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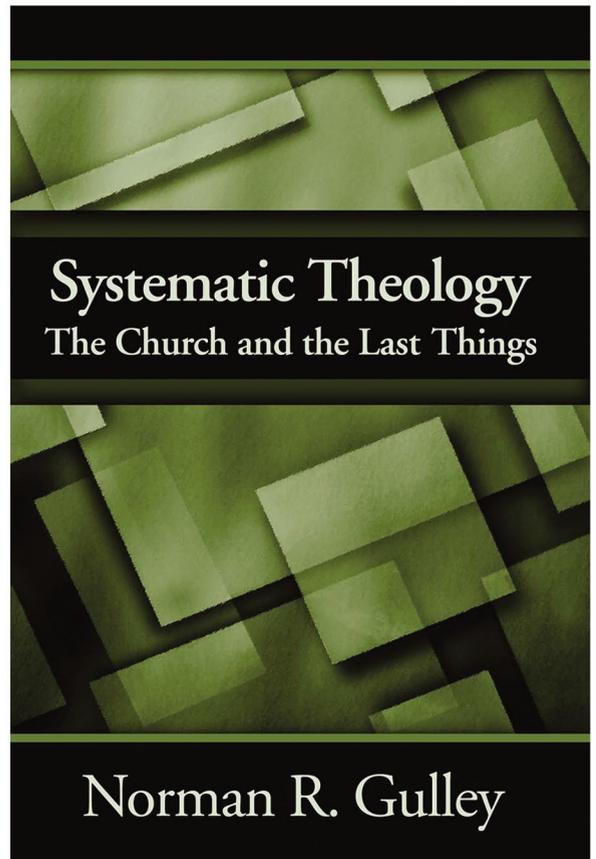
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## ► Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, Reformed, and Anglicans “drawn into deeper communion”

An agreement between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches, which settled one of the historic disagreements at the center of the Reformation, was the focus of a special service at Westminster Abbey on October 31, 2017. On this day 500 years ago, Martin Luther kick-started the Reformation by posting his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of All Saints’ Church—the Schlosskirche—in Wittenberg, Germany. Central to his argument was the theological principle that man can be reconciled to God—justification—through faith alone, rather than through good works, penance, or the buying of indulgences.

“When the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999, you resolved the underlying theological question of 1517, in a decisive moment for all churches in the search for unity and reconciliation,” the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said during the service in Westminster Abbey.

The 1999 joint declaration (JDDJ) has since been adopted by the World Methodist Council, in July 2006, and by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, in July this year. Last year, at its meeting in Lusaka, Zambia, the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) “welcomed and affirmed” the substance of the JDDJ. The ACC said that it “recognizes that Anglicans and Lutherans share a common understanding of God’s justifying grace . . . that we are accounted righteous and are made righteous before God only by grace through faith because of the merits of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and not on account of our works or merits.”

Archbishop Justin Welby presented the text of that ACC resolution to the

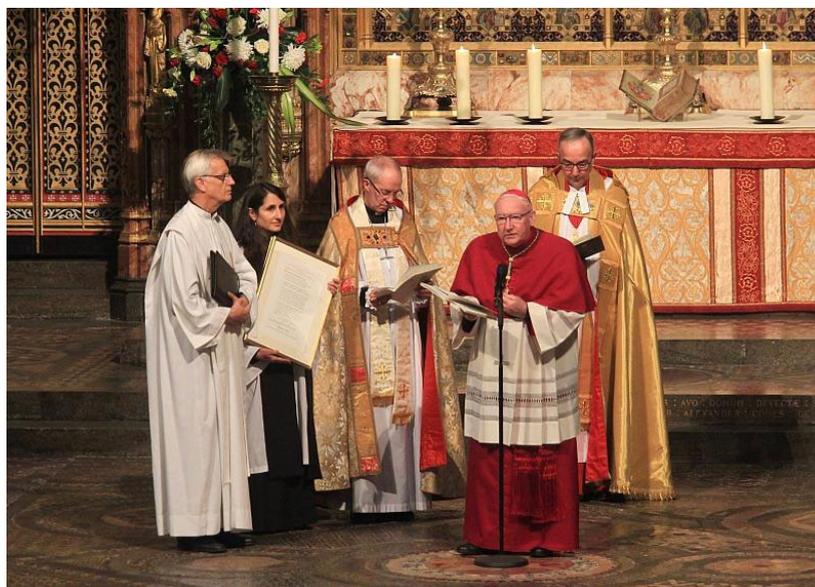


Photo: Andrew Dunsmore / Westminster Abbey

general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the Revd. Dr. Martin Junge; and the secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Bishop Brian Farrell. The act was witnessed by the Revd. Ivan Abrahams, general secretary of the World Methodist Council, and the Revd. Dr. Chris Ferguson, general secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

The public presentation of the ACC’s resolution on Reformation Day was a significant step on the journey toward church unity, Dr Junge said. “We are grateful to God that together with Catholic, Methodist and Reformed sisters and brothers, we are witnessing today the affirmation of the substance of the Joint Declaration of Doctrine of Justification by the Anglican Communion. May this moment serve as an important witness on the way of growing unity among our churches.”

The LWF’s assistant general secretary, the Revd. Dr. Kaisamari Hintikka, is responsible for ecumenical relations

with the Federation. She expressed her joy that what was originally a bilateral declaration between Lutherans and Catholics, has become a document that is owned by five Christian world communions. “The fact that all the historical Churches of the west have now a shared understanding of justification is a wonderful way to mark the Reformation anniversary,” she said. “What used to divide us, now actually unites us.”

It was a point echoed by Bishop Farrell, who said that “Convergence on this point draws Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, Reformed and Anglican Christians into a deeper communion, on the path to the full reconciliation of the Churches as the Lord wishes. We rejoice that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, solemnly signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999, has also been signed by the World Methodist Council in 2006 and, during this Commemoration Year of the Reformation, by the World



Communion of Reformed Churches,” the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said in a statement.

“On this very day it is being welcomed and received by the Anglican Communion at a solemn ceremony in Westminster Abbey. On this basis our Christian communions can build an ever closer bond of spiritual consensus and common witness in the service of the Gospel.”

Archbishop Justin asked, “Will we find from God alone the strength and grace to be a united blessing to His world, so that our witness of unity in diversity overcomes our fears of each other? Will we seize afresh in confidence the hope that God who never abandons His church will again reform us, so that the world may see that Jesus came from the Father?”

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation has been marked by churches around the world. [Anglican Communion News Service]

## Postscript

In a message to Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders, General Conference president Ted Wilson commented, “This is a definite sign of the times, pointing to developments which we have studied in Scripture and talked about for years. We are living in the very end tips of the toes of the statue of Daniel 2. The next huge event is Christ’s second coming. What a time to be alive and focus on the mission of the church of proclaiming Christ and His three angels’ messages entrusted to us by God Himself.

“It is very obvious that we are living in the last days of earth’s history. May God guide us as we proclaim the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 with Christ and His righteousness at the very core of the three angels’ messages and proclaim the fourth angel’s message of Revelation 18 calling people out of Babylon and back to the true worship of God.” [Editors] ❏

## Reformation edition (October 2017)—a commemoration

Your October 2017 issue of *Ministry* on the Reformation is adorable, beautiful, and totally informative. It is to be preserved until Jesus comes. No other church has the courage to commemorate such a God-given occasion except the Adventists. Let us continue to study the Bible for further truth in God’s word. May God continue to strengthen your efforts in this direction. Thank you.

—K. A. P. Yesudian, email

## Reformation edition (October 2017)—a challenge

Norman Gulley has an article in the October 2017 issue in which he states that “those who accept Christ’s death for them have no fear of any subsequent judgment.” I am assuming he is using John 5:24 as translated by the NKJV and other modern translations. Did Paul contradict Jesus when he wrote, “We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Romans 14:10)? Or did Peter have a different understanding when he wrote that “judgment must begin at the house of God” (1 Peter 4:17)? The Greek word *krisin* in John 5:24 more often means condemnation or punishment as the result of judgment (cf. Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, 1957). It seems to me the King James Version has the proper translation and is in harmony with the rest of Scripture.

—Allan Freed, Lacombe, Alberta, Canada

## Education edition (June 2017)—a confirmation

Thank you for addressing such a vital, and often neglected, emphasis regarding the children and youth of our church. My father was a pastor and my mother a church school teacher. Any time my father was called to a new pastorate, if there was not already a church school connected to that church,

there would be one by the beginning of the new school year, even if it was a one-teacher school (my mother).

Through the years the number of people who would thank my parents for their dedication to Christian education and express how their lives had been affected was a strong affirmation of their commitment. I appreciate especially the view of Shane Anderson who stated, “I believe Adventist education was divinely ordained. I, thus, do not preach about Adventist schools as though they are optional but, rather, as being essential to the development of—and in many cases, even the salvation of—our children.”

When I read Carlton Byrd’s words “If it’s God’s will, then it is God’s bill,” I thought of close friends of ours who had four children in Adventist schools and were asked how they were able to pay the bills. The response was, “We pay the school bill the same as the gas bill.” Our local church has a strong Christian Education Committee (every church should have one), and we encourage all members to contribute to our Christian Education funds so that every family who chooses to send their children to church school will be able to do so.

Who do we want to have influencing our children during the time they are developing their priorities and goals? Will those priorities and goals be for this world or for eternity? Where do we want our children choosing their lifelong friends? Will we allow the current emphasis on getting degrees from well-known and elite schools, where graduates have high possibilities for hiring into corporate America, to sway us from supporting and encouraging our Adventist schools where loyalty to God and service to our fellow man is encouraged?

Thank you for reporting the studies and dialog that has been going on among the leaders of our church to address these issues. ❏

—Esther Harter, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States

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# 10,000 percent church growth—do we have what it takes?

If we would humble ourselves before God, and be kind and courteous and tenderhearted and pitiful, there would be one hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one.”<sup>1</sup> I know what “only one” means.

They had a tradition in the Andrews University religion department. If you wanted a preaching appointment, you could sign up and a note would be placed in your campus mailbox. The note would give you the name of the church, the address, the distance, the membership figure, and the attendance figure. I signed up and received a note saying my church was in Indiana—three hours away—and it had twelve members. I said, “Oh, my. Three hours . . . twelve.” Then I read further: “Attendance, six.” I said, “Oh, my. Three hours . . . six.”

A seminarian asked me if I would be preaching anywhere on Sabbath. I gave the name of the church and he started to chuckle. “I know,” I said. “Twelve members, only six attend.”

“Six!” he said. “It’s four; I’ve been there.”

Arriving at the church, the members spent the first five minutes apologizing about why the fourth member was absent. So, there we were. By the time one went to the piano and another accompanied me onto the platform . . . as I said, I know what “only one” means.

*Humility, kindness, courtesy, tenderness, and compassion.* Glen Coon says, “If we should go so far as to spend ten times as much money as we are now spending, and by so doing succeed in learning those five graces that would bring to Christ one hundred times as many souls as we are now bringing, it would still be the most glorious investment this cause has ever made.”<sup>2</sup>

Men and women together—bearing fruit and multiplying (Gen. 1:28). Paul

says, “This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32, NKJV). The prerequisite for fruitfulness and multiplication is love and respect (verse 33). Our General Conference president, Elder Ted Wilson, said, “We need Christians who can manifest the love of Jesus as they work in the cities.”<sup>3</sup> Emerson Eggerichs says, “Love alone is not enough.”<sup>4</sup> The Lord also requires justice, mercy, and humility (Mic. 6:8).

We were created for fellowship and service. It was not good then and it is not good now that the man should be alone. Elder Wilson appealed, “Pray for men and women to unite in the proclamation of the prophetic Advent message of Holy Scripture.”<sup>5</sup> This is the unity for which Jesus prayed. Men and women, separated in the tragedy of the Fall, are to unite in the ministry of redemption. Elder Wilson urges, “No matter your age, nationality, or gender, God is calling you to be part of His mission.”<sup>6</sup>

One hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one—that’s a growth rate of 10,000 percent. Can love, respect, and compassion in a church literally win thousands? When the fruit of the Spirit is fully experienced in the believers, then the gifts of the Spirit will be fully expressed in the body. The gospel will reach the whole world. Ellen White says, “The members of the Christian church are designed expressly by God to live the Christ-life. . . . The kingdom of God is founded upon infinite love, compassion, and purity . . . Had God’s people lived up to all the light they have received . . . thousands upon thousands would have been converted, and the message of warning would have been proclaimed to the world.”<sup>7</sup>

So how did things go, that Sabbath in Indiana? After the service I asked,

“What do you do now? All three of you?” They said they would go to their various homes for lunch. I said, “You are from different families, then? So, you fellowship together at some time during the week?”

“No,” they said, “this is it! Oh, but some Sabbath afternoons we pass out leaflets inviting people to our church.”

I said, “Don’t pass out any more leaflets. Until you three can become a church family, it doesn’t make sense inviting anyone else to join you.”

I’ve learned that it doesn’t take two or three hundred to have church. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20, KJV). Jesse Wilson’s lead article reminds us that pastoral leadership and evangelism begin with listening. This may be in small groups, but it must always be in relationships. By intentionally embracing humility, courtesy, tenderness, and compassion, one can become one hundred, two can become two hundred, and three can become three hundred. Your church can experience one hundred conversions to the truth, where now there is only one. ❏

- 1 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1909), 189.
- 2 Glenn A. Coon, *Path to the Heart* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 182.
- 3 “Mission to Cities’ Outreach,” *Adventist Mission*, 2013, [am.adventistmission.org/mission-to-cities-outreach](http://am.adventistmission.org/mission-to-cities-outreach).
- 4 Emerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect* (Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2004), 1.
- 5 Ted N. C. Wilson, “A Personal Message from Ted N. C. Wilson Regarding Recent Disasters,” *Adventist Review* online, September 9, 2017, [www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story/5442-prayer-for-gods-protection-and-proclamation](http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story/5442-prayer-for-gods-protection-and-proclamation).
- 6 Ted N. C. Wilson, “God’s Mission,” *Adventist World*, September 2016, 5.
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church Containing Letters to Physicians and Ministers Instruction to Seventh-day Adventists* (Nashville, TN: June 1904), 18.

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# The first thing that every leader should do

**L**isten. That is the first thing that every leader should do. Before they plan anything, they should listen. Before they announce anything, they should listen. And certainly, before they change anything, they should listen. Luis Bush, respected missiologist, reminds us that “Listening is indispensable for collaboration in mission because it unveils the ways and means of God’s working on earth.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, effective listening is the doorway to the heart and to the mind of God. This should be *item one* on the agenda of any new leader.

To listen, according to *Merriam-Webster*, is “to pay attention to someone or something in order to hear what is being said, sung, played, etc.” It seems like such a simple thing, such an obvious thing. It seems like common sense. But ask a church member, office worker, or school teacher, and many of them will tell you that common sense is not as common as it used to be—at least not in this area.

More damage is done than you can imagine by leaders who lead before they listen. What is worse is the fact that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. And if the first impression is that the leader’s agenda came fully formed, trouble usually follows. Leaders, especially new leaders, need to listen before they leap. Michael Papay, the CEO and cofounder of Waggi, comments that listening is “the most

important ingredient for building strong leadership, healthy relationships, and thriving organizations.”<sup>2</sup>

For instance, my primary care physician is a longtime friend. In fact, he was a member of my church while he attended medical school at Loma Linda Medical School. I have visited his office more times than I can remember for annual physicals and ailments large and small. But as familiar as he is with my body, he never offers a diagnosis or writes up a prescription before he examines me. I would think he had lost his mind if he did. But that is what some pastors routinely do in their local churches. My physician examines, evaluates, diagnoses, and then prescribes. That is a good procedure for any leader.

When leaders neglect the listening stage, even if they experience success, often that success will never be fully shared or appreciated. It is painful to listen to successful leaders who are never really honored by their church or organization. No matter how hard they work, regardless of the trappings of growth or success, they are rarely thanked or appreciated. At times, it is as if there is a negative cloud always hovering over them. The problem can often be traced back to those early days. First impressions are lasting.

The Hippocratic oath is a great example of practical wisdom. A wise physician knows that the primary

responsibility to a patient is to “first, do no harm.” That is not just good wisdom for physicians; it is great counsel for pastors, presidents, principals, and anyone else called to lead. As gifted as you are, and as desperate as the situation may seem, in most cases, you have the luxury to take your time and listen. The old carpenters put it another way: “measure twice and cut once.” The meaning of that proverb is that we should listen, plan, and prepare well before we act.

William Ury, cofounder of the International Networking Organization, along with former President Jimmy Carter, is an acknowledged expert in negotiating and conflict resolution. He has negotiated with individuals and institutions as varied as Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez and the Harvard Business School. He considers effective listening to be the golden key to forging healthy individual and institutional relationships. He describes this as the essential, but often overlooked, half of communication. His TED talk in 2015, titled “The Power of Listening,”<sup>3</sup> has been amazingly popular. People are beginning to wake up to the benefits of listening for healthy relationships, churches, and businesses alike.

Tony Alessandra is in great demand as an international expert in the art of listening. He has coined the phrase “power listening” for the institutions and businesses that he trains. He

identifies four benefits of active listening. It

1. improves the environment at work, at home, and in sales;
2. reduces relationship tensions and hostilities;
3. saves time by reducing mistakes and understanding; and
4. reduces employee turnover.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there are certain important distinctions between a local church and a typical business. I would argue that it is generally more difficult to lead a church than most businesses, because

*It will take time  
for the pastor  
to move from  
aspirational to  
actual leader,  
but it is time  
well spent.*

the pastor must lead a volunteer army. But there are similarities that make active listening important to the success of both.

Now in the spirit of full disclosure, I might not be the best source for this subject. I was always impatient in the listening stage; especially when I confronted issues that I was confident I had the expertise to handle. But I have learned. And the older I get, the more convinced I am that a leader who misses or mishandles this listening stage is in for a rough leadership ride.

For some young pastors, it is almost impossible to resist the urge to immediately launch that great idea or proven program that fascinated them in seminary. They have studied long and hard, and the time has come for them to move from vision to action. Yet this urge to skip the listening stage can be a challenge for veteran pastors also. They have experienced some level of success in a previous church and assume that what works in one place will work in another. It's not necessarily so.

Why is it so important to look and listen early in your assignment, regardless of the organization? Why is listening the first order of business for any effective leader? Because when you are assigned a new responsibility, no matter how gifted you are, no matter how experienced you are, there are at least three things that you don't know:

### 1. You don't know everything

The Barna Group, in partnership with Pepperdine University, released an important study in 2017 titled "The State of Pastors."<sup>5</sup> It makes the case that there has never been a more difficult time to lead a local church than now. Why? Because of the complexity of it all. Pastors are struggling because the churches they pastor defy one-size-fits-all solutions and easy answers. The world that we minister to and work in today explodes with complexity.

As with pastors, so with leaders in other vocations. It is just as complex and challenging these days to lead a marketing firm, a nonprofit hospital, a charter school, or even a family. Complexity challenges us all. But do not make a difficult task an impossible task by attempting to handle it without counsel, without conversations, and without listening.

It became clear, as I was introduced to the last church I pastored, that practically everything I did as a pastor, someone in that church could do as well, if not better. Two of the former pastors of the church were members, along with their spouses and families. Professors from La Sierra and Loma Linda universities were sprinkled throughout

the congregation. The director of the Counseling Department at La Sierra was there and at least two homiletics professors. There were doctors, businesswomen, musicians, spoken word artists, and retirees. An early decision to listen and learn before I launched my ideas was one of the best decisions I ever made.

### 2. You don't know everyone

It's all about relationships. It's cliché but it's still true: people still do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. You never lose when you invest time in getting to know names and faces. One of the most undervalued ministries is *the ministry of presence*. Just being present can make a powerful impression. It provides the soil for relationship building. It creates the capital that you need now to get things done later.

The sobering reality for the talented new pastor is that he or she is not the actual leader of the church. Of course, the role, responsibility, and authority of pastor have been assigned, but it is impossible to "assign" effective leadership. It is not assigned; it is earned. The actual leaders are those who have built themselves into the lives of the congregation through relationships. It will take time for the pastor to move from aspirational to actual leader, but it is time well spent.

This is especially true for a new generation of ministers who have, unfortunately, been labeled as strong preachers but weak pastors. Here are some quick suggestions:

- Work on remembering names.
- Show appreciation publicly.
- Attend meaningful social events.
- Never miss a wedding or funeral, if you can help it.
- Spend time with children and seniors.
- Be yourself.

### 3. You don't know everywhere

Each church and organization has its own culture. Culture is the way

things are done, based on shared values and history. It takes time to learn this important truth. What is valued in one culture is vexing in another; what is rewarded in one culture is rejected in another. A leader must take the time to look and listen, in order to understand the organizational culture.

I was assigned to a particularly complex and challenging church that demanded attention to the culture. There were unseen laws and landmines that I needed to uncover. I went through a listening exercise that served me well. I announced to the church that we would be meeting together at a popular local restaurant to discuss the past, present, and future of the church. We made arrangements with the restaurant to meet there twice a week for dessert.

We organized a simple schedule that allowed members to come to the restaurant on a day that was best for them. We reserved a nice spot, and members chose desserts that we paid for. It took a while because the church

was fairly large, but week after week we listened. We learned valuable information about the church and what the members felt about it. The information was extremely valuable later as we explored the mission and vision of that local church. It was not cheap; but the investment was well worth it.

## Conclusion

These are some things I have learned, mostly the hard way, about active listening for effective leadership. I have not mastered these tips, but I have seen them work:

- Pick a positive location to listen.
- Remove distractions.
- Give your undivided attention.
- Stay focused.
- Keep an open mind.
- Do not interrupt.
- Ask questions.
- Take notes.
- Summarize what you think you have heard.

I am privileged these days to spend quite a bit of time working with leaders and local churches. I am regularly struck by how critical the early days are to the success of the leader. The late Steven Covey was fond of saying that we should begin with the end in mind. He was right. If you take the time to plan and prioritize listening early, you will reap the benefits later. Trust me. 

- 1 Luis Bush, "The Power of Listening," *Abstract, Missiology* 33, no. 1 (January 2005): 17–28.
- 2 Michael Papay, "The Power of Listening: What It Means and Why It Matters," *Huffpost*, October 27, 2016, [huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-power-of-listening-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters\\_us\\_58129614e4b08301d33e079b](http://huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-power-of-listening-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters_us_58129614e4b08301d33e079b).
- 3 William Ury, "The Power of Listening," TED video, 15:40, published online January 7, 2015, ed. ted.com/on/TXnUdvou.
- 4 Tony Alessandra, "The Power of Listening," YouTube video, 42:19, published by Various Artists—Topic, December 17, 2014, [youtube.com/watch?v=lamZAwEf8SY](http://youtube.com/watch?v=lamZAwEf8SY).
- 5 Barna, *The State of Pastors: How Today's Faith Leaders Are Navigating Life and Leadership in an Age of Complexity*, 2017, [barna.com/themes/pastors/](http://barna.com/themes/pastors/).

## The not-so-random visit

One summer evening, we got into the car to visit some new friends that we had never met. The Southwestern Union had mailed 20,000 Bible study request cards to the homes in my pastoral district. That day my wife, Amy, accompanied me and a number of church members as we prayerfully prepared to visit those who had expressed interest in the study materials. It would have been much easier to follow up these contacts by mail, but we wanted to personally connect with our new friends in the community.

It was a random zip code mailing, a random response, a random evening picked for follow-up, and a random decision by my wife to accompany me. A door that Amy knocked on revealed a woman named Gail randomly and excitedly waiting for someone to study

the Bible with her. What could be even more random than that? It turned out that her father had been a friend of my wife's late grandfather in upstate New York—more than 50 years ago.

Random? I don't think so. God had prearranged for us to meet Gail. If we had simply mailed her the Bible study guide, we may have never made this remarkable connection. This was a divine appointment—and our studies together have been glorious.

"Every soul is fully known to Jesus." "He knows us all by name. He knows the very house in which we live, the name of each occupant. He has at times given directions to His servants to go to a certain street in a certain city, to such a house, to find one of His sheep."\*

We are convinced there are people just waiting to be contacted. "But how

can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent?" (Rom. 10:14, 15, NLT). God will bless us with divine appointments as we obey the Great Commission. 

—Brad Minett pastors the Lufkin, Nacogdoches, Hemphill, and Corrigan Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Texas.

\* Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 480, 479.



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# Five keys to opening the front door

**Y**ou should check out our church, it's so warm and friendly!" We had just moved to a new area, and the invitation sounded genuine and appealing. So that weekend my wife, young daughter, and I headed, somewhat nervously, in the direction of my friend's church, even though we knew that she was going to be out of town.

After the umpteenth wrong turn, we arrived a little late, only to discover that the parking lot was full. Finding an innocuous patch of grass, and hoping we were not contravening any church parking rules, we offloaded and headed for the entrance, up a steep flight of stairs, hauling our stroller with us. At least, we thought, it was the entrance. After several attempts, we realized it was locked. So, down the stairs we went to the next door and tried that. That was a mistake! It was a class in session; they anxiously shooed us out and told us to go around the building.

Finally, we hit the jackpot. An unassuming door in the corner of the building revealed a lady in a floral dress, animatedly talking to her friend. Barely pausing in her conversation to mumble "Happy Sabbath," she handed us a bulletin that looked like an artifact from the 1970s. We stood there, confused, hoping she would direct us to the children's division. When that did not work, we guessed a hallway to

our left, and our intuition eventually led us to the right classroom.

The lady in charge of Kindergarten was sweet and friendly. We left the class much more hopeful and certainly less frazzled. Unfortunately, she was also the last person in the church to speak to us. The members talked to each other, but no one even glanced in our direction. We were strangers, lost in an unfamiliar world. We had to find the sanctuary, the bathroom, and the mother's room all by ourselves. The sermon was nice; the music, excellent; but we never felt like this was a place we could call our church home.

I recount this story in order to ask an important question: *How can we open our church doors so that people who attend can feel genuinely welcomed?*

I would like to share with you five keys that have helped churches successfully reach guests and transition them into church life. These keys have been incredibly effective in making churches that I have worked with become "sticky churches" that not only attract guests but keep them coming.

## Key 1—Make first impressions count

If you want to open that door wide, you had better do it quickly. First impressions matter. Malcom Gladwell, in his book *Blink*, talks about "thin slicing," where we use little slivers of information about a person to quickly

form a larger opinion.<sup>1</sup> Nelson Searcy states, "Seven minutes is all you get to make a positive first impression. In the first seven minutes of contact with your church, your first-time guests will know whether or not they are coming back."<sup>2</sup>

An absent-minded greeter, a difficult-to-find bathroom, a crowded foyer, and an awkward Bible study class are enough "thin slices" for people to form a negative impression of your church. I remember a church that we were attending for the first time and where we decided to stay for lunch. At that time, I had three little kids. In the crowded fellowship hall, it was clearly going to be a challenge to seat all of us together. Fortunately, we realized that if we moved one lady's handbag just one seat down, there would be enough space at one end of the table. Two minutes later, the owner of the handbag came across and berated us in front of everyone. It was a lasting first impression of that church's fellowship.

It is helpful to see your church through the eyes of a first-time guest. Some churches even ask "mystery shoppers" to check out their church and give an evaluation of their experience. You may want to visit another church and record your own observations. Is it easy to find parking? Can you locate the entrance? Do you know where the children go? Do you feel alienated, assisted, welcomed, or

smothered? How does it work in your own church? Who gets prime parking? The members or the visitors?

First impressions are often picked up from the little things that we do not notice. A broken window or the stain in the corner all communicate a subtle message. And nothing more quickly makes a bad impression than a dirty bathroom. “When people see that you care for your facilities, they’ll not

## Key 2—Be genuine

A mistake that churches make is to turn treating guests into a strategy. This is not about turning our churches into a mall; this is, instead, about connecting with people and letting them know that this is a place where they can find Jesus. Mark Waltz says, “First impressions aren’t about making the institution look good. They are about making Jesus look good. They are

Part of communicating care is not to overwhelm people. When I visited one small church with my family, their eyes lit up as if seeing their first visitor in the last decade. Twenty people greeted us before we could even get to our seat. As Christopher Walker states, “You want to avoid ‘the human wall’—so many layers of greeting and greeters that it seems too friendly or overwhelming, particularly for the

*Let’s all create sticky churches where people find grace, a warm welcome, and an opportunity to fall in love with Jesus.*

only tend to take better care with your space, but they will also more easily believe you’ll care for them.”<sup>3</sup>

Because greeters are your first impression of the people at your church, they should be specifically selected for their gift of friendliness. They should know how to pick up on cues about when to engage. “A good rule of thumb is eye contact. If a guest makes eye contact with a greeter, there’s a good chance they want a bit of interaction. But if a guest doesn’t sustain eye contact, they want to be left alone.”<sup>4</sup> Bear hugs and kisses on the cheek may be appropriate in some cultures, but, in general, they invade the space bubbles of strangers. Good greeters have good instincts on this.

Inside the church, make sure the restrooms are easy to find and there are helpful people at every step of the way. In our church, we do not just point you in the right direction, we walk you there. We also know that guests that come together need to sit together, even if members have to move.

When you get the first seven minutes right, you have already made a lasting impression.

about communicating personal value to the people who matter to him.”<sup>5</sup>

If we simply try to “impress” people with how nice our church is, they see right through the pasted-on smiles and slick strategies. This is the reason for selecting greeters who have a heart for people. When you pull your team of greeters together, “rather than presenting a ninety-nine page how-to manual, paint a broad-stroke picture of the atmosphere you want to create.”<sup>6</sup> When they care from the heart, guests notice the difference.

Both the greeters and the members need training in how to help guests. Mark Waltz suggests using the HELLO acronym to help people start up conversations more naturally:

- H—“Hello,” or “Hi, how are you?”
- E—Engagement, pausing to look people briefly in the eye, connecting with them and sharing your name.
- L— Listen and tune in.
- L— Listen some more, ask clarifying questions, and restate what you have heard.
- O—Offer assistance if needed.<sup>7</sup>

first-time visitor. You want to be sure your greeting is experienced as sincere and not as artificial friendliness.”<sup>8</sup>

## Key 3—Make it memorable

Disney knows all about making guests feel special. In their book, *Be My Guest*, they state that the secret to their success lies in creating “memorable experiences.”<sup>9</sup> They think through the potential photo albums that people will look at misty-eyed, long after the experience is over. While we are not a company that needs to satisfy customers, we can create “memorable experiences” that will make them want to come back and experience the grace they found in our fellowship.

When the apostle Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta, he noted that the people “showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold” (Acts 28:2, NKJV). Unexpected hospitality, an *unusual kindness*, makes an event memorable.

Imagine meeting Abraham on a hot day in the desert.<sup>10</sup> Would you

be surprised at this elderly man running out to greet you? Would you be amazed as he bowed low before you and implored you to spend a little time with him, bringing you water and serving you? Would you be impressed as he pulled together a delicious meal at the last minute, giving you the very best he had to offer, standing to one side, remaining attentive to your every need? I think you would want to come back and visit him again!

We can plan for “spontaneous” acts of kindness in our congregations. Keep umbrellas on hand for greeters and deacons to escort people when it rains. Have books available that you can give away. Remember people’s names—use their name three times and link it to a person or place you already know.<sup>11</sup> As you show attention to people’s needs, remember their names, and listen to them, you create a memorable experience. But all of this requires a plan.

### Key 4—Interact intentionally

At our church plant, we have a three-tier system of greeting. The first line is the greeters who meet the guest at the door, warmly greet them, and hand them a bulletin. If our greeters discover they are first-time visitors, we then direct them to a welcome station.

There is no guest book. We found that most people (other than older members visiting from other churches) do not want to write down their names and addresses for everyone else to see. Instead, we have them fill out a welcome card so that we can send them something in the mail to thank them for coming to our church. In one church, we immediately gave them a welcome packet and a rose. In some churches, the welcome card will be collected right away, and in other churches, the welcome card would be dropped into the offering plate. Do whatever works best for you, but be intentional in your approach.

After a brief stop at our welcome station, a guide/host is introduced.

This person will usher them to the children’s division or a Bible study class. If need be, we will sit with the person, or family, to help make them people-comfortable (this is especially important for single people). We chat with them and find out their names and what brought them to our church. We make sure we invite them to either a fellowship meal or to have lunch at our house. We try to think of who we can introduce them to at the church who would have similar interests. The host then emails a short description of that person to the guest coordinator, who puts the information into a Google sheet and matches it with the welcome card. By Sunday evening, the pastor and the elders get an update of all the visitors. By the time a person has visited for three weeks, we know that person’s name and basic background.

This requires not only intentionality but training. We read books (look through some of the resources listed in the end notes) and train our members in how to reach out. All of us can be an Abraham. This intentional interaction has led guests to say that “we are one of the friendliest churches that they know.” We take Paul’s words to heart, “Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity” (Col. 4:5, NLT).

### Key 5—Follow-up

It is amazing how many churches do a great job of making people feel welcome, but that is where it all ends. They may get the first seven minutes right, but then you are on your own. “A truly welcoming church” extends that welcome again and again. Here are some proven ways in which you can retain those guests and help them to keep coming back.

*Offer a free gift.* Many people think that churches are simply here to take your money. When you give without expecting anything back, it motivates them to return. *Have a guest table in your foyer.* This is a place where you can find the pastor or chat with one

of the elders. *Send an email within 36 hours and a card within a week.* We like to have our hosts reach out to thank them for coming and invite them to our next service.<sup>12</sup>

When a guest comes back, we do our best to make their second experience as memorable as the first. We particularly look to connect guests with members. We do not try to persuade them to join our church. We simply show a genuine, caring interest in them and their family. However, we do highlight programs and activities they may be interested in. We try to meet needs that they may have. We communicate that this is a church where you can get involved, but where you can also feel your way along and take it easy.

### Conclusion

Using these five keys has helped us grow two church plants from 50 to more than 200 in attendance. I believe they can help your churches grow too. Let us all create sticky churches where people find grace, a warm welcome, and an opportunity to fall in love with Jesus. 

- 1 Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2007).
- 2 Nelson Searcy, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests Into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 49.
- 3 Jonathan Malm, *Unwelcome: 50 Ways Churches Drive Away First-Time Visitors* (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Church Communication, 2014), 36.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 5 Mark Waltz, *First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013), 6.
- 6 Waltz, *First Impressions*, 89.
- 7 Waltz, *First Impressions*, 93–99.
- 8 Christopher Walker, *Church Greeters 101: Putting the Pieces Together for an Effective Greeting Team and Ministry*, 3rd ed. (Glen Allen, VA: EvangelismCoach.org press, 2013), 52.
- 9 Theodore Kinni, *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service* (New York, NY: Disney Enterprises, 2011).
- 10 See Genesis 18:1–8.
- 11 Leslie Parrot, *Serving as a Church Greeter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), has great practical tips for church greeters, including how to remember names.
- 12 Check out more ideas in chapter 5 of *Fusion* by Nelson Searcy.

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# Innovative evangelism part 1: A new paradigm

It is challenging for a church, using the traditional evangelism model, to preach the gospel to a postmodern audience. Scripture speaks of the tribe of Issachar as having leaders who “understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take” (1 Chron. 12:32, NLT). We must adapt to the times and use all available means of witnessing. By incorporating multiple evangelistic strategies year-round, traditional as well as innovative, our churches would have a greater opportunity to help people experience the gospel.

Knowing that we need new ideas and coming up with those new ideas are not the same. Fortunately, we have churches full of people from all walks of life who can help us generate and integrate innovative evangelism. The best creative evangelism is what the members come up with to meet the needs around them through loving relationships. Evangelistic ministries birthed by the members work best when there is a heart to reach people. It is not the ministry but rather the love and prayers that make the difference. The goal is not a quick surge in baptism or membership numbers but rather the fostering of long-term, Christ-centered relationships, with no strings attached.

Jesus called us to “‘Go’” (Matt. 28:19) out into the communities rather than waiting for them to come to us. As followers of Christ we, as individuals,

are expected to do more than just speak Christ’s truth to the world; we are also to share His life. Jesus “affirmed that the worship of God is central to what it means to be a disciple. But . . . He did not make the building—or corporate worship—the destination. His destination was the people God wanted to touch, and those were, with few exceptions, people who wouldn’t have spent much time in holy places.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus intentionally socialized at weddings, feasts, people’s homes, and even walking by the road or sea. Churches, therefore, would be best served when they are intentional about not relying solely on denominationally provided programs and evangelistic models.

I (Joseph) discovered the potential for member-generated creative evangelistic ideas when I saw this in action at one of the churches I pastored. A church member, Diane, saw an angel tree in the mall over the Christmas holidays. The tree was filled with names of poor families in the community. She took ten names back to the church. Within minutes the names were gone. Church members wanted to drop off the gifts for the families in person rather than having the angel tree organization deliver them in order to build a relationship with the families so that the church could look in on them and be there to help with any future needs.

The organization agreed, and Diane grabbed some more names off the

tree to take back to the church. That winter, the church provided gifts for 100 families. The church was a beacon of hope for those families and a reflection of the love of Christ. Diane’s impulse to have individual church members fill a community need sparked in me a desire to tap into the creativity present in each of us for innovative ideas regarding evangelism. This led to the creation of a culture in the church in which eyes and ears were opened and encouragement was given for every member to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in order to take part in filling community and personal needs.

We want to invite you to take part in a paradigm shift in your thinking about evangelism and evangelistic strategies. This article will focus on the changing paradigms of how people come to the Lord, the need for a church to exist in more than just the building, and creating an innovative, evangelistic, idea-generating environment.

## New paradigm: Show and tell

The old model of evangelism was a movement from facts (head knowledge) to faith to feelings (heart knowledge). In the age of modernity, being presented with facts would lead to a change in faith, which would then lead to an experience within a like-minded community. For example, proof texts were presented about the validity of the

Sabbath. People agreed with and had faith in those facts, so they started keeping the Sabbath.

Today, our postmodern world is shifting to one of post-truth, where feelings hold sway more than facts.<sup>2</sup> As such, the new model of evangelism should be a movement from feelings, to faith, to facts.<sup>3</sup> This requires a larger commitment on the part of members. Relationships must be formed first; the unchurched need to see how Christianity works. They need to feel like a part of something, part of a community.<sup>4</sup> For example, when we share about the Sabbath, proof texts

information. If what we learn requires a change in behavior, we are less likely to embrace the needed change and more likely to reject the new information. But if we have already changed our behavior, it is much easier to adapt our beliefs to match.<sup>5</sup>

In a *New York Times* article, Maria Konnikova presents several studies about the ineffectiveness of facts to change peoples' minds. Interestingly, it was found that when you feel good about yourself, you are more open to accepting new facts.<sup>6</sup> In the realm of evangelism, this means we should

life in order to rest and recharge. Kristy invited Alexis to church socials and tried to do a Bible study with her. But these did not increase Alexis's interest in going to church services. Over the years, the women moved away from each other but still kept in touch. Without pressuring, Kristy would share devotional messages or Bible texts from her church newsletter that Alexis seemed to respond to and comment on. Recently, with no prompting from Kristy, Alexis signed up for the weekly church newsletter devotional and continues to reach out for general spiritual guidance.

*The best creative evangelism is what the members come up with to meet the needs around them through loving relationships.*

and history lessons should not be the place to start. One should start with fellowship and relationship building, showing how living within a Sabbath rest helps strengthen family bonds, church communities, and an awareness of God. Let the unchurched have a shared experience of the Sabbath as a delight. They will want a repeat of that experience, which can lead to faith in the principles of the Sabbath. They then ask for facts about the Sabbath because they are already experiencing the joy of it. This is the "show and tell" paradigm.

The same is true for the Second Coming. People need to see how living in the hope of the Second Coming provides purpose and strength for everyday living. Once this is seen, the unchurched can begin to believe for themselves in the reality of the Second Coming. It is then that they will begin to ask for the facts.

Dr. Fredric Neuman observed in his psychotherapy practice that, for change to take place, more is needed than new

not present the facts of the gospel without sharing the love Christ has for every individual. When someone finds their value and self-worth in God, they are more open to understanding and absorbing the truth of the gospel.

After-church activities, such as a picnic by the lake, a hike in the local forest, or a birding expedition, are wonderful opportunities to build relationships with those who do not feel comfortable in a church. Eating together is another way in which to build meaningful relationships and to share how Christ works in our lives.

Several years ago, Kristy was introduced to Alexis, the sister of a church member. The two women were the same age and became fast friends, even though Alexis was not a Christian. They spent time together talking and sharing meals. They would often go to the zoo on Sabbath afternoons, watching the animals and enjoying nature. Alexis began to understand the importance of taking a break from work and the busyness of

"In the end Christians must understand that unbelievers will not accept what we say about Christ until they first see the truth manifested in our lives."<sup>7</sup> We must first show people what life with Christ looks like and why it is better, in order for us to earn the trust necessary to be believed—that we are able to share the facts that people may not even realize they were searching for.

### **New paradigm: Go and do**

In the past, writes Michael L. Simpson, people would come to the church for answers: the church became their path to God. Today, few people seek out a church for answers to life's questions.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, "evangelism must often take place as an encounter outside the church. The church's role is to prepare Christians for these encounters and provide safe entry points for new believers to enter into church life."<sup>9</sup>

Ethan saw people converging at a local park. When he discovered that they

were preparing to put on a triathlon, he wondered what he could do to help. The organizers said that they could always use more water. Feeling inspired, Ethan gathered some church members, who donated water for the triathlon. For those who wanted to help pass out water, the triathlon's sponsor covered the insurance and training of volunteers. Because Ethan saw a need, church members were able to meet some great people and fill a need in the community. Church leaders could encourage members to join with other organizations as volunteers. This may be just one way in which we can "go and do."

In meetings, Andy Stanley "will go around the room and ask staff members to report on who they are spending time with. If staff members are not talking to people who are hell bound, then something's out of balance in their schedule and priorities."<sup>10</sup> He even encourages pastors to spend more time with the unchurched than with their members.<sup>11</sup> Ellen White also spoke against ministers who focused their time only on their churches because "the ministers have other work to do. They must carry the message of truth to those who know it not."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, everyone should make an effort to spend time with unchurched people as a normal part of their day. When we intentionally spend time with people, our eyes will be opened to their needs. When coupled with an evangelistic heart, members will be able to "establish ministries that allow the church to be present in the community, and have a process by which they are able to draw these unchurched people into the safety of Christ and a local church."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus's method of one-on-one, personal contact was representative of the "special place in His heart for those shunned and rejected by society regardless of their socioeconomic level."<sup>14</sup> You do not need a ministerial license to have the Holy Spirit work through you to reach people. "Angels of God attend you to the dwellings of those you visit. This work cannot be done by proxy. Money lent or given will not accomplish it. Sermons will not do it. By visiting the

people, talking, praying, sympathizing with them, you will win hearts. This is the highest missionary work that you can do. To do it, you will need resolute, persevering faith, unwearied patience, and a deep love for souls."<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after he was baptized, Peter was asked to help out with Pathfinders. He was surprised to see only about 15 kids in the club, and all were from the church. Peter envisioned a club with half of its members from the community. He had the kids invite friends to come and join Pathfinders. They worked to make the club known within the community. He opened the gym to the community, had monthly social events for the kids and their families, and had the Pathfinders actively involved with church services on a regular basis. Under his committed leadership and creativity, the club tripled in size in less than three years, with less than half being from the church. Several families came to be church members through the influence the club had on their children.

Peter helped his church develop a paradigm shift for not only the Pathfinders but also the church as a whole. The members learned the value of having nonmembers included in ministries and taking those ministries outside of the walls of the church.

In the research done for this article, we found several examples of churches going outside their walls to meet with the community. Many churches meet at a local park for vespers, programs, Sabbath lunches, or even to do Vacation Bible School. Small groups are held in members' homes, and youth groups meet at the local coffee shop or restaurant. Some churches incorporate community service projects into the calendar for months with a fifth Sabbath. Others host block parties, have church at the beach, or go camping in the mountains. One group opened a prayer café in a local strip mall.<sup>16</sup> All of these ideas involve going out and being available, consistently, outside of the church building.

Robert Henderson shares his dream of what this type of church without walls would look like: "a congregation

of down-to-earth, wholesome Christian folk who are 'radioactive' with their love of Jesus Christ, who are alert to and praying for all of their non-Christian friends, and who are able to enter into gentle conversations with these friends which would bring them to the knowledge of the Lord in sensitive ways."<sup>17</sup>

Considering the amount of loneliness in our world today, we would do well to focus on building relationships and connections with others. These connections will help people realize that we are sharing with them out of genuine concern and love for them with no strings attached. This means befriending coworkers, neighbors, the parents of your child's friends, etc.

Ellen White encourages believers: "Wherever you can gain access to the people by the fireside, improve your opportunity. Take your Bible, and open before them its great truths. Your success will not depend so much upon your knowledge and accomplishments, as upon your ability to find your way to the heart. By being social and coming close to the people, you may turn the current of their thoughts more readily than by the most able discourse. The presentation of Christ in the family, by the fireside, and in small gatherings in private houses, is often more successful in winning souls to Jesus than are sermons delivered in the open air, to the moving throng, or even in halls or churches."<sup>18</sup>

It is through the forming and growing of relationships that you gain credibility and the right to be heard.<sup>19</sup>

Some of those reading may be saying, "But all of my friends are Christian!" Bill Tenny-Brittian counters that "a Christian without an unchurched friend is like a dash of salt in the ocean: it doesn't do anyone any good, and no one even knows it is there."<sup>20</sup> Forming lasting friendships takes time, energy, and intentionality—things that are often in short supply in today's Instagram and Twitter world.

## New paradigm: Live and imagine

Have you ever considered that all worship and evangelism is

contemporary? At least it was when the services and programs we now consider traditional were first instituted. They were new and innovative. “The challenge and opportunity, however, is to shape liturgy and church life [and evangelism] in ways indigenous to the cultures in the community, in this generation.”<sup>21</sup>

Churches need to celebrate ministry regardless of outcome, encouraging believers to zealously make use of every evangelistic ministry and opportunity. However, we must remember that “humans do not convert nonbelievers; only the Holy Spirit does that. Consequently, our responsibility is to serve as capable conduits of God’s love through a clear expression of the gospel message. Whether or not the person accepts Christ is beyond human control.”<sup>22</sup> However, still aim for excellency; put your best effort into all that you do. An evangelistic ministry that is poorly planned or executed can work as a disservice to the glory of God and leave people with a bitter taste.<sup>23</sup> Take the time to bathe your ministry in prayer and properly prepare, doing all in service to Christ.

Harry had a passion for missing members. He knew that many were still in the community but had stopped coming to church. With permission from the pastor, he started a Saturday morning breakfast specifically for former members. No topic was off limits—they could even bash the church while drinking their coffee. What was important was listening without judgment and rebuilding relationships. He was a little worried about how the members would respond to this new ministry. But the pastor told him to go ahead; he would deal with any member complaints. After several years of spending time in this group, some of these former members started rejoining the larger congregation.

What worked for Harry was his focus on relationships and the desire to share himself with former members; that, coupled with a grace-filled and welcoming church congregation. When we take the time to be trained in relationship building (how to be a better spouse,

parent, friend, and neighbor), evangelism will be a natural outgrowth. If people do not like you or know you, why would they want to worship with you? If you are unlikeable, what does that say about the God whom you serve and want others to know? On the other hand, if you are compassionate and empathetic to people’s needs and genuinely care about them as individuals, that is the God they will see through you. As believers in relationship with Christ, we are to do our best within the church to create “environments where people are encouraged and equipped to pursue intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influence with outsiders.”<sup>24</sup> Maintaining an intimate relationship with God will help you to be in tune to the imaginings He puts in your heart for ways in which to reach out to His children.

When we encourage church members to live with intention in regard to others, they are better able to discover new and innovative ways in which to reach those around them. In this way, they can “live and imagine,” using their God-given creativity for evangelism. Members can then “take seriously Jesus’ command in Mark 7 to avoid letting traditions get in the way of obeying God or ministering to people. Creativity is part of their thinking, and change is integral to their strategy. They’re willing to take risks for the sake of those who are lost, but they learn from their mistakes and constantly readjust their course.”<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Friendship must be at the root of all kinds of evangelism. It is through long-term relationships that we are able to see and meet the unique personal and community needs of those in our sphere of influence. Taking the time to see and sympathize with these needs is at the heart of innovative evangelism. This type of commitment is necessary, if we are to model Paul’s actions of identifying with people in order to share the message of salvation (1 Cor. 9:19–23). It is the task of each one of us to look for ways in which to reach the unchurched. ❖

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# God's two seals:

## The seal of the gospel and the apocalyptic seal

**T**he Bible speaks about two seals of God. Ephesians informs us of the first one, and the book of Revelation speaks of the second. While the second is familiar to Seventh-day Adventists as part of their understanding of end-time events leading to the second coming of Christ, the first may not be as familiar.

Given at different times, these two seals are different, but complementary. Only those who receive the first seal will receive the second one. The first seal indicates our redemptive surety now: it is received at the beginning of our spiritual journey when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The second one is our eschatological assurance: it plays its role at the very end of time just before the close of probation. Both are important, and a study of both will bring to our Christian walk a new dimension, fresh insight, renewed commitment, and deep joy.

### The first seal: The seal of the gospel

Ephesians speaks of the first seal twice. The first mention is Ephesians 1:13, 14: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal [Greek: *esphragisthēte*],<sup>1</sup> the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the

redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of His glory.”<sup>2</sup> Paul states that at the moment one surrenders oneself to Jesus and accepts Him as Savior, the Holy Spirit seals that believer in Christ for the day of redemption. Thus, the Spirit of God marks Christ’s followers with the seal of salvation when they first believe. I call this “the seal of the gospel.”

The thought sequence in the Ephesians passage needs to be noted: (1) we heard the Word of truth, the gospel of salvation; (2) we believed in Jesus Christ; (3) we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit; and (4) the Holy Spirit is given to us as a deposit (Greek: *arrabōn*, Eph. 1:14; 2 Cor. 1:22) or as a firstfruit (Greek: *aparchē*, Rom. 8:23, 24). The “seal” here refers to that divine act whereby the Holy Spirit becomes the pledge and Guarantor of our salvation-redemption. Thus, the Holy Spirit guarantees our inheritance. He guarantees our redemption as long as we remain faithful to our calling until the end of time, when we will be God’s possession in our entirety, and we will have a perfect relationship with God face-to-face.<sup>3</sup>

The gift of the Spirit is like a down payment of the inheritance we have in God. This first recompense guarantees complete future payment. The Spirit is the initial installment in our salvation; He is also our assurance that the full future inheritance and salvation will be

delivered. Salvation does not depend on our achievements, performance, or actions; for this is thoroughly and uniquely God’s work. The Greek word *arrabōn* means “deposit, pledge, guarantee of what is to come.” The word is used also in 2 Corinthians 1:22, where sealing and guaranteeing are put together, and in 2 Corinthians 5:5, where that entire activity is traced to God, who “has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

This leads us to the second passage on God’s first seal. Here Paul cautions believers on their relationship to the Holy Spirit: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed [Greek: *esphragisthēte*] for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).<sup>4</sup> The Greek expression occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in Ephesians 1:13—and always in relation to believing in Christ. Note that in the life of a believer, Paul’s affirmation of the sealing by the Holy Spirit, in both texts, is a past event: “you were sealed.” Believers in Christ are sealed by the Holy Spirit for the eschatological event of total redemption.

Paul exhorts Christians to maintain proper ethical behavior in as much as an obedient life is a natural flow from a living faith. Sealing is God’s gift: His response to our response to His love and surrender to Him. Believers already have the Holy Spirit, and for that reason

they should not disappoint and sadden Him by wrong actions and conduct: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” Not only that, “but among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people” (Eph. 4:31; 5:3). They should be “imitators of God,” following His example “as dearly loved children,” and walk in love (Eph. 5:1, 2).

Paul’s admonition to the believers not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph. 4:30) is a direct plea: Do not act like God’s people in the past (see Isaiah’s almost identical appeal in Isaiah 63:10). We have the Holy Spirit and need to stay in a right relationship with Him, fulfilling the will of God. Why live contrary to Him whose ownership seal we wear? Why place our eternal destiny in jeopardy?

Sealing has several meanings, three of which are to be noted: (1) a sign or proof of authenticity; (2) a sign of ownership; and (3) a sign of approval. By sealing, God proclaims that we belong to Him; we are His own; He approves and accepts our faith in order that we may grow in Him; and He will help us live authentic lives of love, faith, and hope (2 Cor. 13:14; 2 Pet. 3:18). All these nuances are relevant for God’s sealing of those who believe in Him. As a sign of ownership, sealing indicates belonging to, as well as an approval of, a product. This gives a sense of validity and genuineness: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor. 1:21, 22). “Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor. 5:5). The possession is seen as God’s possession of His people, not their possession of salvation (Eph. 1:14; see also Mal. 3:17).

The “you” in Ephesians 1:13 and 2:11 refers to believers in Christ. Through their union with Christ, they

belong to Him, and the Holy Spirit puts His seal on them in order to assert the new relationship. There is no uncertainty of salvation because the Holy Spirit is the Guarantor of that experience (cf. John 5:24 and Eph. 2:4–10). Having believed, they are sealed by the Spirit for the day of redemption. It is significant that sealing by the Spirit is mentioned in both parts of Ephesians. In the first part (chapters 1–3), which is more doctrinal, Paul presents the indicative of the gospel, or root of our salvation, and reminds us of our calling and the riches of God’s grace. In the second part (chapters 4–6), Paul delineates the consequences and demands of a saved life, namely the imperative of the gospel and ethical behavior, exhorting Christ’s followers to live in a manner appropriate to their calling.

None of us can put a seal on ourselves. Sealing is God’s action for us in which there is no “but” or “perhaps.” By staying in Christ, we have this assurance of salvation.

## The second seal: The apocalyptic seal

The second seal of God is described in the book of Revelation. This seal is not in contradiction to the first but is a seal placed on God’s redeemed people as a sign of their belonging to God. They live in the end time just before probation closes. The purpose of this second seal does not focus on salvation or redemption but expresses ultimate redemptive vindication and protection. If the first one is the seal of the gospel, the second one may be called the eschatological, or apocalyptic, seal.

This apocalyptic seal (Greek: *sphragis*) is mentioned in Revelation, where God’s faithful followers receive it toward the end of time in order to be able to go through the final events and be protected from the seven last plagues (Rev. 7:2, 3; 9:4; 14:9). This seal of God is in contrast to the mark (Greek: *charagma*) of the beast. The world is warned against receiving the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:16, 17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), because the mark is a symbol placed on those who have

rejected the saving grace of Christ and have cast their allegiance on the side of Satan.

In the book of Revelation, those who have the seal of God on their forehead are protected from the outpouring of the wrath of God, and they will be able to stand on that great day (Rev. 6:17; 7:3). The seal of God shields God’s people at the time of the outpouring of the divine judgment of condemnation. Therefore, it is not by chance that the three angels’ messages conclude with the Spirit’s assurance to God’s people: “They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them’ ” (Rev. 14:13b). These faithful are God’s inheritance, resting in the Lord until the day of redemption. Salvation was never an anthropocentric but a theocentric endeavor. We cannot take it into our hands. We do not possess salvation; it comes to us as God’s prepared gift that we can only accept or reject. God possesses us—we belong to Him. One needs to stay “in Christ,” as Paul would say.<sup>5</sup> Christ is the Guarantor of our sealing, because He received a seal of approval on His work of salvation on our behalf when He lived on earth. “On him [Christ] God the Father has placed His seal of approval’ ” (John 6:27).

## Two seals compared

To summarize, in both the seal of the gospel and the apocalyptic seal, the sealing work is done by the Holy Spirit. The first one, the seal of the gospel, is placed on all those who accept Jesus as their Savior, and it is placed at the time they accept Him (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30; 2 Tim. 2:19). The second one, the apocalyptic seal, is placed on those who have received the first seal and are alive and faithful to their calling during the apocalyptic days that come just before Jesus returns the second time (Rev. 7:3, 4, 14–17). The first is a seal of salvation, declaring that a person is saved by Christ and is part of God’s family, with that status remaining so long as the person remains faithful to Christ. The second is a seal of protection that guards the faithful ones during the time of persecution that comes in the apocalyptic period. One is a seal

of acceptance, and the other is a seal of final confirmation. The first seal is initial declaration that a person belongs to Christ and is placed at the time that person accepts Jesus. The second confirms faithfulness in following the Lamb and God's leadership in their lives, doing His will, keeping His commandments, and living according to His revealed Word during earth's final hours (Rev. 7:14–17; 12:17; 13:10; 14:4, 5, 12; 17:14; 19:10). The first seal is placed at the time of acceptance of Christ as Savior, and the redeemed retain it as long as they remain faithful to their calling. The second seal is placed on those who have received the first seal and live during the apocalyptic days, faithful to their calling. Although the seal of the gospel can be broken by falling away from faith, the apocalyptic seal is permanent.

## Time of receiving the apocalyptic seal

As the history of the world draws to a close, at that end time, there will be such pressing circumstances that people will have to decide on which side they stand—with God or with the forces of evil represented in the book of Revelation as the dragon, the sea beast, the earth beast, the image of the beast, and the false prophet (see Rev. 13–18). The book of Revelation mentions that during this time of the end, God will place His apocalyptic seal on His people (Rev. 7:1–4).

On the basis of biblical teaching, supported by the writings of Ellen G. White, one may assert that the apocalyptic seal is given only to God's faithful followers after the final global crisis, immediately prior to the close of probation. At that time, the image of the beast also rises with its forceful demands. Ellen White says, "The image of the beast will be formed before probation closes; for it is to be the great test for the people of God, by which their eternal destiny will be decided. . . ."

"This is the test that the people of God must have *before they are sealed*. All who prove their loyalty to God by observing His law, and refusing to accept a spurious sabbath, will rank under the

banner of the Lord God Jehovah, and will *receive the seal of the living God*. Those who yield the truth of heavenly origin and accept the Sunday sabbath, will receive the mark of the beast."<sup>6</sup> She further states when the mark of the beast will be received: "No one has yet received the mark of the beast. The testing time has not yet come. There are true Christians in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communion. None are condemned until they have had the light and have seen the obligation of the fourth commandment. But when the decree shall go forth enforcing the counterfeit sabbath, and the loud cry of the third angel shall warn men against the worship of the beast and his image, the line will be clearly drawn between the false and the true. Then those who still continue in transgression will receive the mark of the beast."

"With rapid steps we are approaching this period. When Protestant churches shall unite with the secular power to sustain a false religion, for opposing which their ancestors endured the fiercest persecution, then will the papal sabbath be enforced by the combined authority of church and state. There will be a national apostasy, which will end only in national ruin."<sup>7</sup>

Ellen White further states: "Sunday keeping is not yet the mark of the beast, and will not be until the decree goes forth causing men to worship this idol sabbath. The time will come when this day will be the test, but that time has not come yet."<sup>8</sup>

Again, when will the eschatological sealing take place? On the basis of the writings of Ellen White, we can state the following: (1) The sealing will take place only after apostate Protestantism unites with Catholicism to enforce the keeping of Sunday; (2) the Sunday law will come in to force and act as a catalyst to cause people to choose between God's law or human demands, to make their final decision for or against God, His law, and His people; and (3) only then the time for the seal of God and the mark of the beast will begin.

The apocalyptic sealing, then, will begin only after the Sunday law has

been issued. The final Sabbath-Sunday controversy will distinguish those who are loyal from those who choose to cast their lot with Satan. Ellen White is right: "The Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty. . . . When the final test shall be brought to bear upon men, then the line of distinction will be drawn between those who serve God and those who serve Him not. While the observance of the false sabbath in compliance with the law of the state, contrary to the fourth commandment, will be an avowal of allegiance to a power that is in opposition to God, the keeping of the true Sabbath, in obedience to God's law, is an evidence of loyalty to the Creator. While one class, by accepting the sign of submission to earthly powers, receive the mark of the beast, the other choosing the token of allegiance to divine authority, receive the seal of God."<sup>9</sup> 

- 1 *Esphragisthēte* is a verb indicative aorist passive second person plural, which means, "you were sealed" or "marked" (from Greek verb *sphragizō*, "to seal, secure with a seal, mark with a seal, set apart by a seal, affix to be true, acknowledged, proved") and is speaking about a community of faith, believers in Christ Jesus.
- 2 Unless otherwise stated, all biblical passages are from the New International Version, 1984.
- 3 The presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is not only evidence of their present salvation in Christ but also a pledge and guarantor of their future inheritance and down payment of that inheritance. Paul speaks also about having the firstfruits of the Spirit: "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?" (Rom. 8:23, 24).
- 4 Ephesians 4:30 is among a series of exhortations. The reference to "the day of redemption" is Paul's unique emphasis in Ephesians, and its context points to the second coming of Christ (see 1:14).
- 5 "In Christ" with its 164 occurrences, 36 of which are in Ephesians, is much more likely the central motif, or at least a central motif" in Paul." Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 57; emphasis in original.
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# Unity aids mission and mission serves unity

Ellen White has stated, “The work of God in this earth can never be finished until the men and women comprising our church membership rally to the work, and unite their efforts with those of ministers and church officers.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, for this gospel of the kingdom to reach the whole world, members, pastors, and administrators must unite. Disagreements might arise to threaten this unity. Indeed, Millard Erickson maintains that “disagreements over the nature of church unity have, ironically, caused a great deal of disunity.”<sup>2</sup> These differences of opinion, however, should not break our unity. “[The apostles] would have their tests, their grievances, their differences of opinion; but while Christ was abiding in the heart, there could be no dissension.”<sup>3</sup>

So what is biblical unity, and why is it so elusive? In His special high priestly intercessory prayer, unity was a major concern for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (John 17:11, 20–23). This article will consider three points that become evident in studying this prayer.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Unity is designated a priority

Jesus prays, “ ‘Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as

We are’ ” (v. 11, NKJV). *This is a oneness based on example but not control.* Unity was, for Jesus, the central focus. He not only prayed for oneness, He demonstrated this oneness. The fact that He returns to the topic of unity several times in this prayer speaks volumes. Jesus has in mind not only the disciples at the time of the prayer but also the future generations who will “ ‘believe in Me through their word’ ” (v. 20, NKJV).

Jesus foresees the attacks of the enemy that would fragment the Christian movement, and He asks the Father to “ ‘keep them from the evil one’ ” (v. 15, NKJV). The great controversy theme informs us that an independent spirit is not something new to our postmodern times. This is rooted in the beginning when Lucifer, an angel of light, brought into the universe war instead of peace—and separation instead of harmony.

His very names depict his strategic plan: to separate and divide. In the Old Testament, he is called “Satan,” which means “adversary” or “enemy.” This is a noun formed from a verb meaning to “to obstruct, to oppose.” The evil one is an opposer. He is always in opposition. He is also an accuser. In the New Testament, he is named the “devil,” which comes from a Greek verb meaning “to throw apart,” “to throw over,” “to throw across,” “to traduce,” or “to slander.” These concepts are well-captured in the German word

*Durcheinanderwerfen*, meaning “to throw it upside-down, to make chaos.”

Fragmentation, opposition, and separation have been and will always remain key weapons of the enemy. Satan separated himself from God and became the father of all separation and division. Ever since the Garden of Eden, he has been successful in separating human beings from the Creator, the only true Source of unity and harmony. This is why Jesus, just before the cross, offered His special high priestly intercessory prayer for unity and protection from the source of all separation.

If unity was such a concern for Jesus, then it should also be the top concern of every leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today. Whatever we do, whatever we plan, whatever we write, whatever we say, we should always have in mind the question, “How will this affect the unity of the body of Christ?”

## 2. Unity is grounded in the Trinity

Jesus prays, “ ‘That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me’ ” (v. 21, NKJV). *This is a oneness based on unity but not uniformity.* The unity between the believers should be patterned after the unity of the triune Godhead. The necessity of unity originates in the Trinity, and the

unity between the Father and the Son is used as a model for unity between believers. The struggle for the church entails embracing unity while resisting uniformity.

The Trinity comprises three different persons but one God, thus the biblical concept of unity includes diversity. This concept is most clearly expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4. The key word used here is *one*. Hebrew has a number of words for *one*; however, the author of the book of Deuteronomy chose the Hebrew word *echad*, which can be used to present not only the numeric oneness but a compound oneness, a oneness comprising multiple parts.<sup>5</sup>

In the marital paradigm, “and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, NKJV), the same Hebrew word is used. Two different persons are becoming one. They are still two distinct persons and personalities, with different looks and playing different roles; nevertheless, they have become *one*. It is very insightful to note that after two have become one, if separated they will bear the signs of the broken relationship. This is supported by the word *cleave* used in Genesis 2:24 (KJV). The two will not become what they had been even before becoming one. This is analogous to gluing together two pieces of paper and then separating them. The destructive effects of fragmenting what had previously been united are visible for all to see.

First Corinthians 12 points to the relationship within the Trinity as the foundation for our unity: “the same Spirit” (v. 4), “the same Lord” (v. 5), “the same God” (v. 6). At the same time, the passage highlights the place of differences. It speaks of a variety of spiritual gifts. We all have different gifts, but all are given for a “common good” (v. 7, NIV) so that the whole body can function effectively. Paul’s picture of the body underlines the necessity of diversity. This diversity does not destroy the harmony but is, in actuality, its very foundation.

Unity found in the Trinity also sheds light on its opposite counterpart, uniformity. These are not one and the same.

Uniformity can be defined as “being uniform, having always the same form, manner, etc.” and may be manufactured by repression and dictatorship. This not the unity of which Paul speaks. Paul’s beautiful illustration of unity (1 Cor. 12:12–30) makes it very clear that it is not uniformity, neither does it imply uniformity. Unity does not mean that all Christians will perform identically, but it may best be defined as a “condition of harmony.” One may play different musical notes, but they need to be in harmony; otherwise it is not music but musical chaos. We use the differences to be found in harmony to create the wonder to be found in melody.

Paul takes his time to patiently explain what unity in the church will look like. He says, “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all” (vv. 4–6, KJV). Paul states that biblical unity is not uniformity but, rather, the joyful celebration of diversity. In Christian unity, we are not one because we eliminate our differences; we are one because we harmonize them. Reuel Lemmons states, “Only when we restore Jesus Christ to His throne in our hearts can we have unity. As long as we try to impose our wills, or even our understanding upon others there will never be unity. All unity meetings are doomed to failure as long as we try to substitute either union or uniformity for unity. These counterfeits can never make us one in Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Through this illustration, Paul makes it obvious that no one part of the body, or group from the body, can represent the whole body or function independently of the whole body. Paul’s analogy “is a vivid one, because no single person is the body of Christ, that identity is a collective privilege. . . . This offers us a clear illustration of unity in diversity. We are not designed to be the same as each other, nor to perform identical functions, but we are inextricably linked to each other. The only possible division would be created

by amputation, if we were forcibly cut off from the rest of the body.”<sup>7</sup>

While authority is to be respected, Ellen White warned about the danger of someone trying to control the whole body, or the conscience of the believers: “God has not set any kingly power in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to control the whole body or to control any branch of the work. He has not provided that the burden of leadership shall rest upon few men. Responsibilities are distributed among a large number of competent men.”<sup>8</sup> She added, “God has never authorized any man to exercise a ruling power over his fellow workers; and those who have allowed a dictatorial spirit to come into their official work need to experience the converting power of God upon their hearts. They have placed man where God should be.”<sup>9</sup>

This is why the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not maintain a presidential system of church governance, comparable to the governance found in corporate structures. Rather, issues that affect the whole church are decided in committees, where the whole body is represented, and all leaders report to them. The main assignment of the chair is first to make sure that every voice is heard and, second, to ensure that decisions taken represent the will of the whole body, rather than a small influential group. We do not live in a theocracy, where the Lord reveals His will through one person; but, rather, the Holy Spirit works through all believers who are open for His guidance. The Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself. If He speaks through you and He speaks through me, we will reach a consensus. “Those in authority should manifest the spirit of Christ. They should deal as He would deal with every case that requires attention.”<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Ellen White is very clear in pointing out that we need harmony and a unity of message, purpose, and action. She encourages leaders to “labor in harmony with the decisions arrived at by the general body of believers in united council.”<sup>11</sup>

Speaking of the apostle Paul, she states, “Notwithstanding the fact that

Paul was personally taught by God, he had no strained ideas of individual responsibility. While looking to God for direct guidance, he was ever ready to recognize the authority vested in the body of believers united in church fellowship. He felt the need of counsel, and when matters of importance arose, he was glad to lay these before the church and to unite with his brethren in seeking God for wisdom to make right decisions.”<sup>12</sup> She also states, “God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God.”<sup>13</sup> It is remarkable to note that even God Himself worked out the plan of salvation in a council of the Trinity.

Another passage that deals with unity also refers to the Trinity: “one Spirit” (Eph. 4:4), “one Lord” (v. 5), “one God and Father” (v. 6). These three passages, John 17, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4, refer not only to the Trinity as a model for unity but also to love as a way to unity.

### 3. Unity is interrelated with mission

Jesus prays, “‘And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me’” (John 17:22, 23, NKJV). *This is a oneness based on interdependence but not independence.*

Christ’s intercessory prayer makes clear the purpose of unity: to let the world know that You sent Me (v. 21). Jesus has been sent into the world, and now He is sending us to bear witness of Him. The way we relate to each other is one of the most powerful tools in mission. The struggle for the church entails embracing interdependence while resisting independence.

Unity implies a common purpose and interdependence within the body of Christ. Today we speak of TMI—Total

Member Involvement—where all members of the body of Christ have been marvelously involved in mission, “as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4, NIV). At Pentecost, mission began to happen when the disciples placed the interests of their brothers and sisters above their own. “Putting away all differences, all desire for the supremacy, they came close together in Christian fellowship. . . .

“And under the influence of the Spirit, words of penitence and confession mingled with songs of praise for sins forgiven. . . . And what followed? The sword of the Spirit, newly edged with power and bathed in the lightnings of heaven, cut its way through unbelief. Thousands were converted in a day.”<sup>14</sup>

Jesus’ teachings about the vine and branches (John 15:1–8), while addressing the disciples in chapter 13—“‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’” (v. 35, RSV)—are strong illustrations of the necessity of interdependence in mission.

We should never ever forget that independence, disunity, fragmentation, and separation are the main and most successful weapons of the enemy. If history can teach us anything, this is a lesson we need to grasp. Coming from a part of the world where the Seventh-day Adventist Church was divided for decades, I can see that the worst thing that could happen to our church is to experience a division or a split. Nothing weakens our effectiveness in mission more.

The New Testament Church constitutes one nation, one people: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet. 2:9, RSV). If our life together as a church does not demonstrate this unity, mission is rendered null and void.

Jesus concludes His intercessory prayer by referring to love (John 17:26). Paul finishes his discussion of unity by adding a whole chapter on love (1 Cor. 13). Then Paul refers to love in the beginning and middle of Ephesians 4 and

even ends the chapter by highlighting love (4:2, 16, 32) with the reminder, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted” (v. 32). Biblical unity incorporates a diversity of gifts, talents, ministries, and functions. However, the Bible never encourages *doctrinal* diversity. Based upon the Ten Commandments, our doctrines are spelled out in love to God and love to humankind. In this, we are to be the same. Paul says, “Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose” (Phil. 2:2, NASB).

Thus it becomes very clear that *relationships* play a key role in the process leading to unity. Someone very correctly stated, “It is not the love of power but the power of love that is to cement the Christian church.” Love for God, His Word, and one another is the best and only glue for church unity. It is love that makes mission not only possible but effective.

We have the message that the world needs to hear. However, none of us can successfully proclaim it ourselves. We need each other; we need the church as a whole; hence, we need unity—the kind of unity revealed in the Trinity itself. ❖

- 1 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915), 352.
- 2 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 1130.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 296.
- 4 There are other important themes mentioned in the prayer, but we will limit our study to these three.
- 5 Genesis 2:24; Exodus 26:6, 11; Ezekiel 37:17, 19, 22.
- 6 Reuel Lemmons, “Union, Uniformity, and Unity,” [theexaminer.org/volume2/number4/union.htm](http://theexaminer.org/volume2/number4/union.htm).
- 7 Clive Calver and Rob Warner, *Together We Stand* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 6, 7.
- 8 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1904), 236.
- 9 Ellen G. White, *Christian Leadership* (Washington, D.C.; Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., 1985), 33. See also Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1962), 362.
- 10 White, *Christian Leadership*, 31.
- 11 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 199.
- 12 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 200.
- 13 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 164.
- 14 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 37, 38.

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Our editorial team wishes to express appreciation to all the divisions of our world field for giving us access to their best small group resources. These are presented for your enrichment in “Practical Pointers” that follows this article.

# Cultivating relationships through small groups

The figures are staggering, mind boggling, almost overwhelming. Millions in the Western world are on sensory overload. They are so bombarded with information that it becomes difficult to concentrate on interpersonal relationships. In depth, close, personal relationships can easily be sacrificed on the altar of technology.

The Yankovich Research firm recently reported that the average person is exposed to 3,000 to 20,000 messages every day. We probably absorb only 200 to 300 of those messages. The average 13- to 17-year-old sends 3,339 texts per month or more than 100 texts per day. Whether we are aware of it or not, our brains are registering 40 million bits of sensory information per second.<sup>1</sup>

Eating at a restaurant one day, my wife and I noticed the couple across from us totally immersed in texting on their cell phones. On another occasion, I noticed a group of teenagers in a shopping mall texting, rather than talking. I was amazed to discover that they were texting each other.

In 2014, 561 billion texts were sent worldwide. The average American spends 9.5 hours before some kind of screen each day: computer screen, TV screen, tablet, or cell phone screen.

Driving me to the airport one day, a young pastor told me how he used social media including Facebook, text messages, and tweets to stay in touch

with his friends. I reflected on how Jesus, the divine Son of God, entered the arena of human affairs to touch His friends with His grace and transform us by His love. After affirming the young pastor’s desire to touch the lives of others, and after confirming the significance of social media, I simply said, “There is one thing to remember. God didn’t send a tweet. He sent His Son.”

## Small groups give Christianity a face

We live in an age of depersonalization. The individual has largely gotten lost in the tangled web of technology. There is something to be said about a warm embrace, a gentle smile, a listening ear, and a compassionate heart—that’s what small groups offer. Small groups personalize Christianity in a world of depersonalization. They provide an environment for people to share their joys and sorrows, their heartaches and happiness, their struggles and their triumphs. They give Christianity a face.

One of the great values of small group ministry we should consider is that it provides an opportunity for us to listen sensitively to one another’s heart-felt needs, pray together, sing together, and study the Word together. Someone has well said, “You cannot love me if you do not know me.” Small groups provide a warm, personal environment for us to get deeply acquainted with unbelievers. They provide a culture to grow Christ-centered relationships. In the context

of small home groups, deep, lasting relationships are formed, and Christ incarnate speaks to human hearts.

## Small groups—the basis of New Testament witness

Small groups functioned in the New Testament church in a variety of ways. The second chapter of the book of Acts records the baptism of 3,000 new believers. Acts 2:42 describes the disciples’ strategy to nurture these new converts. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and prayers.” Notice this significant comment in verse 46: “So continuing with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and singleness of heart.”

There are two fascinating expressions in these passages. First, “they continued in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship.” And second, “they broke bread from house to house.” Both of these expressions indicate that these new believers met in small house groups as bases for their newly discovered faith in Christ. Evidently, they fellowshiped together, prayed together, studied the Word together, and shared a common meal together. These small groups nurtured the new converts and solidified their faith. Becky Scoggins maintains that “new Christians who participate in small groups are more likely to remain church members.”<sup>2</sup>

Small groups are one of the most effective ways to nurture new converts after a major evangelistic series. They also formed the basis of a vibrant church planting movement in the New Testament. In Acts 10 the apostle Peter held a mini evangelistic campaign in the home of Cornelius. The Holy Spirit worked mightily, and a new body of believers was established. In Acts 16:13–15, the apostle Paul nurtured new converts in Lydia’s house. Even while he was under house arrest in Rome, the apostle Paul established a small group ministry in his own home (Acts 28:28–31).

*The purpose of all small groups is both to nurture believers and to reach unbelievers.*

Small groups are the basis of nurturing new converts, strengthening church members, planting churches, teaching the Word, and evangelizing new converts. They also provide an excellent means of preparing for evangelistic meetings. In major cities throughout the world, we have organized small groups studying the book of Daniel before our evangelistic meetings. Participants in the groups have then been invited to our evangelistic series and have responded in outstanding numbers.

### The essentials in small group ministry

The small-group experience is a Bible study class but much more. In each small-group meeting we have the chance

to connect with each other on a deeper level. Our small-group meetings provide the opportunity for developing lasting friendships and enduring relationships. Following are seven ways for a small group leader to make the most of your small group experience:

1. *Prayerfully consider who you would like to invite to join you in your small group.* We suggest groups with a small group team of about four to six church members and the remainder of the group “spiritual seekers.” Encourage each of your small group team members to invite two spiritual seekers who are not church members to the small group. Before launching your group, it is best to spend time meeting with this small group leadership team and discussing the four “basics” of small groups: fellowship, sharing, prayer, and Bible study. Meeting with your leadership team, determine how often your group will meet (weekly, biweekly, or monthly). Determine how long you desire to meet—will you meet for three months, six months, a year? We recommend meeting weekly or at least biweekly for a minimum of six months. This provides enough time to establish meaningful relationships.

2. *Invite participants to make a commitment to attend each small-group meeting.* If people attend only occasionally, they will not only miss the blessing themselves but will fail to bond with the group and tend either to not be engaged in the discussions or dominate the discussions.

3. *Encourage attendees to freely participate in the discussions.* They may share their own experience with Jesus. As they share the challenges and joys they face in their spiritual journey, they will be spiritually enriched and will bless others.

4. *Assign the group a specific small-group Bible study topic.* Encourage group members to share how the Holy Spirit has impressed them with the topic during the week. Without a specific direction, your small group may easily degenerate into discussions without substance and will be difficult to sustain.

5. *Invite each member of the group to bring specific prayer requests.* Share

them with the group. In one of our small groups, an elderly woman who appeared to have a very well-ordered and structured life opened her heart during the prayer request time and shared some major challenges she was having with her son. This provided the entire group the opportunity to rally around her and lift her up in prayer. In our last small group meeting, one of the couples was leaving on a trip to Europe for about two weeks. At the end of the meeting, our entire group gathered around this couple and earnestly prayed for God’s protection in their lives. It was a special time and a bonding experience.

6. *Instruct your group to respect others’ opinions and listen sensitively as others share.* One of the things that kills small group discussions is if one person dominates the discussions or thinks they have the answers to every question any group member raises. Small groups are an opportunity to grow together. They are designed to strengthen us on our spiritual journey through life. Dominant, dogmatic, inflexible people can easily destroy the spirit of warm fellowship in a small group.

7. *As the group grows to a maximum of 12–15 regular attendees, consider dividing it.* It may be difficult for the group to divide, especially when a group bonds and develops deep, meaningful relationships. However, we find it necessary to keep the group focused on its main purpose, that of reaching lost people for Jesus and multiplying your influence so that more and more people can become disciples of Christ.

### It’s your turn now

I have a prominent business friend who has a small group in his home on Thursday nights. As far as possible, he schedules his business trips around his small group meetings. He commented that at first he was hesitant to invite people to his home, but his small group has become so spiritually enriching to him that it has now become a vitally important part of his life.

The purpose of all small groups is both to nurture believers and to reach unbelievers. In a postmodern, secular

society there are many people who will not attend public evangelistic meetings but will join a small group if they are invited by a friend. Ellen White makes this remarkable statement: "The formation of small companies (groups) as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err."<sup>3</sup> My wife, Teenie, and I cherish the opportunities we have to meet with our small group.

Launched this past year, on most Monday evenings we have an average of 18-25 people who meet to fellowship, sing, pray, study God's Word, and share their lives together. Our group is extremely varied, with ages ranging from 8-78. We have young adults and retirees, white collar professionals and small business owners, computer engineers and tradesmen, and caregivers and homemakers.

About half of our group comprise guests who originally came to our health or biblical seminars. They are developing a deeper understanding of God's Word as we study the book of Revelation chapter by chapter. We are planning a major

evangelistic series in Northern Virginia in the spring, and in preparation for that series we will begin at least an additional four more small groups.

I believe that the evangelistic potential of small groups is enormous. Small groups provide a non-threatening environment in the context of meaningful relationships to share the truths of God's Word leading to decisions for Christ and His church. It has been such a refreshing spiritual experience for us. You will be richly rewarded as you set aside one night a week, or every two weeks, to participate in your small group. Let me assure you, you are poised on the verge of some of the most spiritually rewarding experiences of your life.

Small groups are a divinely appointed plan to enable church members to grow in Christ and invite their friends to study God's Word, fellowship, ask questions, and share their lives in a safe, nonthreatening environment. If you have not experienced the spiritual joy of participating in a small group, why not ask God to help you start a

small group in your own home? Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in selecting a few of your friends to join you in this adventure for Christ. Begin praying about who the Spirit wants you to invite to your small group. The Spirit will bring people into your life and impress you to invite them to join your group.

You will find yourself scheduling most of your other activities around your small group time because it will become a spiritual anchor for your soul. I am confident that the Holy Spirit will refresh your soul and revitalize your experience with Jesus as you launch a small group ministry. 

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- 3 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1902), 21, 22.

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# Small group ministry resources from across the world

Resources may be freely downloaded at [ministrymagazine.org/smallgroups](http://ministrymagazine.org/smallgroups).

## East-Central Africa Division (ECD)

—Noah Musema, *Personal Ministries director*

ECD leaders are challenging their membership to organize a health seminar, small group, Bible study, or evangelistic series in their homes using the New Beginnings DVD. Another ECD small group resource is called *Harvest in Sheaves*.

### Resources

- *Harvest in Sheaves* will be available at the ECD website, [ecd.adventist.org](http://ecd.adventist.org). See especially the “Evangelism” page, [ecdadventist.org/evangelism](http://ecdadventist.org/evangelism).

## Euro-Asia Division (ESD)

—Dmytro Zubkov, *Personal Ministries director*

In ESD, the number of small group Bible studies has more than doubled. The division provides a model of small-group outreach for congregations to follow. Small groups have increased from 2,774 in 2002 to more than 10,000 groups today. ESD has voted to make small group ministry the main basis for evangelism throughout the region, believing that small groups are the future of evangelism in their territory.

### Resources

- Lessons for small groups [http://sspm.adventist.ru/document\\_groups/3173](http://sspm.adventist.ru/document_groups/3173)
- Seminars for small groups [http://sspm.adventist.ru/document\\_groups/3337](http://sspm.adventist.ru/document_groups/3337)
- Books for small groups [http://sspm.adventist.ru/document\\_groups/3200](http://sspm.adventist.ru/document_groups/3200)

## Inter-American Division (IAD)

—Melchor Ferreyra, *Personal Ministries director*

IAD has more than 92,000 small groups in operation, aiding the growth of the 20,000 churches and

congregations in that territory. IAD maintains that groups of 6–12 people in a home, meeting to pray, study the Bible, spend time, and testify together of God’s goodness, once every week, serve to strengthen marriages and aid in raising missionary-minded children.

### Resources

- Inter-American Division, *Lord Transform Me: A Special Study on the Righteousness of Christ*, small group Bible study guide, [centralja.org/media/27048/righteousness-of-christ-study-guide.pdf](http://centralja.org/media/27048/righteousness-of-christ-study-guide.pdf).
- Grupos Pequeños, Ministerio Personal y Grupos Pequeños, [grupospequenos.interamerica.org](http://grupospequenos.interamerica.org).
- Libna Stevens, “In Inter-America, Small Groups Are Strengthening Church Membership,” Inter-American Division, December 1, 2014, [interamerica.org/2014/12/03/in-inter-america-small-groups-are-strengthening-church-membership/](http://interamerica.org/2014/12/03/in-inter-america-small-groups-are-strengthening-church-membership/).

## Inter-European Division (EUD)

—Paolo Benini, *Personal Ministries director*

In EUD, small groups are helping the church grow by providing nurture for intimacy with God and each other. In Spain, small-group meetings are creating a bonded group of women. Belarus has more than 300 Adventist small groups, Moldova has more than 600, and in Ukraine, there are well over 3,000 small Adventist outreach groups throughout the country.

### Resources

- Paolo Benini, *Making Disciples for the Lord: Vocation, Biblical Principles, and Practical Applications for Discipleship through the Dynamics of Small Groups* (Berne, Switzerland: Inter-European Division, 2016).

- *Frühstückstreffen für Frauen CH* and Denise Hochstrasser, *My Tree of Life* (French, Spanish, Dutch, English).
- “Resources,” Women’s Ministries of the Inter-European Division, [women.eud.adventist.org/en/resources/](http://women.eud.adventist.org/en/resources/).

## Israel Field (IF)

—Emanuel Lascu, *Oleg Elkine, Personal Ministries directors*

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Israel has nearly 800 followers, gathering in 21 churches and groups under the leadership of seven pastors. Despite the challenges and limitations, the church in Israel is steadfast. It moves ahead by faith, believing in God’s protection and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### Resources

- Resources are coordinated by the Israel Oversight Committee, based in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA (see “Resources” listing for General Conference).

## Middle East and North Africa Union Mission (MENA)

—Michael Eckert, *Personal Ministries liaison*

In one particular Asian city in this region, small groups meet to study the Bible with the help of DVD players and special software. Four thousand five hundred people have been taken through small-group Bible studies, culminating in 30 small, one-week public meetings, a safer alternative to one huge public meeting. Here they believe that the strength of the church lies in the training and participation of lay people who have the ability to make congregations sustainable.

### Resources

- Resources are coordinated by the Middle East and North Africa Union

Oversight Committee, based in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA (see “Resources” listing for General Conference).

## North American Division (NAD)

— *J. Alfred Johnson II, Personal Ministries director; Eduard Schmidt, director, NAD Evangelism Institute (NADEI)*

NADEI is the tangible expression of the North American Division’s commitment to inspire a love for evangelism. One NAD conference developed a plan for small groups in 1997; now there are 350 groups that meet each week. They have baptized more than 12,000 people and organized a total of 49 churches, 13 companies, and nine mission groups. Small groups build an extended community and multiply church membership. People aren’t looking for a pastor or a priest, but they are looking for a group of friends. They love the sense of belonging. The Prayer Ministries Department also provides prayer training for small groups to support evangelism.

### Resources

- “Small Group Resources,” NADEI, [nadei.org/article/329/evangelism-services/small-groups/small-group-resources](http://nadei.org/article/329/evangelism-services/small-groups/small-group-resources).
- “Prayer Ministries Resources, Bulletin Inserts, and Suggestions,” Seventh-day Adventist Church North American Division Prayer Ministries, [nadadventist.org/article/200/ministries-services/ministries/prayer-ministries/prayer-ministries-resources-bulletin-inserts-and-suggestions](http://nadadventist.org/article/200/ministries-services/ministries/prayer-ministries/prayer-ministries-resources-bulletin-inserts-and-suggestions).
- Elizabeth Anderson, “Small Groups Boost Church Membership: What’s the Science Behind Their Success?,” *Columbia Union Visitor*, October 2014, [nadministerial.org/article/975/for-nad-pastors/articles/small-groups-boost-church-membership-what-s-the-science-behind-their-success](http://nadministerial.org/article/975/for-nad-pastors/articles/small-groups-boost-church-membership-what-s-the-science-behind-their-success).
- Advent Source, [adventsource.org/as30/search.results.aspx?search=small&section=store](http://adventsource.org/as30/search.results.aspx?search=small&section=store).
- Milton Adams, *Growth Groups: Equipping Small Group Leaders* (Multimedia Kit), AdventSource, [adventsource.org/as30/store-productDetails.aspx?id=35828](http://adventsource.org/as30/store-productDetails.aspx?id=35828).
- Chris and Yolanda Blake, *Reinvent Your Sabbath School* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2001), [adventistbookcenter.com/reinvent-your-sabbath-school-discover-how-exhilarating-a-ministry-driven-class-can-be-srr.html](http://adventistbookcenter.com/reinvent-your-sabbath-school-discover-how-exhilarating-a-ministry-driven-class-can-be-srr.html).
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- Don James, “Cell Groups and Holistic Small Groups,” [adventistlearningcommunity.com/media\\_resources/5145](http://adventistlearningcommunity.com/media_resources/5145).
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- “Resources,” FAST Missions, [fastmissions.com/welcome/resources](http://fastmissions.com/welcome/resources).
- “Focus on Prophecy” online study guides, Voice of Prophecy, [voiceofprophecy.com/study/focus-prophecy](http://voiceofprophecy.com/study/focus-prophecy).
- Pacific Press, “Clouzet Affirms Adventism’s Greatest Need,” April 18, 2011, [pacificpress.com/pp/news/content/newsReltpl.php?relID=146-ClouzetAdvGreatestNeed.htm](http://pacificpress.com/pp/news/content/newsReltpl.php?relID=146-ClouzetAdvGreatestNeed.htm);

## South American Division (SAD)

— *Everon Donato, Personal Ministries director*

In the SAD, there are more than 70,000 small groups, and great effort has been made so that small groups become the basis of the church’s missionary outreach. Between 1996 and 2005, SAD membership increased 180 percent, contrasted with the global Adventist growth rate of 54 percent over the same period. Though many factors are involved in this growth, SAD considers small groups to be one of the most effective. They have brought spiritual growth, growth in relationships, growth in preparing disciples, and growth in planting new churches.

### Resources

#### Forming leaders

- Spanish: “Lección Protótipo: Multiplique Esperanza,” [Adventistas.org/downloads.adventistas.org/es/ministerio-personal/manuales-y-guias/leccion-prototipo-multiplique-esperanza/](http://Adventistas.org/downloads.adventistas.org/es/ministerio-personal/manuales-y-guias/leccion-prototipo-multiplique-esperanza/).
- Portuguese: “Protótipo Pequenos Grupos,” [Adventistas.org/downloads.adventistas.org/pt/kits/prototipo-pequenos-grupos/](http://Adventistas.org/downloads.adventistas.org/pt/kits/prototipo-pequenos-grupos/).

#### Developing leaders

- Spanish: “Multiplique Esperanza,” [Adventistas.org/downloads.adventistas.org/es/kits/multiplique-esperanza/page/3/](http://Adventistas.org/downloads.adventistas.org/es/kits/multiplique-esperanza/page/3/).
- Portuguese: Materiais: “Escola de líderes—Aprofundado a caminhada,” [Adventistas.org/adventistas.org/pt/ministeriopessoal/projeto/pequenos-grupos/#1459874096472-289adb3c-b17b](http://Adventistas.org/adventistas.org/pt/ministeriopessoal/projeto/pequenos-grupos/#1459874096472-289adb3c-b17b).

## Northern Asia-Pacific Division (NSD)

— *Richard Sabuin, Personal Ministries director*

NSD has experienced gradual growth in recent years, but now the church is employing relational evangelism, Christ’s method of mingling with people. The church is organizing small groups and engaging in team ministry, while inviting new people to church. NSD maintains that the Holy Spirit is poised and ready to reignite an end-time people in their quest for truth through small groups. As this is done, they believe that a significant spiritual revolution can begin at the local church level, by the lives they live and the burden they have for the lost.

### Resources

- *FAST Catalog* (FAST, 2014), [fast.st/fast/files/store/catalog.pdf](http://fast.st/fast/files/store/catalog.pdf).

**Weekly lesson studies**

- Spanish: “Buscar Archivos,” Adventistas.org, [downloads.adventistas.org/es/?orderby=date&order=DESC&post\\_status=publish&post\\_type=post&seemore\\_title=Vea+m%C3%A1s&xtt-pa-projetos=grupos-pequenos](https://downloads.adventistas.org/es/?orderby=date&order=DESC&post_status=publish&post_type=post&seemore_title=Vea+m%C3%A1s&xtt-pa-projetos=grupos-pequenos).
- Portuguese: “Procurar Arquivos, Adventistas.org, [downloads.adventistas.org/pt/?orderby=meta\\_value\\_num%25pa\\_thema\\_materiais\\_download\\_count&order=DESC&post\\_status=publish&post\\_type=post&seemore\\_title=materiais+pequeno+grupo&xtt-pa-projetos=pequenos-grupos&xtt-pa-sedes=dsa](https://downloads.adventistas.org/pt/?orderby=meta_value_num%25pa_thema_materiais_download_count&order=DESC&post_status=publish&post_type=post&seemore_title=materiais+pequeno+grupo&xtt-pa-projetos=pequenos-grupos&xtt-pa-sedes=dsa).

**Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division (SID)**

—*Michael Ngwaru, Personal Ministries director*

SID surpassed the 2,000,000-member mark in large part due to small group evangelism. Small groups are considered the key to evangelism in the region. Some 52,000 groups of approximately five people are regularly meeting in homes. SID claims that 92 percent of the people won through small groups are now winning others to Christ. Adventists don’t have a lot of friends who aren’t already members of the church. Members are challenged to increase their network of unchurched friends by making friends in the wider community.

**Resources**

- Small groups for children 12 and below (*Every Kid Club*), Small groups for teenagers (*Young Champions Club*), Small groups for young adults (*Homes of Hope and Healing*)
- [gauteng2018.org](http://gauteng2018.org) and [guateng2018.org/TMI](http://guateng2018.org/TMI)
- Small groups for newly baptized (*Fishers of Men*)
- Seventh-day Adventist Church News, October 8, 2009, [news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2009-10-08/in-southern-africa-adventist-evangelism-focuses-on-discipleship/](https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2009-10-08/in-southern-africa-adventist-evangelism-focuses-on-discipleship/).

**Southern Asia Division (SUD)**

—*Hidayat Masih, Personal Ministries director*

In India, the predominant religion, Hinduism, makes it difficult for many to make the decision to follow Christ. However, an Adventist pastor formed small prayer groups, and church members started prayer groups in their homes and in their workplaces. A few months later, small-group leaders encouraged their prayer partners to attend church. That church has had 4,000 people baptized and 16 church plants, a result the pastor attributes to small-group ministry.

**Resources**

- Victor Sam, *Essentials of Small Group Ministry*
- In southeastern India, laymen have been equipped to minister through small groups with “Bible Speaks” lessons, setting the stage for multiple small groups to study and fellowship together.—C. S. Marandi/ANN staff, “Laymen in Southeastern India Become Equipped to Minister Through Small Groups,” *Seventh-day Adventist Church News*, January 9, 2017, [news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2017-01-09/laymen-in-southeastern-india-become-equipped-to-minister-through-small-groups/](https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2017-01-09/laymen-in-southeastern-india-become-equipped-to-minister-through-small-groups/).

**Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD)**

—*Hermogenes Villanueva, Personal Ministries director*

Integrated Evangelism Lifestyle (IEL) is SSD’s comprehensive strategy to share the love of God through small groups, or care groups. In some predominantly Buddhist countries of SSD, small groups where people can study together and make discoveries are a vital part of SSD’s strategy. Here, speaking one-on-one with a person and asking them to make a decision for Christ is often going against the culture. The small group allows discussion, answering questions people have in their hearts, and calling people to decisions in a gentle way.

**Resources**

- To launch this program, the first material being used is that of Dr. Wes Youngberg and Drs. John and Millie Youngberg, *WIN! Wellness Homes of Hope & Health*. This program is designed to promote healthful living and prevention of disease in families and communities. It seeks to recapture the wholistic model described in *The Ministry of Healing*, which encompasses physical and mental health, spiritual growth, and family enrichment.
- *WIN! Catalog of Materials*, WIN! Wellness, 2015, [winwellness.org/site/1/docs/2015\\_CatalogofMaterials.pdf](http://winwellness.org/site/1/docs/2015_CatalogofMaterials.pdf).
- “Programs: Integrated Evangelism Lifestyle,” [Adventist.asia](http://Adventist.asia), [adventist.asia/programs/integrated-evangelism-lifestyle/](http://adventist.asia/programs/integrated-evangelism-lifestyle/).

**South Pacific Division (SPD)**

—*Leigh Rice, Discipleship Ministries director*

The process working wonderfully in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Territories to facilitate small group Bible reading is Discovery Bible Reading. It is being used effectively in branch Sabbath School settings, by chaplains in schools, by parents in family worship, and members in community Bible outreach. It is also transforming members’ engagement in Sabbath School Bible study time. Two churches in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, used the Discovery Bible Reading plan in small groups, and 30 new branch Sabbath Schools were started. These are now developing into new church plants.

**Resources**

- Peter Roennfeldt, *Making Disciples and Planting Churches that Multiply*, [newchurchlife.com/wp-content/uploads/Planting-Churches-that-Multiply-20111.pdf](http://newchurchlife.com/wp-content/uploads/Planting-Churches-that-Multiply-20111.pdf).
- Institute of Church Ministry, Avondale College of Higher Education, “Introducing Small Group Ministry in Your Local Church.”
- “Institute of Church Ministry,” Seventh-day Adventist Church for the South Pacific Division, [www.adventist-org.au](http://www.adventist-org.au)

.adventistconnect.org/institute-of-church-ministry.

- AdventSource Video, “Holistic Small Group With Doug Franske,” [adventsource.org/as30/plusline.video.item.aspx?id=1513](http://adventsource.org/as30/plusline.video.item.aspx?id=1513).
- AdventSource Video, “Holistic Small Groups With Wayne Krause,” [adventsource.org/as30/plusline.video.item.aspx?id=1424](http://adventsource.org/as30/plusline.video.item.aspx?id=1424).

## Trans-European Division (TED)

—Patrick Johnson, *Discipleship coordinator*

Bible study and prayer are the lifeblood of the TED. Women all across the territory, such as Ljiljana Jovanovic-Arandjelovic in Nish, Serbia, are involved in small-group ministries to encourage each other in their Christian journey and growth in God’s Word. She leads a group of nine women once a week for Bible study and prayer. In addition to study they have also been able to help many in need as a result of prayer and sacrificial giving. “I am not suggesting that small groups offer a magic formula for completing the Gospel Commission, spreading unity and love in the church, and leading us individually to spiritual maturity. I am simply suggesting that small groups are a divinely ordained means which can help us to achieve these goals.” —David Cox, England (see resources below).

### Resources

- Gavin Anthony, *One Ambition: How Was I Designed to Live?* (for groups up to 6 people), June 2017, [reflectingjesus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/OA-Book.pdf](http://reflectingjesus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/OA-Book.pdf).
- David Cox, *Think Big, Think Small Groups: Building Christian Community* (Watford, UK: South England Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Personal Ministries, 1998), [sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/02-small-group-ministries-in-the-local-church-textbook.pdf](http://sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/02-small-group-ministries-in-the-local-church-textbook.pdf).

## West-Central Africa Division (WAD)

—Vincent Roger Same, *Personal Ministries director*

WAD has placed an emphasis on small group evangelism, bringing thousands into the family of God. Cameroon supported 3,800 evangelistic sites: 511 were public, 3,300 were small groups. A record 5,042 baptisms were recorded. Women of the Republic of Bénin used small groups to reach out to friends and neighbors, followed by reaping meetings. More than 90 women preached and 117 persons were baptized, including a wealthy Muslim woman and her son. Thrilled to encounter truth and find peace in Jesus, she said her motto is “No turning back.”

### Resources

- *Developing Dynamic Small Groups in Your Church* (see Trans-European Division resources [David Cox])
- *Keys to Small Group Ministry* (see General Conference resources [Sabbath School])
- *Homes of Hope and Healing* (see General Conference resources [Women’s Ministries]).

## General Conference (GC)

**GC Family Ministries**—Willie and Elaine Oliver, *directors*

### Resources

- *Family to Family Guides for Church and Family* (English and Spanish), [family.adventist.org/mission-to-the-families-in-the-cities-family-to-family.html](http://family.adventist.org/mission-to-the-families-in-the-cities-family-to-family.html)

**GC Ministerial**—Anthony Kent, *Ministry in Motion Host*

### Resources

- Balvin Braham, “Creating Effective Small Groups in Your Local Church,” video, [revivalandreformation.org/resources/all/creating-effective-small-groups-in-your-local-church](http://revivalandreformation.org/resources/all/creating-effective-small-groups-in-your-local-church).
- Clifford Goldstein, “How to Lead a Small Group Study,” video, [revivalandreformation.org/resources](http://revivalandreformation.org/resources)

[/all/how-to-lead-a-small-bible-study-group](http://all/how-to-lead-a-small-bible-study-group).

- Sergio Gonzalez and Oleg Kostyuk, “Growing a Young Adult Interactive Bible Study,” video, [revivalandreformation.org/resources/all/growing-a-young-adult-interactive-bible-study](http://revivalandreformation.org/resources/all/growing-a-young-adult-interactive-bible-study).

**GC Personal Ministries and Sabbath School**—Ramon Canals, *director*

### Resources

- General Conference, *Keys to Small Group Ministry* (AdventSource), [adventsource.org/as30/store-productDetails.aspx?ID=36330](http://adventsource.org/as30/store-productDetails.aspx?ID=36330).
- Jim Howard, *Discipleship Handbook and Mentor’s Guide*, [trainingcenterchurches.com/discipleship-handbook](http://trainingcenterchurches.com/discipleship-handbook).

**GC Presidential**—Mark Finley, *assistant to the president*

### Resources

- Mark Finley, *Life-Changing Bible Studies* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn.). Contact: Melinda Worden 301-393-3000 (United States), [mworden@rhpa.org](mailto:mworden@rhpa.org).

**GC Women’s Ministries**—Heather-Dawn Small, *director*

### Resources

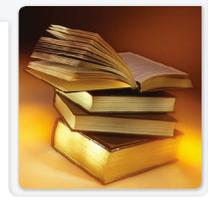
- Lavelle Whitehouse, *Small Group Dynamics* (General Conference Women’s Ministries), [adventsource.org/as30/store-productDetails.aspx?ID=34963](http://adventsource.org/as30/store-productDetails.aspx?ID=34963).
- General Conference Women’s Ministries, *Homes of Hope and Healing: 8 Weeks of Bible Lessons for Small Groups*, [adventistwomensministries.org/assets/files/Homes%20of%20Hope%20and%20Healing/HHH\\_booklet\\_copy\\_2nd.pdf](http://adventistwomensministries.org/assets/files/Homes%20of%20Hope%20and%20Healing/HHH_booklet_copy_2nd.pdf).

**GC Youth Ministries**—Gary Blanchard, *director*

### Resources

- Starter kits for your youth groups or small group meetings: “Starter Kit Downloads,” Youth Ministries Department, [youth.adventist.org/Resources/Starter-Kit](http://youth.adventist.org/Resources/Starter-Kit). 

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## Moving Your Church: Become a Spirit-Led Community

by S. Joseph Kidder, Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2016. ISBN 978-0-8163-5785-7. 144 pages.

Discovering or rediscovering one's passion for God serves as the catalyst necessary to move people to grip God's directives. Joseph Kidder aptly highlights this fundamental principle as the hallmark for moving the church to "become a Spirit-led community." Apart from the necessity of implementing personal, biblical spirituality, there are certain invaluable enablers of church growth. Growing congregations are discipleship-focused, relational in evangelistic nature, and creative in connecting with people (28–33). Implementation of these church growth strategies requires effective leading, intentional evangelism, "awe-inspiring worship" (67), preaching that engages and transforms individuals, and renewal through church planting.

Although helpful to all church members, the leadership principles emphasized by Kidder are geared toward church leaders, particularly pastors. These principles will help pastors become effective leaders. First and foremost, efficient leaders need "passion for a continual connection with God" (11). The interactions between the passionate leader and God are then to be communicated to the church. Therefore, knowing how to capably communicate the gospel is an essential leadership quality. Successful leaders are also vision-casters, effective change agents, and people of influence (13–20).

Evangelism is the heartbeat of the church. It is accomplished proficiently through relationships. Kidder is "convinced that it's better for our churches to have an evangelistic culture than just to have a series of evangelistic programs" (35). Developing a "culture of evangelism" will mobilize the church to adopt Jesus' methods in reaching "the unchurched."

"Awe-inspiring worship" would be, also, a tremendous church growth enhancer. The church service should inspire worshipers to experience "God moments." These are moments "in the worship service when our hearts touch the heart of God and we have a vision of him" (70). What this means in everyday terms is that the worship service should be creatively engineered, enabling worshipers to experience the presence of God. To create such transforming effects, every element of worship should be God-focused. This includes music particularly selected for the congregation, the uninterrupted "flow of worship" (70), the attention given to guests, the transformational prayers, and, undoubtedly, the presentation of God's Word through properly crafted sermons.

Preaching should be an integral part of the life-force of the church. Therefore, there needs to be a space for "engaging and transformational preaching" (85). Kidder suggests 20 pivotal ways to improve one's preaching skills. His practical approaches include being creative, honest, and transparent. Infused with much prayer, thorough preparation, and the power of the Holy Spirit, the delivery of the sermon through the instrumentality of the "effective and efficient leader" will produce deep-rooted results.

For Kidder, "church planting is an effective evangelistic tool" (109). To strengthen his point, he shows quite aptly, based on his research, that churches in North America are on the decline due to the failure to invest effort into planting new churches. Church growth also brings about revival; therefore, "one of the best ways to bring about church renewal is through planting another church" (117). Ten practical

steps on how to start a church plant are suggested in the book.

Kidder's personal experiences as a pastor are well noted in the volume. His rich testimonials make his suggestions practical and believable. At the same rate, these experiences highlight the book's frailties. While personal experiences add credence to the work, it is important to note that they may be anecdotal and may not necessarily have broad application.

Perspectives from a wide range of professionals, as well as advice from varied capable minds, can build even stronger credibility. Emphasis on reaching the current generation could have also added strength to the volume. Without these factors, one may be left wondering how to implement Kidder's noteworthy suggestions within a context and time that is different.

Kidder's main theme, the great importance of having personal connection with God, cannot be over-emphasized. It is this spiritual focus that can break down the walls of skepticism and negativity and enrich the church.

*Moving Your Church: Become a Spirit-Led Community* is well worth the read, I strongly recommend it. The book is ideal for any church member or leader and particularly, in my opinion, a valuable tool to be placed in the hands of new pastors. Firsthand knowledge of the information presented in the book can prevent many pastoral pitfalls. The book is an equipping tool. Everyone who desires to grow as an individual and endeavors to help the church grow spiritually will find Kidder's work significantly useful in moving the church to become a Spirit-led community. ✓

—Reviewed by Alrick Watson, pastors the Williams Lake and Quesnel Seventh-day Adventist Churches, British Columbia, Canada.

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