructure, or resources to run such a variety of classes. Some churches are a small group in themselves—12 people or less. They should shine as that small group, and can bring different styles of teaching into the group. That way they will meet the needs or learning styles of all the group members. The average church of 30 or more in attendance should certainly be able to have at least two Sabbath school classes. I would recommend that these be of different styles.

We worship a God of enormous variety. We see it in the multitude of things He created. An abundance of different foods, trees of all sizes and shapes, insects, flowers, mountains, plains, rivers, lakes, and birds that sing a thousand different songs. God created people in diversity. Each of us is unique, and our relationship to God is nurtured in different ways. We should do our best to offer a variety of options for our members and guests.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** The society we live in seeks and expects variety. How can your local church take advantage of this, especially using the Sabbath school?
- 2.** Rate your Sabbath schools in your church on a scale of 1 to 10. How well are you doing with variety for different people and their different interests and learning styles? How might you improve?
- 3.** Is your church small? How do you offer variety in your context as a small church?
- 4.** Share a theology of diversity and variety. What from Scriptures will support the theological model you share?

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Myth 15 - Pastors can effectively handle two, three, or four churches spread over a large area by themselves. Church members don't need to help.

The church board I was about to meet with had gathered to discuss their need of a new pastor. The previous one had been there about four years and had accepted a call to another district in another state. As the meeting began one elder asked, "Could the conference give us a pastor all to ourselves so that we don't have to share our leader with two other churches? That way we could grow!"

I've heard this same pleading question many times and don't know how to answer it. There are no right answers to wrong questions, and this is the wrong question. We will attempt to ask the right question in a moment.

As a denomination we have chosen not to follow the congregational model that many other denominations use. Rather, we have a panoptic<sup>13</sup> model designed not to leave any church without pastoral presence. This has brought a great deal of strength, especially to smaller rural churches. It has also brought a great deal of stress to the pastors who serve in this system. One of the biggest challenges an Adventist minister has is to attempt to pastor two, three, or four churches spread over a large geographical area. Interestingly enough, this huge challenge is usually given to our least-experienced pastors. Go figure.

One reason this is such a challenge to pastors and a concern to laypeople is the consumer attitude that has developed in North American churches. Now, this is not just selfish people wanting their way. Not at all. The consumer attitude has become a part of the fabric, the very culture, of the church. It is based on the membership paradigm, instead of a discipleship paradigm that would ask the right question. The consumer/membership model says: I paid my dues (tithe and offerings); therefore, I should get benefits. This includes a full-time pastor for my congregation. However, the discipleship model says: We need to do what is best for the fulfillment of the gospel commission.

The question must not be: Could the conference give us a pastor all to ourselves? Instead, the question needs to be: How can we be of service to help our shared pastor be successful, and how can we develop a discipleship culture in our local church so all members are part of productive ministry?

One time as I was sitting in a pastors' meeting I heard the conference president share a rather lengthy multipage job description for the pastors in that conference. After the meeting I went up and asked the president if I could share with him the job description I'd been working with in my ministry. I was given a cautious nod, so I said, "My job as a pastor in the local Seventh-day Adventist church is first to help the local church discover God's vision for that local church—not my vision, not the elders' vision, not the deacons' vision, but God's. Next, I am to keep the church on task to fulfill that vision. Third, I will develop leaders, and fourth, I am to make sure that they are successful in their ministries. After that, my ministerial duties are done." I was quick to add, "As a layperson I do visit in hospitals, give Bible studies, counsel people, and so forth, but my ministerial duties are to make disciples, and make them successful."

He replied, “I can live with that.”

We must move to a paradigm that believes we are all ministers and disciples in the church. The pastor is to lead, train, and mentor ministry. He or she is not to be the sole doer of ministry in the church. If the pastor is the only minister, the church can grow only slowly and only to a small size.

One other concept needs to be introduced here. There is a well-documented limit regarding how many people one minister can effectively pastor. Literature on this topic repeatedly shows an average, and the recommended rule of thumb is one full-time equivalent staff member for each 100 to 150 people in attendance at worship services.<sup>14</sup> This 150 is the upper limit of people in the care of one pastor. More than that, it is time to have one or more associates if a congregation or district wants to grow.

I know the arguments put forth about our “pastors hovering over the churches.” Often someone shares a remark by A. G. Daniells, made when he was General Conference president: “As late as 1912 we still did not have settled ministers in our churches.”<sup>15</sup> But to place this statement in context, the lowest decadal growth rate in the North American Division was the decade prior to Daniells’ 1912 statement.

Something that conference leaders will need to face is the need to work toward a ratio of 150 to 1. This will give the best potential for growth. Of course, you could have 10 full-time pastors in every church and still not have growth if the ministry is not used properly and a culture of discipleship is not developed for all members.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Does your church have sufficient pastoral coverage? Why or why not?
- 2.** In what ways is the Adventist system of pastoral coverage superior to other systems? What are its weaknesses?
- 3.** Is your home church a membership or a discipleship culture? How do you know? What are the indicators?
- 4.** What is the job description for your pastor? What should it be? Have we become too pastor-dependent? How can you as a disciple support and aid your pastor so that he or she is a success in your church?

## Myth 16 - You don't need to plan for worship. It will happen naturally.

The church board was having a heated argument, and the topic guaranteed it would stay that way. The loud voices were discussing worship, and the argument concerned the style of worship that should be acceptable in this local church. Someone had suggested we introduce a few praise songs into the service and also that we practice the worship service before Sabbath morning. This brought alarm to several of the saints. They began to argue against any new changes to the worship service. Concern was expressed not only for the proposed new songs, but also about doing any specific planning for the worship service. This, they were afraid, would not leave the Holy Spirit free to work on Sabbath morning. This ideology was trying to put God in a box!

There is no topic that seems to stir the emotions as the topic of worship. Worship of God *is* very important, and should excite the emotions. After all, it is the all-powerful God of the universe that we are invited to worship. But more than once I have been questioned when I proposed a need for a high degree of planning of the worship service. The concern expressed again and again is that such planning does not leave room for the Holy Spirit to work on Sabbath morning. Let me tell you that Sabbath morning is not the only time the Holy Spirit works! Experience has shown me that the Holy Spirit works for weeks in advance as a worship service is planned and practiced. Then when you get to the actual worship service, the Holy Spirit can work in an even more powerful way on the individual hearts of the congregation as they share in the focus and flow of the worship.

We were created for worship. We should do it well.

In a few weeks my son is getting married. It will be a great occasion as he and his bride walk down the aisle and exchange vows. It is a very sacred and holy occasion. Have they left everything up to chance? Has planning been avoided? Not at all! There have been hours and hours, day after day of planning, calling, reviewing the music, the order of the ceremony, who will speak and when.

How much more important is it to plan the worship service during which we come to meet with our God? There is nothing more important, and nothing should be left to chance. God is worthy of receiving our best. The people who come expecting to meet with the Lord need to know that it will happen. Guests that God sends as potential for the kingdom need to hear clearly that God loves them. Guests need to know that there is nothing more important to us than our time with God. Let us give our best time, talent, and preparation for the sake of excellence in worship. You will not be disappointed, and the Lord will not be either.

### **Talk About It**

1. Why has God created us with this need to worship?
2. Is there only one right way to worship? In what ways does culture affect how we worship God? Does God accept worship in different cultural expressions? Explain.

**3.** Does worship discussion bring division to your church? If so, how might your church discuss and grow together in understanding worship?

**4.** How does your church plan for worship? How does planning for worship help or hinder? How could worship be different in your church to assist you as you approach God on Sabbath morning?

# Myths About Personal Spirituality and Relationship With God

## Myth 17 - What I do is more important than who I am.

There she was, crying in my office. She was a model church member—a greeter, the head deaconess, a member of the school board, and our home and school leader. Jan<sup>16</sup> dressed modestly, did not wear jewelry, spoke softly, and cared for her husband and two grade school children. Jan came early to church to be ready to lead out in the primary department, and the program was always well prepared for the eight or so children who came. Whenever the school or church needed someone to drive a car, Jan was there to help. When the fellowship dinner was being prepared, or had finished and the kitchen needed cleaning, Jan was there.

Now she sat in my office, weeping. “I have come to resign all my church positions,” she told me. “I do all these things, but God still seems so far away and unreal.”

I thought about this for a moment and sent up a short prayer. “Jan,” I said as gently as I could, “what are you doing personally to maintain your spiritual life? What in your life builds your love relationship with God?”

As we visited, it became clear that Jan thought she could build a relationship with God by working hard and being more and more involved in the church. She felt that if only she did these tasks well God would smile on her and accept her. Jan did not know that God already accepted her and was hoping and longing to personally spend time with her.

Too often our church members feel that their time in service for the church is their time with God. This is not true and will, by and large, end in disaster. God is a personal relationship God. He is a real, alive, sentient, loving, benevolent Creator, eager to spend personal time with His children—you and me.

Another concern we might have is that of fearing God and hoping to appease Him through working hard in the church. But there is no amount of service to church or community that will make you acceptable to God. We don't serve the church to build a relationship with Him, but because we have a relationship with Him. Our service is a response to the love we feel from God above. He loves us, we regularly spend time with Him, He blesses and leads, we overflow with love for Him—and this brings us to joyful service.

My conversation with Jan developed into a plan for her to spend less time working in the church and more personal time with God, and this is what happened next. Jan discovered a God she had not known and then, out of love, she joyfully served the church in several capacities. She also discovered that nowhere in the Bible was there a command to Go and make fellowship dinner. There was, however, a command to Go and make disciples. As she grew to know God personally and His love filled her heart, Jan found this came quite easily. She found herself intentionally planning ways to be with friends, family, and neighbors so she could share her faith. New joy came into her life because she no longer felt a need to work in order to have a relationship with God. She had discovered it is far more important who you *are* than what you do. She had discovered that a life in relationship with her Lord made her life complete.



### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Does your local church ask too much of too few people? How might these ministries be spread out to more people?
- 2.** Have you ever felt overworked and taken advantage of in the church? If so, what should you do about it?
- 3.** How does your personal relationship with God affect your ability to be in ministry in your church?
- 4.** What are some ways you can be assured that you are in proper relationship with God so your ministry can be God-focused, God-directed, and joyful?

Myth 18 - I come to church on Sabbath to get a spiritual blessing that should last me all week long.

For a few years in my role as an administrator I traveled a great deal. Before I headed out of town I went to the gas station and filled the gas tank to the top with gas. After I had driven across the state I was not surprised that the needle on the gas gauge stood close to E, for the tank holds only 18 gallons of fuel. I filled the car up on Sunday for the trip I'd take on Monday. On Wednesday I filled the car for the trip I planned for Thursday. And I filled up on Friday for the driving I'd do Sabbath.

Some come to church believing it is like a spiritual gas station. They expect to have their spiritual gas tank filled to the top and hope against hope that this will last them all week long. Let me tell you right now, your gas tank is not that big! If you were able to fill up on Sabbath morning, and I do not believe you can, your spiritual gas gauge will be moving swiftly toward empty by Sunday or Monday. Then you will find that you are trying to just hang on spiritually for the rest of the week until you can attempt to fill your tank again.

It is a vicious cycle. It's as if I filled my car's tank once a week and then when it ran out of gas, I pushed it around by hand until the following week. As I struggle and push the car down one street and up another I actually push it right past several gas stations. But I don't stop to fill it. How much better it is to monitor the gauge and fill up regularly as needed. Or better yet, why not make sure the tank is full every morning!

How do you maintain the full level in your spiritual gas tank? We call it spiritual disciplines which is the name we use for spiritual formation.<sup>17</sup> These are activities that connect us to God. There is no set list of what this should be or what will work best for you. It will vary depending on where you are in life, and on your personality and temperament.<sup>18</sup> Here is a list of possible spiritual disciplines, but it is by no means exhaustive. God has a thousand ways He wants to connect with you and me.

Read the Word

Pray; keep a prayer journal; record answered prayers

Meditate on the Word

Read Scripture aloud

Look for divine appointments Worship

Sit in silence

Go on short fasts Memorize scriptures

Write thank-You letters to God

Give away personal items

Take a walk with God

Listen to music with God

It is best to have a wide variety of spiritual disciplines in your list. You will want to experiment with what will connect you to Jesus and build a relationship such as you have never had before. What works for you today or this week may or may not be helpful six months from now. God is seeking you. Use some tools to seek Him and you will find Him.

When more of us fill our spiritual gas tanks all week long we will come filled and really ready to worship God! We come together to worship on Sabbath, not to connect to God and fill ourselves up. Rather we corporately meet together to celebrate what God has been doing for and with us all week long. Being in authentic relationship will invigorate our Sabbath schools, our discussions, fellowship, worship, evangelism, and planning. It will make Sabbath a powerful day focused on the fullness of God instead of the emptiness of men and women, boys and girls.

What about those who show up for worship drained to the E mark? What of those who are coming to your church for the first time, perhaps their first time in any church? The good news is this: if you have connected with God all week long and are full of His love, it will overflow and there will be extra for those who have not prepared. The guest in your midst may not consciously understand it, but others will recognize your connection with Jesus and it will lift all higher toward heaven.<sup>19</sup>

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Describe how you feel when you come to worship. What has been your expectation when you arrive each Sabbath?
- 2.** Why did God design us to need spiritual energy more often than once a week?
- 3.** How do you maintain the fuel level in your spiritual gas tank?
- 4.** How does your spiritual preparedness affect the corporate worship service? How can a church teach more people to prepare spiritually for worship? How will this affect future worship experiences in your church?

## Myth 19 - Worship is something done for me, not something I do.

Please do something about our pastor. We come to church, but we are not being fed. My spiritual life is dwindling because the worship service and preaching is not helping me!”

As a conference administrator visiting many churches across the conference, more than once I heard these sentiments expressed. People believe that worship is something done to them instead of something they do.

It reminded me of when my kids were small. They would come to me and say, “Dad, I’m bored! Dad, I’m bored!” What they were really saying was “Dad do something about it. Entertain me.”

At first I would try this game or that trick to help, but it seemed they just became more and more bored. Finally I wised up, and when they came and said, “Dad, I’m bored!” I was ready. My answer: “It’s not my problem! If you are bored, do something about it!” If you feel unfulfilled and unfocused at worship on Sabbath, don’t blame anyone else—take ownership of your own spiritual journey and do something about it!

A proper understanding of worship will help you do something about it for yourself and others. People come from all directions Sabbath morning to the church service. They assemble themselves in the pews. What is to be their role? Some have mistakenly thought that because they’re sitting in the pews they are the audience. Let me tell you right up front: if you are sitting in the pew on Sabbath morning you are *not* the audience. God is! You are not there to be entertained. You are the participant, an active partner in the worship of our God.

In a sinless universe worship of God is spontaneous and freely given in various proper forms. But in a sinful world worship must be taught and consciously practiced. Worship should be a response to our joy at an encounter with God. Worship should be prepared for all week long.

On Sabbath morning when worshippers gather in anticipation of meeting God, some of them minister from the platform. These people are not performers, nor are they practitioners of worship. Those with this awesome ministry are to be the *facilitators* of worship. They are to act as catalysts to make it easier for the worshippers to connect to God. These facilitators must be spiritual people who have stayed in tune with God, led by His Spirit throughout the week. Remember, on this earth worship is a learned activity. These facilitators need to learn how to worship also. They must have experienced worship themselves. Then they will be ready to teach worship to the church family.

*Worship* is a verb, not a noun. *Worship* is an action word. Our God is worthy of our worship. He is the Creator and the Re-Creator. He is our Savior, Friend, and Companion. He has done great things for His people. He is doing awesome deeds for us and will continue to work on our behalf until we are part of His kingdom and sin has been destroyed. And even then He will continue to bless us beyond what we can imagine. Each Sabbath God bends low to our places of worship to accept the praise and adoration from His people that He alone is

worthy to receive. On Sabbath God is with His people as He is no other time of the week. God is the audience.

**Talk About It**

- 1.** What does it mean for you to take responsibility for your own spiritual journey?
- 2.** Who is the audience at a worship service? In what ways can we offer our best to this audience?
- 3.** Do you agree that on earth worship must be learned? Why or why not?
- 4.** In your church is worship considered a verb or a noun? What are some changes personally and corporately that will assist you and your church into active worship?

Myth 20 - Sabbath is from sundown to sundown, but the really holy part is from 9:30 to 12:00.

My wife, Lynn,<sup>20</sup> and I regularly set aside time that is just for us. We don't let anything else interfere with this special time. We don't do other business during this time. We may go out to the mall, to a restaurant, or to the park. We may stay home and read a book together or go for a walk. It is time just for us. The rest of the week I talk to her and about her and often look lovingly at the picture I have of her in my office, but the special time when we really connect is our time we set aside just for us.

What about God? He is our Creator and Designer. We were created to be companions for the God of the universe. He knows what we need, and part of that design is to spend quality and quantity time with our Creator. In His wisdom, God has ordained that one seventh of our time be set aside for a special time with Him. It is called the Sabbath. It is a full day of rest and focus on our Lord. During the remainder of the week we should not forget or ignore God, but the Sabbath is different. It is 24 hours of time that He calls blessed and hallowed. It is a gift to us of 24 hours with our special Friend and Savior.

Some mistakenly call the hour from 11:00 to 12:00 on Sabbath morning the divine hour, but in reality that hour is no more holy than the rest of the Sabbath. God set aside 24 hours. All 24 are called the Sabbath. This is why we must evaluate what we do with this special time. We must look carefully at our Friday evening and Sabbath afternoon activities. We are to honor Him as the Creator throughout the entire Sabbath day.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** What makes Sabbath holy? What does God want for you during this time?
- 2.** Do you have traditions individually, or as a family, that enhance your Sabbaths? Share with others what these are.
- 3.** Why would the God of the universe use a 24-hour period of time to especially connect with us?
- 4.** What are some ways that your local church can help people understand the importance of the 24-hour Sabbath?

## Myth 21 - Miracles just don't happen anymore.

The phone rang and as I answered it I heard John's voice. He sounded distressed. My wife and I had been studying with John as he prepared for baptism. He had many of the usual questions and fears that come with such a dramatic life change. His wife had been eager to be baptized, but John, cautious and careful, had been much slower to move this direction. However, today it was not a spiritual problem but a physical one that precipitated John's call. Not feeling well, he had been to see a doctor who discovered that he had a grapefruit-size tumor on one kidney. As any of us would be, John was very frightened. He wanted to know if Lynn and I would pray for him before he had surgery.

Lynn and I gladly went to his home. He sat in a chair, waiting for us. After reading from the Bible, we, along with John's wife stood around him in a circle and prayed for God to heal him by whatever means He saw fit. Then we left John in God's hands.

On the day of his scheduled surgery John headed to the hospital with renewed courage. And upon his arrival he insisted that the medical staff take another look before they did the operation. He was convincing, for somehow they agreed to do another CT scan and were stunned to find the tumor completely gone! The doctors didn't know what happened, but we did. The Great Physician had worked a miracle on John's behalf. John's doubts about God and whether or not to fully commit his life to God vanished. He was soon baptized, joining his wife in her decision to become a Seventh-day Adventist.

Miracles do happen today. Miracles of *healing* do happen today. We serve the same God who visited villages and upon His leaving, not one sick person remained (Matt. 8:16; Luke 4:40). Why then are miracles in shorter supply today than when Jesus walked this earth? Some have suggested it is because of our lack of faith or our reliance on modern science instead of God that has made such a shortage of miracles today. I disagree. God is still all-powerful, and His compassion for us never fails (Lam. 3:22, 23).

God works differently in different times and circumstances. As we study the Bible we can see this great truth in the way God dealt with different people and situations. Even today, in some places and times, there are a lot of miracles; and there are times when there are very few. God's ultimate goal is to have us as part of His kingdom. In His wisdom He knows when to use miracles and when not to use them to aid in His work. Even while Jesus was here on earth He had concerns that the miracles He had performed were misunderstood.

“Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him” (John 6:26, 27).

Some years ago Ellen White shared one of the reasons that miracles are no longer proof of the presence of God.

“The way in which Christ worked was to preach the Word, and to relieve suffering by

miraculous works of healing. But I am instructed that we cannot now work in this way, for Satan will exercise his power by working miracles. God's servants today could not work by means of miracles, because spurious works of healing, claiming to be divine, will be wrought.”<sup>21</sup>

With all of this I do not want to leave you with the impression that I believe there are no miracles today. While they may not be seen in such a dramatic and sweeping manner as when Jesus was on the earth, they do happen. I have witnessed other healings, and the miracle of a changed life is a constant affirmation of God's present power with us. While in school working for my undergraduate degree I personally witnessed that there was no way our finances would work out on paper, yet God saw us through in better style than some near us who made several times our income. I have visited with people who have received special protection from danger. I have witnessed direct answers to prayer in my life and in the churches where I have pastored.

While we do not currently see wholesale miracles in the church today, especially in the developed world, it is not a sign of the lack of God's presence. God is alive and well today! He is just as interested in our lives today as He was 2,000 years ago. Will we see another time just before the end when God moves through mighty miracles? I do not know, but I do know God will not fail us. Remember that He has promised to do “above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). There will always be miracles as God sees fit to fulfill His purposes.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Why do you believe there seem to be fewer miracles today than when Jesus walked on this earth?
- 2.** Have you been a witness to a miracle from God? Share.
- 3.** Scriptures and Ellen White both say that Satan, too, performs miracles. How can you know the source of a miracle?
- 4.** Should we pray for miracles today? How do we know what to pray for? What should be our reaction when a miracle does occur?



Myth 22 - The Holy Spirit and the Pentecost experience are for just before the end of time, not for now.

When the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1- 4).

What an experience that would have been to have such a dramatic demonstration of the coming of the Holy Spirit in His power. From the upper room the disciples went out, and lives were changed every place they went. If only that could happen today!

Just where is the Holy Spirit today? Everywhere! The Holy Spirit is right here with us, active in our lives and in the life of our church. The Holy Spirit did not suddenly show up at Pentecost. The Bible declares that the

Holy Spirit was present at creation (Gen. 1:2). The Scriptures reveal that the Holy Spirit was in the lives and ministries of such champions of God as Moses (Num. 11:25), Othniel (Judges 3:10), Gideon (Judges 6:34), David (1 Sam. 16:13), Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:20), and Ezekiel (Eze. 3:24). The Holy Spirit was present at the baptism of Christ (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). But throughout history the greatest evidence of the Holy Spirit is the lives that are changed forever. This includes your life and my life.

Today we hear reports from outside North America of thousands being baptized in a day into the Adventist Church. What about here in North America? Does the Holy Spirit work only to the south of us or on the other side of the ocean? Are we to be in a holding pattern until the last days and then see the mighty working of God here?

While Adventists feel we have been commissioned to grow, in North America the church finds itself in a plateau of almost no growth. I believe the myth that the Holy Spirit is for only the end-times has become a self-fulfilling prophecy in North America. We have told ourselves that hovering around 2 percent growth per year for the past decade or two is normal. Because of this we have become comfortable with these results. This ideology is in stark contrast with the fact that North America is full of unchurched people. Donald McGavran realized this and wrote about it.

“More winnable people live in the world today than ever before. There are far more winnable men and women in Illinois or Canada than there were a hundred years ago. The general population in many states and regions is more favorable to Christ and more open to conversion.”<sup>22</sup>

There are more winnable people to evangelize than ever before. The Barna Report states that “one third of the nation's adults (31 percent) can be deemed ‘unchurched’—a proportion that represents 60 to 65 million unchurched adults.”<sup>23</sup> These people represent a large current mission field for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America.

Reports show that in 2004 growth in North America slowed to a snail's pace: 1.44 percent. This is the lowest in almost 100 years.

During my years as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor I have heard many reasons proposed to explain why church growth has slowed among Anglo churches in North America. A list of reasons would likely include: (1) lack of spirituality, (2) not enough prayer, (3) the time is not right for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, (4) society is not receptive, (5) our members are asleep, (6) we have abandoned our evangelistic roots, and (7) Ellen White spoke out against large churches.<sup>24</sup> Although some of these items may be true to some degree, they are only excuses.

Bob Moorehead suggests that we need to rethink what we call normal growth. "I am convinced when the twentieth-century church resumes 'normal' behavior, the kind we read about in Acts, we will see 'normal' results again (which the watching community would surely call abnormal!)." <sup>25</sup>

I believe that this is true for the twenty-first-century church as well. I argue that we will need to rethink how we intend to grow the Adventist Church in North America. Learning how to grow churches will assist us in winning and keeping people for Christ. As we discussed earlier in this book, the culture of the church must be changed from a membership to a discipleship basis. If we can make discipleship the very DNA of our congregations I believe we will have a paradigm where the Holy Spirit can make a great difference, just as we see in other parts of today's world.

In North America we need not wait. Christ said, "Do you not say, 'There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:35). Now is the time for us to make this change and then watch God do His marvelous acts on this earth. God is interested in growing His church aggressively here and now, in my day and yours.

### **Talk About It**

**1.** What do you consider is the greatest evidence that the Holy Spirit is active throughout history and today? Why?

**2.** Why does it appear that the Holy Spirit is more dramatically active outside of North America?

**3.** Since there are more winnable people than ever before in North America how should we pray and act to cooperate with the Holy Spirit?

**4.** How might your local church ministry differ if it were truly in tune with the Holy Spirit?

Myth 23 - What's important is for the pastor and elders to be spiritual people. The regular members get their spiritual feeding when they come to church on Sabbath.

It was one of those conversations during which you are listening intently to a church member and waiting for the other shoe to drop. For five minutes April had voiced her concern for the noise in the sanctuary on Sabbath morning. The children, the acoustics, the PA people, the lighting. Then her real concern came out. "Pastor, I am worried about the spiritual life of the leaders of this church. They dress too casually, speak too loudly, and are bad examples for the rest of us. How are we to become spiritual unless the leaders are? We come on Sabbath to get our spiritual batteries charged, and the leaders need to be ready to be examples and sources of spirituality. My spiritual life is in shambles."

While April was right, spiritual leaders are key to having a spiritual church, it is a myth that there is a different level of spirituality for "regular members." The desired quality of the spiritual relationship with Jesus is the same for all members whether it is the pastor, an elder, a deacon or someone not in leadership. It is a high level we should all be seeking to attain. "To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (Revelation 1:5, 6). As king-priests we are all of the same level and of the same order. Spirituality is a must for all.

Not only is it a must, but also it is the responsibility of each member to personally work with God for our own spiritual maturity. Ron Bennett says it this way:

"Immature Christians always rely on someone else to expound the Word. Hence, effective discipleship involves teaching self-feeding skills—competence in studying the Bible and applying it to daily living. The discipling communities motto should be, 'Knives and forks for everyone!'"<sup>26</sup>

If you feel far from God, take charge of your spiritual life. Please do not blame the quality of the sermons, the style of music, or the bad example of an elder. If you keep your eyes on worldly things you will never rise above them. You must keep your eyes on heavenly things; you must keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Only by observing His perfect life and spending quality time with Him will you ever have the power of heaven to change your life, to enable you to become the spiritual person you wish to be. We are all alike in our need of a savior and to be spiritual people.

Is it possible for the members of the church to be as spiritual as the pastor? It is not only possible but imperative. It is not necessary for all to attend the seminary and study biblical languages, but all are to be in relationship with Jesus. Being able to read and explain Scripture in its original language or an understanding of the theological arguments of scholars does not make one a spiritual person.

The quality of the church and worship is directly related to the aggregate of the spirituality of the people who make up the church family. If the church family is in

relationship with Jesus all week long it will bring spiritual energy to the worship service and all that the church does. Your church is the sum of its parts, all its parts. Your spiritual health impacts the spiritual atmosphere in the church.

Does this mean that we should screen our members and guests before we let them in the door on Sabbath? No, absolutely not! It means that for our churches to be healthy we need a “critical mass” of the church family in a healthy relationship with Jesus; not perfect, but in relationship. Then you can welcome a great number of people who are seeking God (but have not yet found Him) into your church family. They will gain strength from you and others who are in relationship with Jesus. Eventually they will gain their own spiritual health and relationship. Then they can be a disciple for the spiritual birth and life of someone God will send.

It is important for pastors and church leaders to be spiritual people. It is just as important for all of God's children to be spiritual. It is worth taking responsibility for one's own spiritual health. Jesus is a friend worthy of our time and energy. Psalm 34:8 invites us to try this for ourselves. “Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see—how good God is. Blessed are you who run to him” (Message).

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Is there a different standard of spirituality we should expect from the pastor and elders of a local church? Why or why not?
- 2.** Evaluate your own personal spiritual level. Are there ways that you can raise this level? Share how this might be done?
- 3.** What should your attitude be if you observe a pastor or church leader who is not the best spiritual example?
- 4.** How can your local church reach and maintain a “critical mass” of its members with strong spiritual lives? Why is this important?

# Myths About Evangelism

Myth 24 - The major ministry of the church is inside the church building; we will wait until people come to us.

Here is a passage of Scripture very familiar to Seventh-day Adventists. We study it time and again, and our children learn it at an early age. The Sabbath school quarterly, no matter the topic, brings us time and again to its words of command. It is a sacred trust given in the words of Christ Himself. It is His chosen method to grow His church.

“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” (Matt. 28:19, 20).

The very first word of this command is powerful and needs to be understood. It is too often overlooked or misinterpreted. The word is *Go*.

*Go* tells us to get out there. From the time of Christ on earth until today, the great evangelistic events of history always happened when people followed God's command to *go out there*. This means that our greatest evangelism is to be done outside the walls of the church. In the New Testament the greatest evangelism happened when people left the confines of the church family and went *out there*.

It seems today that many churches and disciples have rewritten that word *Go* as *Come*. We have by design and planning, intentionally and by default, come to practice and believe the myth as if Christ had written, “Wait patiently for the pagans to come into your church where you can make disciples of all nations that come to you.” No! Christ specifically said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”

When someone who is not a Christian walks or drives by your church, it is highly unlikely that they will ever walk in. A church, even your church, is a scary place filled with foreign ideas that challenge society and culture as they know it. Some have said that we should find a “neutral place” where they will feel comfortable with us. But the building is not the scariest part of Christianity to a nonbeliever. You are!

If you are the scariest thing to a nonbeliever, there must be a way to bridge this gap. The best way is to go out there. Evangelism is relational. It is the privilege of every disciple to go out there and make friends for Jesus, such good friends that they will trust you to share God with them.

In meeting with my church board in one church that I pastored, I brought a proposal to the table. I suggested that since it was of great evangelistic importance to make friends for Jesus, we should take the \$10,000 in our treasury that was set aside for evangelism and place it in a fund. This fund would then be used to reimburse any church member who intentionally took an unchurched person to supper, to the museum, to the beach, or any other good social event. The response came back: “What kind of problems would you be causing when the people found out that the person was being friendly to them because the church was paying for the activity?”

I was counting on that issue coming up. I wanted the board members to understand that they and others should simply go and make relationships with unchurched people—even without withdrawing funds. The point was *we must go out there*.

Some have said that it is a dangerous place out there in the world, so it is better not to go. Instead, leave the going to professionals. But the command is to all disciples; that includes you and me. We must go. Is it dangerous? Yes. Must we be prepared? Yes. But go we must. But before you go be sure you have a strong relationship with Jesus. Put on the whole armor of God.<sup>27</sup> With God you can go and build relationships with sinful people who have bad habits you do not like and who hang out with people in bad places where you'd rather not be. If you are criticized for the people you fellowship with and the places you go, you will be in good company. Jesus was accused of being evil because He went where the sinners were and because He socialized with people who were not considered reputable.

The example of Jesus is the most powerful we have. He built relationships because He knew that it was the most powerful evangelistic tool available. Winfield Arn interviewed 4,000 converts in order to learn why they first came to church and why they stay connected to a congregation. Here are his findings:

6 to 8 percent just walked in

2 to 3 percent came through church programs 8 to 12 percent were attracted by the pastor

2 to 4 percent came out of a special need

1 to 2 percent were visited by church members

3 to 4 percent came through the Sunday school class

70 to 80 percent were invited by relatives and friends.<sup>28</sup>

Research shows that, while there can be some church growth because of programs and buildings, the greatest number of people visit and have become church members because a friend or relative invited them. The people who come to Christ had a relationship with someone.

How do we spend our resources? Is building relationships even a line item in a church budget or its evangelistic plan? It should be! Building relationships is where we would get the most return on our investment.

Finally, the last word is that Jesus did just what He has asked us to do. The command to go is something He did. He left the perfect environment of heaven with great friendships and family, where the music and worship was out of this world, and went to a dangerous and dismal place full of dangerous people and temptations. Once we are properly prepared, can we do any less?

Ellen White tells us “Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the

people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”<sup>29</sup>

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Does the word *Go* in Matthew 28:19 apply to all disciples? How does it apply to you?
- 2.** Is your church a fortress, or is it a base of operation to go out from? If it is partially or totally a fortress, how can it be changed?
- 3.** Explain what is meant by “evangelism is relational.” How can you personally make this your and your church's greatest evangelism tool?
- 4.** Since it is a dangerous place out there, how are we to prepare?



*Myth 25* - When people come to us, there should be a trial or testing period to see if they are good enough for us.

George and Linda were excited! They had been attending the Revelation Seminar I'd conducted in our church and longed to learn even more. The truths about God and salvation unfolded before them from the pages of Scripture and warmed their hearts, giving new meaning to their lives. They even brought peace to their troubled marriage. George had a steady job working outdoors with his hands. Linda stayed home with the two young children.

It had been fun to watch them grow in Christ and to see outward changes taking place. At first they came to the meetings wearing their old work clothes, their hair unkempt. As the seminar progressed you could see that they came clean and much more orderly. Even the children had clean faces and their hair was nicely combed. God was making a visible difference in their lives as well as the unseen difference He made in their hearts. George and Linda made a commitment to God and joined the church through baptism.

The next Sabbath they walked in happy and smiling. They were members of God's church! To honor this George and Linda had purchased new Sabbath clothes, crisp new denim blue jeans and plaid shirts. That Sabbath one of the unofficial greeters was the church patriarch, Mr. Green. With his white hair and three-piece suit Mr. Green definitely commanded respect. And why not? He had been in leadership in a local Adventist church for 40 years. When Mr. Green saw George and Linda, he headed right over to them and without shaking hands asked, "Are those the best Sabbath clothes you have? Can't you do better than that?"

This was the last Sabbath we had George and Linda in church. No amount of discussion or visiting could override the message they felt they had received that day: *You do not belong here!*

You may think that this could never happen in your church, that this was an isolated instance. But we send similar messages, if not so strong, in many other ways. On several occasions I have visited church boards or nominating committees that treated with a concern a number of names suggested for deacon, deaconess, elder, and other positions. Once I heard that the suggested person was "not ready to be a deacon here. They've been a church member for only four years!"

I am not advocating that we have no standards for church office. Of course we should be careful not to rush people into just any office, especially into ordained offices. But the church should see it as their responsibility to provide all members with opportunities to serve in the area of their giftedness and passion for ministry.

We are all sinners, and none of us are worthy to serve the awesome and holy God we worship. I am thankful that the ground is level at the cross. I am thankful that we stand together and we serve together. Salvation is a process. It is similar to growing a plant. It takes care, sunshine, water, and time. It takes, in fact, a lot of Sonshine. But the plant will grow.

Several decades ago the question being asked by the society around the church was

“What do you believe? If I can believe what you believe, then I will belong.” Our pastors and evangelists preached sermons on the 2300 days, on the sleep of death, the Sabbath, and the Second Coming. We were very good at explaining the truth that God has placed in Scripture and in this church. People came. They listened, and when they saw that our teaching matched the Bible, large numbers followed the prompting of the Holy Spirit and were baptized.

Today the question has been turned on its head. Society now asks, “Can I belong? If I can belong, *then* I will believe what you believe.” This is evident as people believe very strange things when they feel they belong. We could speak of the Branch Davidians, Jonestown, and the group called Heaven's Gate, or a variety of supremacist or terrorist groups. They felt they belonged; therefore they were ready to believe anything. How much better it is for people to believe solid biblical truth because they feel they belong. Information and truth are important, but they must be preceded and assisted by relationship and belonging.

When God sends new people to investigate my church or your church, what should we do? We should remember that most often the question of highest priority in their minds would not be “What does the church teach?” but “Can I fit in and feel that I belong here?” Here are a few suggestions to make this happen.

Make the comfort of guests your priority. Let them remain anonymous when desired.

Develop genuine friendships with the newcomers.

Design appropriate ways for them to take part and be a part of the church family as quickly as they are willing. This is a part of vibrant discipleship. This will grow the church of God.

### **Talk About It**

1. Should we cheerfully accept new members any way they come? Why or why not?
2. How important is guest care to your church? What are the qualities of a great greeter?
3. How does being involved in one of the church's ministries help new people feel that they belong?
4. Since belonging is such a powerful tool to help people join our church family, how can your local church use it more?

Myth 26 - If we can only get a top name evangelist to come, we'd see great things happen.

I began the ministry as an intern in a local church district. I had been there only a few months before the conference sent me to a large city where a “household name” evangelist was about to conduct a six-week evangelistic series. I joined on as part of the visitation team. The church and conference spent tens of thousands of dollars on this important event. The large church was full every night. And we, the visitation team, went from home to home visiting our hearts out. And at the end of the series there were 48 new Seventh-day Adventists!

Sadly, one year later only four of these new members were still attending church. What had gone wrong? Is the professional evangelist really the best way to grow the church?

Professional evangelists are one of the greatest instruments the Seventh-day Adventist Church has to grow the church properly. And conversely, professional evangelists are one of the greatest obstacles to growing the Seventh-day Adventist Church properly. They are a blessing because they have introduced many, many souls to Jesus Christ. When you ask someone about their spiritual heritage, often they will trace their joining God's family to an evangelist. On the other hand, the professional evangelist is an obstacle—when we have made it so. The emphasis on hiring the professional has led many in the church to believe that the professional evangelist is the only one qualified to make disciples.

The command of God is not “Go and hire a professional” but “Go and make disciples.” Discipleship is not something that can be done by proxy or by hiring someone to do it for us. God asks us to become fully devoted followers of Jesus. Fully devoted followers of Jesus understand that the command of Jesus is “Go.”

They understand that the command to go is specific and with a purpose. That purpose: to make friends and disciples who know and love Jesus.

Through conversations with many evangelists I know that they do not want church members to believe the myth that only evangelists can make disciples. They know that by themselves their efforts will have only marginal lasting effect. Their best efforts, evangelists know, will bear much fruit only when the church is doing relational evangelism on an ongoing basis. They know that relational evangelism is the lifestyle of a vibrant, active church. Then, when the professional comes in, wow! God does great things and grows His church.

Discipleship in the local church is for everyone. Building friendships with unchurched family members, work acquaintances, and neighbors is our God-given privilege. Just imagine! God commands us to go and have a good time fellowshiping with people around us. He asks us to build strong friendships with them, such good friendships that they'll trust and believe us when we share with them the truth about God. With a large circle of close friends who are not part of our church we will have plenty of people to invite when the professional evangelist comes to our community. When the evangelist shares what God wants to do in our lives and calls for a decision, you will be there to support your friend. And so God's church continues to grow.

The biblical principle is clear. “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:5, 6).

Go! Enjoy! Make friends! Make disciples!

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Are professional evangelists a productive part of evangelism? What has been your experience? What would strengthen this tool of evangelism?
- 2.** Is a professional evangelist a sower or a reaper in the Lord's harvest? Explain.
- 3.** How can you and other church members develop evangelism into a lifestyle for your church?
- 4.** How important are friendships in evangelism? If you feel they are highly important, how are you personally going to increase your circle of friends?

Myth 27 - We're called the remnant, aren't we! We're supposed to be a small church.

It was only an excuse, but it was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. I knew it was a myth, but I was having a difficult time convincing my head elder. The elder quoted, "And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17, KJV).

When I still disagreed with him, he added: "Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved" (Rom. 9:27, KJV). Each time he recited the verses he emphasized the word *remnant* by raising his voice to a higher note. "Pastor, when you preach that we should be growing and when you say that it is God's will that we become a large church, you are going against Scripture. I don't know if God simply foresaw it or if He predestined it, but we are supposed to be small. Please quit the guilt trips!"

Seventh-day Adventists believe that Revelation 12:17 is a prophecy of God's last-day church, the Adventist Church. As such, it is vitally important that we understand this text properly. The NKJV, as in other more recent translations, places the language in more modern terms. "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17). *The rest of her offspring* does not refer to quantity but speaks of origin. Revelation 12:17 says that God's last-day church comes from the long line of true followers of God throughout history.

In their study *Finding Them, Keeping Them*, Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin remind us "large is not lethal."<sup>30</sup> According to Paul Richardson, director of the Center for Creative Ministry, of the 4,746 Adventist congregations in North America in 1999, 3,000 had less than 100 members. He also reports that the next 1,400 had 100 to 250 members.<sup>31</sup> Remember, this is book membership; the actual attendance would be about 50 percent of these figures.

So why are the majority of Adventist churches small? Why does there seem to be a barrier to the size a church can grow? Why does a church's attendance plateau so soon? Longtime members as well as those in power often become fearful of new people because they represent a threat to the status quo. Carl George explains this stage:

"People, including Christians, like to be comfortable. If they are convinced that growth will upset the family feeling they associate with 'their' church, they may establish a surprising number of turf-protection barricades to keep new members from being absorbed."<sup>32</sup>

Researcher Monte Sahlin supports this idea of discomfort, saying, "Small churches become comfortable with being small and tend to resist growing beyond the size where everyone can know all the members."<sup>33</sup> Below this barrier is where the majority of Adventist churches in North America stand today. Their book membership may have soared beyond 200, yet until changes are made they are as large as they will get. While there are other contributing factors, the greatest obstacle to growing large churches is in our minds and in our

hearts.

The New Testament is quite comfortable with the concept of large churches. The apostles apparently interpreted the gospel commission in light of the many statements on growing the kingdom of God. With the blessing of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they went and preached with power, which resulted in the almost instantaneous creation of a large congregation.

Acts 2:42 indicates that many were from Jerusalem. The following verses share the ongoing growth of the church after the feast. In a short time the apostles were in charge of a large congregation even by modern standards. In a short time the Jerusalem church was likely a church congregation of more than 10,000.<sup>34</sup>

As the church in Jerusalem grew, so did persecution, and thus Christianity and the gospel spread everywhere. Large congregations were formed as the gospel spread. Philip went to the city of Samaria, working miracles in the name of Christ and preaching the gospel. “And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did” (Acts 8:6). Peter, Paul, and others shared, and soon there were large congregations in Jerusalem, Antioch, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and many other places.<sup>35</sup>

Some have suggested that Ellen White counseled against larger churches. This is not so. She did counsel against some of the wrongs in large churches, but not against the concept.

During the fund-raising for the Battle Creek Tabernacle, Ellen White came to Battle Creek for a camp meeting. James White presided over the plans, and their son William White presided over the promotion. Ellen had visions during this time, but none of the messages from these visions says anything against the plans for the large church.<sup>36</sup> There are other examples of her involvement in large churches.

“But the large church on Laguna Street, with its accompanying clinic, which James and Ellen White helped to build in the 1870s, was saved. Being a frame building, it suffered only minor earthquake damage, and in God's providence the ravaging fire was held in check two blocks from the church.”<sup>37</sup>

The Whites were involved in the building of large churches, and God was in the business of preserving them.

Much later, from 1905 to 1906, when A. T. Jones, John H. Kellogg, and others were scheming to acquire legal control of property, including the Battle Creek Tabernacle, Ellen White pleaded that everything possible be done to save the tabernacle.<sup>38</sup>

A study of Ellen White will reveal that she saw the larger churches as potential centers of strength and resources for smaller churches. She also saw them as potential centers for training missionaries who would then go and make disciples in places where there was no church presence.

It is not necessary for Seventh-day Adventist churches to be small. But it is necessary for them to be filled with disciples who love God and are not afraid of new people. God blesses small churches, and He blesses large churches. Really, He blesses growing churches. Growing churches are the ones who are adding many new smiling faces to the family of God. May your church be a growing church!

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Define “remnant” in a church setting. What did the Bible writers mean? What should it mean to us in our own local church?
- 2.** Why do you believe that large churches are relatively rare in the Adventist denomination?
- 3.** What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of a large church family?
- 4.** If you are in a small church, do you believe God wants it to remain that way? Are there barriers your church has put up to keep it from growing?

## Myth 28 - We have the truth! That will draw everyone.

George came running across the parking lot just as I was getting out of my car one Sabbath morning. "Pastor, I want you to know that I've done it again this year! I have taken copies of the pamphlet I wrote and left them hanging on the doors of every house within five blocks of the church. It was a good one this time. I titled it 'The Truth About Hell.' What do you think? Shouldn't that shake a few up and make them think of the future they're headed for? I hope some of them come to church!"

"George!" I said a little too loudly, "I don't believe that is the best message to share to encourage someone to come to our church, especially not with secular people. They won't get past the title, and they don't trust things from people they do not know."

"But Pastor," he countered, "everything I wrote is based on the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. People need to hear the truth. I have done what God asked, He said, 'Go!' "

"But George," I protested, "the go command was very specific. Jesus said, 'Go and make disciples.' Making disciples is not just giving information." I knew I was not making sense to George, for he abruptly turned and walked away mumbling about me wanting to soften and weaken truth.

What George did not understand is that people don't care if we have the truth; they just want to know whether we care about them. People are jaded and scarred by the selfish acts of others in their lives and are slow to even believe that we really do care. It will take more than a printed brochure that says "We Care" on the cover. It will take more than knocking cold turkey on their door, smiling, and handing them a lesson or video. We must give them much more than an instrument of information. We must give them something they will value more than almost anything. What we have to give is of great value, but will cost you very little. What they will value most is your being their friend. And that only develops over time. But that is what will convince them that you care.

This may be difficult for many of you because the new scarce commodity in today's church is not money, but time. The church does need your help with financial resources. This will keep the doors open and the lights on. But the resource of your time is what the church needs to grow and make disciples; time used outside the church walls to make friends for Jesus. Time to become such good friends that they will trust you when you share the good news of Jesus with them. We are the "earthen vessels" that bring the gospel to our friends, family, and neighbors (2 Cor. 4:5-7).

As Seventh-day Adventists we are convinced, and I believe rightly so, that we have the truth for these last days of earth's history. The truth is powerful and necessary, but truth is not enough in and of itself. Satan and his host believe and tremble (James 2:19), but that does not convert and change them to serve God again. If truth was all we needed, then when we have the cognitive knowledge of truth and we share the cognitive knowledge of God it should save others and us.



Another necessary aspect is the building of relationships, but relationships are not enough by themselves. Some Christians, including some Adventists, have believed that relationships are the most important aspect of church life. They build worship experiences and programs to build relationships of the people with each other and with the community. While this is important, relationship in and of itself, it does not convert someone to be a disciple of Jesus. An emphasis only on the relationship aspect makes weak Christians who have little knowledge of the truth and are vulnerable to false teachings and false teachers who may offer great relationship.

One other aspect is necessary for the discipleship process. Even if you have the truth and have great relationships with church members, you must also have the power of the Holy Spirit for lives to change. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23). We must have the Holy Spirit. We must have the presence of God.

This was the method of Jesus. This was and is how He attracts and changes hearts. This is how He prepared people to hear His voice and believe the truth He wanted to share.

“It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Savior's matchless love, revealed throughout His pilgrimage on earth, from the manger of Bethlehem to Calvary's cross, and the sight of Him attracts, it softens and subdues the soul. Love awakens in the heart of the beholders. They hear His voice, and they follow Him.”<sup>39</sup>

So how are we to share the truth today? Start by building relationships, strong, long-lasting relationships. But don't stop there. Give people hope and a sense of urgency because of the times in which we live. Wrap it all in prayer for the presence of Jesus. This will then become a fertile field of planted seed, and the Holy Spirit can bring a rich harvest.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Can we as a church be right and still wrong in our evangelistic methods? Explain.
- 2.** What does “People don't care if we have the truth; they just want to know whether we care about them” mean? On a scale of 1 to 10, how responsive is your church to this? How can this be improved?
- 3.** Which is easier? For you to give to the church time or for you to give it money? Why is the answer you gave true? Why is giving time becoming more scarce?
- 4.** Why is truth alone not enough to make new disciples? Why is relationship alone not enough to make new disciples? What is the key to making new disciples?

## Myth 29 - Anyone who is not a Seventh-day Adventist really has no understanding of who Christ is.

A fascinating story is told in the ninth chapter of Luke. Jesus takes three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, up on a mountain to pray. And the three do what they seem to usually do when not busy—they fall asleep. As they awake they see Jesus shining in unspeakable glory and talking with Moses and Elijah. What an awe-inspiring privilege to have this small glimpse into heaven. Then they hear the voice of God Himself. “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” God says to them (Luke 9:35).

As John, Peter, and James are struggling to make sense of what they've just witnessed, they come down the mountain and find a large crowd of people and trouble among the disciples who had remained behind. A man had brought his son to them with the plea that they cast out an evil spirit from the boy. The demon causes him to convulse and foam at the mouth. We can imagine the disciples talking among themselves, puzzled and frustrated. Maybe they were even embarrassed because, in front of this crowd, their best efforts had been in vain.

The poor father hurried to Christ. “I implored Your disciples to cast it out,” he cried, “but they could not” (Luke 9:40).

At that Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and cast him out of the boy. He then returned the son to his father.

In verse 44 Jesus begins to reveal that He will be handed over to evil men and will be killed. But His disciples are too busy to understand what He's talking about. They are arguing about who will be greatest in the kingdom that they think Jesus is going to set up right there. Jesus rebukes them by drawing a small child to Him and saying that when someone accepts a little child it's the same as accepting Jesus Himself.

Now the story begins to get really interesting. “Now John answered and said, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side’” (Luke 9:49, 50).<sup>40</sup>

Do you see the significance of what has happened here? The “true” disciples of Jesus were trying to stop someone outside their group from casting out demons, a task they were not able to do because of their own selfish hearts. I believe this story speaks to the myth “Anyone who is not a Seventh-day Adventist really has no understanding of who Christ is.” As Seventh-day Adventists we must be very careful how we speak and think of Christians from other denominations. I have heard church members speak of the “Gentiles out there,” referring to anyone who is not an Adventist, suggesting that they do not know God. But Jesus said, “He who is not against us is on our side.”

As a pastor I have had deep, gospel-filled theological discussions with believers who did not happen to be Adventist Christians. Yet it was evident that they had a profound personal relationship with Jesus. Our Lord also said, “And other sheep I have which are not of this

fold” (John 10:16). Jesus did not stop there. The rest of the verse goes on to say, “Them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.” Instead of rebuking other Christians, we must be building relationships with them, close, friendly relationships with them, so that the truth we have to share will be accepted.

Is it necessary for someone to be an Adventist to be saved? While we believe rightly that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a movement of destiny prophesied in the apocalyptic passages of Scripture, we do not believe or teach that anyone who does not accept the message of our church is doomed to eternal death. We do teach that as we come closer to the end there will be a time when all must decide to accept the great truths entrusted to us. Until then, be very careful of excluding from the presence of God anyone who is a Christian and doing good works but is not yet an Adventist. We should not alienate, but build relationships, share truth, and let the Holy Spirit lead others in His wisdom.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Is it possible for someone who is not a Seventh-day Adventist to be in relationship with Jesus? Explain your answer.
- 2.** Is it easier to build relationships with other Christians or with those who are not Christians? Why? Do you know any atheists, or believers in religions other than Christianity?
- 3.** Is it possible for those who are not Seventh-day Adventist Christians to be doing the work of God? Why or why not?
- 4.** What is your church doing, and what do you personally do, to build relationships with Christian organizations and with people of a different faith?

### Myth 30 - Adventist outreach ministries such as the Voice of Prophecy or Amazing Facts are the ones to give Bible studies.

Our church had been planning outreach. One component was a flyer we sent into the mailboxes of the community inviting people to have Bible studies, and the response was great! The church elders had in their hands a sizable pile of cards that had been returned. Now they were trying to decide how to best respond to them. I suggested that we find church members who were willing to give Bible studies and send them out as teachers. Those who were not familiar with giving Bible studies could be mentored by those who were.

To my surprise, the elders expressed concern that such a plan would take a lot of time out of the church members' busy schedules. Finally one suggested, "Why don't we just send these cards to the Voice of Prophecy or Amazing Facts? They can send one of their Bible correspondence courses to these people. After all, they're the experts in giving Bible studies."

"Yes, and if the people complete the lessons, then we can invite them to a future evangelistic event," another added.

Let me say that the Bible correspondence schools are doing a wonderful job of sharing Bible truth. They are organized and efficient, and they allow a certain distance for their students to feel safe, since the Bible school is usually far from their home. God has greatly blessed this ministry, but there is only so much they can do. The Bible schools realize that there needs to be another component to their ministry. That is why they send names and progress reports to the conferences, which then pass these on to the churches. The local church adds a critical ingredient that is very difficult to do from a distance and in the wholesale fashion the Bible schools must employ.

That necessary ingredient is a personal relationship. While these Bible correspondence schools are excellent at giving good, truthful cognitive knowledge, they are unable to bring the hands-on relationship necessary to give substance and power to the truth that their students are learning.

Recognizing this missing ingredient, the Bible schools have worked to develop schools in the local churches across North America. This is not because they want to have less mail to process or because they want to reduce the number of people working with the studies. It is because they recognize that there must be a local relational element to bring the gospel to the local community. "The gospel is not heard until it comes to people within their own context."<sup>41</sup> Someone local must follow the gospel commission and go out there and share in a relational context.

This is especially true in today's world. Monte Sahlin, in his book *Sharing Our Faith With Our Friends Without Losing Either*, calls it the third era of Adventist evangelism—an era of relational evangelism. Sahlin notes that this era is characterized more by an emphasis on sharing one's faith than on teaching a system of doctrines. Friendships will be the primary tool for bringing men and women to Christ and into the church. Fellowship at a personal level will be more important than large personalities or organizations. The goal will be to meet the needs of people rather than to build up institutional programs.<sup>42</sup> George Barna agrees: "Study after study,

however, shows that the most believable and best remembered form of advertising is the personal recommendation of a trusted person.”<sup>43</sup> We must go out there and make disciples. It cannot be done by proxy or long distance. The best Bible studies are not necessarily done by the most experienced or best trained, but by people who live in the community in which the Holy Spirit has prompted someone to seek Bible truth.

Every church has people with the gift of evangelism and teaching who can share biblical truth and build relationships. Perhaps they are not able to actually go out and give Bible studies because they are overburdened with other duties in the church. The local church needs to identify those whom God has called to go and give Bible studies, and release them for their ministry.

Does your church have a list of names of people who have requested Bible studies? Send them to one of the Adventist Bible correspondence schools if you must. Do not just let them drop by the side. But the best plan will be to train and equip a group in your local church to go and share the Word one-on-one. It is worth it. It is our reason for existence. We exist as a church to share the good news of Christ and His soon return with those out there whom the Holy Spirit will draw into seeking God. Let's prepare and be ready to share Bible truth locally. It is the best.

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Since key organizations among Adventist do such a good job with Bible studies, why would we want to do them at the local level?
- 2.** What is the key ingredient that a local church can bring to a Bible study?
- 3.** If it is true that every church has people with the gift of evangelism, how can they be turned loose to exercise their gift?
- 4.** What is your local church's plan for evangelism? Does it include personal Bible studies in the community? Why or why not?

Myth 31 - That form of evangelism worked well in Washington, D.C., or New Deli, or Mexico City. It's got to work just as well here.

We all had the pre-evangelistic meeting jitters. Would the people come to hear the Word of God preached? We were praying that our preparation and advertising would bring us a good audience for the meetings soon to begin. It was an Internet satellite meeting, and based on previous experience we anticipated a crowd. A couple years before in a city across the nation the Net satellite meeting had been well attended and resulted in several joining the church. Why not the same results here in this large city?

At last the night arrived, and the cars began to roll into our parking lot. Many people I'd never seen before helped fill the church to capacity. Were we ever excited! The potential for the gospel, the three angels' messages, to be shared was great. But in the first few nights the response cards began to tell a different story. Night after night we visited with guests at the doorway and reviewed their response cards. We discovered that of the large crowd, all but three of our visitors were from other Adventist churches in that large city. Within a week only Adventists remained in our nightly audience. The three true visitors had left, and we were unable to encourage them to return. And so the much-anticipated meetings became a good revival for church members but not an evangelistic event for the community.

What had gone wrong? What myth had we unknowingly accepted? The myth that an evangelistic method that is successful in one place will be successful in another. Evangelism must be custom-designed for each different time and place.

This was how the apostle Paul worked. Depending on his audience and the cultural setting in which he found himself, Paul used different approaches. In the synagogue he spoke and preached as a Pharisee sharing from the Scripture. In a palace Paul shared his personal journey, his story. On Mars' Hill in Athens Paul spoke to local cultural beliefs, appealing to his listeners to become acquainted with the "unknown God."

"I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some," Paul said (1 Cor. 9:22).

While there is certainly science and methodology in evangelism, I believe it is more art than science. Art is learning the different tools appropriate for evangelism and using some or all of these tools to paint on the canvas of your community and church family. While the results will look different in each different place and time, you are still using the same basic tools of canvas, brushes, paints, or chalk. These fundamentals are what we can gather from other successful evangelistic strategies across the country and even around the world and use them as principles that will help us wherever we are.

One basic principle is that God is the one who works the miracles in the lives of people. "So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase" (1 Cor. 3:7). In the same way as the farmer (or gardener) who works hard planting and caring for his crops is unable to create life in a field, so it is with us and our evangelistic efforts. We are to do our part in evangelism, and then God will do His.

Another basic principle I have learned from other parts of the world is that all evangelism is relational. As I visited with evangelist Henry Feyerabend, who had been successful in both South and North America, it became apparent that most of his success in South America was because about 45 percent of the church members actively pursue direct relationships in both homes and workplaces for the sharing of the gospel. In North America the same is estimated to be near 3 percent. True discipleship consists of building relationships with others, such good relationships that the people will trust you to share God with them. As Philip Samaan points out in *Christ's Way of Reaching People*, we must go back to Christ's model for evangelism: "Christ's program was first and foremost people."<sup>44</sup>

We should not ignore methods of evangelism that have been successful in other parts of the world. We should observe them, look for principles, and apply the principles to our community and church. We should never be afraid of failure. I have personally learned more from attempted evangelistic methods that failed than the ones that were a great success. These "failures" are the school where we learn great principles that enable us to go back out and share the news that God loves the people of the world and that He is coming back soon!

### **Talk About It**

- 1.** Why does an evangelistic method work well in one place but not in another?
- 2.** What can we learn for our own church and ministry from the statement "All evangelism is relational"?
- 3.** What is the key difference between the evangelism carried on in North America and that in South America? What principle can we learn from this? How can this principle become a part of our local church evangelism?
- 4.** Have you analyzed the failures in evangelism that your church has had? What did you learn? What might you change in the future?

# Conclusion



As you can see, there are a lot of myths out there. This book by no means contains an exhaustive list. Because Seventh-day Adventists have a passion for sharing Jesus, it is vital that we recognize the myths, because often they feel right to us and often they give some results. However, following any of these myths will not deliver the results both we and God desire. Myths allow us to have a clear conscience and to become very good at being mediocre.

Your church can have good mission and vision statements, understand its purpose, determine its values, and have many willing hearts and hands, yet without recognizing, understanding, and avoiding these myths it is doomed to live in expectation of its vision without ever seeing it succeed.

Living by these myths, we will never accomplish our purpose and never truly hold to what we value.

We must learn how to recognize the myths and how to protect ourselves and our church from them. If we can learn to avoid buying into these untruths, we will grow much closer to being the disciples and the church that the Holy Spirit is eager to bless here in North America. Lives are at stake; eternal lives are at stake. And the life you may save may be your own as you learn to become a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

### **How to Recognize the Myths**

Because of the nature of these myths, it is necessary to closely and deliberately examine our beliefs about methods even as we look toward what we wish to become. Andy Stanley calls this “clarifying the win.”

“The church should be more determined than any other kind of organization to ‘clarify the win’ simply because the stakes are much higher: Eternity hangs in the balance.”<sup>45</sup> If we understand what success is to look like, we will then know when we have reached it.

Not only should we ask ourselves what defines the win, but also we must qualify it by asking how God defines the win for us and our church. That is the win He is eager to bless. This is the vision He is zealous to bring into reality. “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). Ellen White says it this way: “As the will of man cooperates with the will of God, it becomes omnipotent. Whatever is to be done at His command may be accomplished in His strength. All His biddings are enablings.”<sup>46</sup>

Once we understand what the win is to God, then we can ask whether we are getting there. If not, it is a strong indication that we are harboring some myths in ourselves and/or in our church. We must press together and pray earnestly for God to reveal any myth we are holding that is preventing the gospel from going to our community as He wishes. We must pray that God will give us the desire and the ability to give up on the myths that some of our churches hold dear. Those who do not understand may see you in rebellion to the ways of the church when you point out the problems. But the lives at stake are worth pressing forward beyond the myths, to work side by side in the will of God. This will revolutionize your church and bring true success.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been blessed by God. We have schools, hospitals, universities, and church buildings scattered all across North America. Even with all these wonderful tools, the best instrument God has to share the gospel is you. Jesus did not say, “Go and make schools, hospitals, universities, and church buildings” or any other institution or building. The command is “Go and make disciples.” The first disciple you must be sure of is yourself.

True disciples, in that vertical connection with God, will be best prepared for the horizontal connection with others around them. As you seek God with all your heart, mind, and soul you will surely be ready to examine how and why you and others do what you do. You will certainly begin to see the myths that hold us back from the will of God. We literally have no time for myths. We must deal with reality. Jesus is coming soon. What we see in the world around us will soon pass away.

Are you willing to let go and instill true methods? Are you and your church willing to relearn discipleship and evangelism? God is calling you and your church to move beyond the myths that are holding you back. God is eager to bless and grow the church here in North America just as fast and strong as anywhere on the globe. Let go of the myths!

# Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> *142nd Statistical Report of Seventh-day Adventists* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> George R. Knight, "A System in Search of Identity," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 48, no. 4 (April-May 1986).

<sup>3</sup> George R. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1987), p. 240.

<sup>4</sup> Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 1990), p.15.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941), p. 333.

<sup>6</sup> Here is an attempt to define the difference between a membership culture and a discipleship culture.

**Membership Model:** The member is the center of the church and its primary reason for existence. Culture, programs, worship, fellowship, stewardship, facility, location, etc., are to maintain and grow the member. Collectively, the church is a well-oiled machine.

**Discipleship Model:** God and His mission are the center of the church and its primary reason for existence. Culture, programs, worship, fellowship, stewardship, facility, location, etc., are to send members into the surrounding culture to make disciples. Collectively, the church is a living organism.

<sup>7</sup> Lyle Schaller, *The New Revolution* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> Carl F. George and Warren Bird, *How to Break Barriers: Capturing Overlooked Opportunities for Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Win Arn, *The Church Growth Ratio Book* (Monrovia, Calif.: Church Growth, 1990), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Blackmer, "A Personal Glimpse of the New Vice President," *Adventist Review*, July 5, 2005

<sup>12</sup> George Barna, *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2003), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> This term may not be familiar. It means that we have an all-encompassing across-the-board system that attempts to give pastoral coverage to all churches, even the very small ones. This is decided at the conference level and not left to the individual churches to struggle for pastoral leadership.

<sup>14</sup> George and Bird, p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Burrill, *Revolution in the Church* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Hart Research Center, 1993), p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Names used in illustrations in this book are pseudonyms.

<sup>17</sup> Ron Bennett's *Intentional Disciplemaking* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2001) is a great place to begin to understand this more fully.

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<sup>18</sup> *Sacred Pathways*, by Gary Thomas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), is a tool to help determine what spiritual disciplines may be helpful to you.

<sup>19</sup> “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

<sup>20</sup> The one exception to a pseudonym.

<sup>21</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), book 2, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Pub. Co., 1970), p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> “Update on the Unchurched,” *The Barna Report*, April-June 1999, p. 8. “Unchurched” is defined as someone who has not attended a worship service in the past six months other than a wedding, funeral, or holiday service.

<sup>24</sup> Not true! Ellen White spoke out about the evils in the larger churches, but not against the churches themselves. She saw that they could be strong centers of evangelism, and she financially supported the building of several.

<sup>25</sup> Bob Moorhead, *The Growth Factor* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1988), pp. 9, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> “Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).

<sup>28</sup> Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III, *Church Growth Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1980), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1942), p. 143

<sup>30</sup> G. McIntosh and G. Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them*, p. 109.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Paul Richardson, director of the Center for Creative Ministry in Lincoln, Nebraska, Apr. 27, 1999.

<sup>32</sup> C F. George and W. Bird, *Capturing Overlooked Opportunities for Church Growth*, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> Monte Sahlin, *Sharing Our Faith With Friends Without Losing Either* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1990), p. 191.

<sup>34</sup> *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1957), vol. 6, p. 165.

<sup>35</sup> Examples can be found in Acts 9:35, 42; 11:21, 26; 13:44, 49; 14:1, 21, 23; 16:5; 17:4, 6, 12; 19:20.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years, 1876-1891* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1982), vol. 3, pp. 93, 94.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmhaven Years, 1905-1915* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1982), vol. 6, p. 85.

<sup>38</sup> Ellen G. White manuscript 79, 1905, quoted in A. L. White, vol. 6, p. 125.

<sup>39</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), p. 480.

<sup>40</sup> Also found in Mark 9:38-40.

<sup>41</sup> Jon Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1993), pp. 18, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Sahlin, pp. 14-23.

<sup>43</sup> George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1988), p. 53

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<sup>44</sup> Philip G. Samaan, *Christ's Way of Reaching People* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1990), p. 34

<sup>45</sup> Andy Stanley, Reggie Joiner, and Lane Jones, *7 Practices of Effective Ministry* (Sisters, Oreg.: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 3.