



The General Conference  
Sabbath School &  
Personal Ministries



FOR

# PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH GROWTH

SEVENTH-DAY  
ADVENTIST CHURCH 

**Principles of Church Growth** is created by the General Conference Sabbath School & Personal Ministries Department

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# PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH GROWTH

## *Section One:*

### **A Culture of Evangelism**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Seventh-day Adventist Church faces a daunting challenge in its attempt to evangelize the world for Jesus. In some parts of the world, the church can barely keep up with the huge numbers of people that annually decide to join the church, while in other parts of the world, the church is rejoicing over one or two individuals who joined the church that year. This leaflet is designed primarily for those who find church growth difficult. However, even those who are experiencing amazing growth patterns, can still learn how to do it better from the principles outlined in this leaflet.

I remember one church where I held an evangelistic series. At the end there were several baptisms. When we attempted to fill the baptistery, we discovered it was the storage bin for the church. Not only that, the water had never even been hooked up. And the church was over 25 years old! Evidently there had been no baptisms in the church for nearly 25 years.

Most Adventist pastors are stymied by their church members' lack of interest in reaching the lost. The church seems to be more concerned with arguments over music and cheese than over reaching the lost. If half the energy that has been spent in the "worship wars" were spent on reaching the lost, we would be shocked at the results in most churches. It must be heart-wrenching for God to see churches fighting over miniscule issues when so many people need to be reached with the authentic, everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Transfer or Convert Growth**

Yet it is not a hopeless situation. Research has revealed that there are many vibrant, growing Seventh-day Adventist churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even in western countries where growth has been minimal. What is different about these churches? For the

last few years in my church growth class at the seminary, I have assigned groups of students to select a conference in North America and chose the five churches in that conference with the highest rate of baptisms over the previous year. They have then called these churches and interviewed the pastor and/or lay leader to discover what was happening. We look at 10-15 conferences each year, which would represent 50-75 churches. Over the last three years that represents 150-200 churches.

Many studies have been done on growing Adventist churches, but what some researchers have failed to do is distinguish between transfer growth and convert growth. You get different results when you exclude churches that are growing through transferred members. Many of these fast growing Adventist churches are located in high Adventist population areas and are growing primarily because members are transferring from other Adventist churches. This is fine, but we must make certain that we don't copy these churches that are growing through transfers, and then expect convert growth as a result. It is critical to examine churches growing primarily by convert growth.

As I have examined the reports of the students who have made the contacts, a few common denominators began to emerge. First of all, there is no magic pill that a church can swallow that will enable it to finish the work in its territory. Church growth is hard work and church members must be committed to it. However, what I did notice about the churches growing by convert growth was that each of them had somehow created a culture of evangelism in their church.

In fact, it seemed to make little difference in the methodologies that the churches used, provided they had first of all created this culture of evangelism. Once the culture was in place, then almost any approach they used, worked. Later on we will examine some of the more common methodologies used by these growing Adventist churches. At this point, we must realize that it is not some new methodology that is important, but that it is the development of a culture of evangelism that is imperative.

## What is a Culture of Evangelism?

A culture of evangelism exists when reaching the lost permeates the entire fabric of the local church. This culture will occur when a church realizes that their self identity is wrapped up with the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It is who they are. A church that has a culture of evangelism is clearly identifiable. When one talks to the members of such a church, they all resonate with the same passion: their church exists to reach the lost. It is the burning passion that consumes them.

When a church has a culture of evangelism, evangelistic thinking permeates every activity of the local church. It is not just the concern of the Personal Ministries committee or the evangelism committee. Reaching the lost is talked about on every committee and in every ministry of the church. Ministries exist to enable the church to fulfill the great commission. In a church with the culture of evangelism, the Pathfinder club, the Community Services group, the Sabbath School will all be equally concerned that their ministry will enable the church to fulfill its mission.

In a church with the culture of evangelism, the monthly church board meeting will focus on reaching the lost. It will be the first item on the agenda and most of the meeting time will be spent discussing how the church can be better equipped to fulfill the mission of Christ. Of course, this is what the *Church Manual* declares to be the main function of the church board, but a church with the culture of evangelism actually accomplishes it.

Not only does the passion for the lost grasp the imagination of the institutional needs of the church, but it also grabs the attention of the individual members. They live for the sake of reaching the lost. They may have a daily vocation, but it is the side line in their life. They exist for the sake of reaching the lost. Their weekly pay check enables them to support their family so that they can be involved in their real vocation: fulfilling God's mission. This is the all-consuming passion of their life.

What I am describing may sound hyperbolic to most readers. It certainly does not describe my church, you are thinking. Yet it is the reality of the New Testament church. I realize I am describing the ideal, but the nearer we come to this ideal, the faster our

church will grow. What the research reveals is that Adventist churches that have begun to grasp this culture are the ones that are the growing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If there is a magic pill, this is it.

The reality is that most Adventist churches are nowhere near this ideal. This is why so few churches are growing. It is easy to blame the difficulties of evangelism on the materialistic culture some parts of the world confront, but the reality is that the real problem is not in the external world that we cannot control, but the internal passion of the church, which we can control. Yet it is far easier to blame the world, over which we have no power, than to ask ourselves what we can do to fulfill the mandate of the Master. Even in western cultures, churches that develop this culture or passion for the lost experience the same growth rate as the fast growing areas of the world.

By now, several of you are probably stomping your feet and saying: “True, true, but how can we create this kind of passion in our church?” And that is the real question we need to consider. Since most non-growing churches lack a culture of evangelism, and since a culture of evangelism is the most basic ingredient for growth in our churches, then what can we do to create this culture of evangelism?

## **Creating the Culture**

The most logical first step is to begin by preaching a sermon on reaching the lost. This is always a good first step, although, as we will see, much more is needed. Yet it is not just preaching it, but preaching it with a passion. If the culture is not in the heart of the pastor or church elder, then all the sermons preached will not create this culture in the church. This is where the process really begins: deep in the heart of the church leader.

Where does a pastor develop such a passion? Only from Jesus. This is why a lack of church growth is such a spiritual problem. One cannot spend significant time with the Master and not begin to feel His passion. See Him as the crucified Redeemer revealing such deep passion for the lost that He was willing to go to Calvary and pay the price of separation from God because the lost mattered so much to Him. One cannot truly spend time contemplating the ministry of Jesus without developing His



passion for the lost. That is who Jesus is. He is the God who came seeking the lost. This was the driving passion of His life. Everything He did was for the sake of reaching the lost. Lost people matter to Jesus and lost people are the center of His attention.

As the local church leader begins to develop this passion for the lost, it will soon be manifested in everything that happens in the church. Churches become reflections of their leaders. The passion of the leader will soon become the passion of the church. There can be no growing church without a leader who feels this passion for the lost.

This does not mean that if there is no growth in the church, the church has a leader without passion for the lost. This passion has to be in the leader first, but it must also translate to the members of the congregation. Through the years I have observed pastors with passion for the lost, but the church did not grasp their passion. This could be due to the pastor's inability to convey the passion, or it could be an outright rejection of the passion of Christ on the part of the church. However, growth will not take place unless this passion for the lost consumes the life of the church leader.

How then does the leader gain this passion? I have suggested spending time contemplating the life and death of Jesus. That is where it ultimately must begin. It is also important for the leaders to pray for God to give them the passion of Christ for the lost. Prayer for this passion will bring the strong passion of Jesus to the heart of the church leaders, so they, like Jesus, will begin weeping over the lost in their community.

When leaders pray for this passion, Jesus always answers. The leaders then become consumed with the need for reaching the lost. It will bother them that people are not being won to Christ in their territory. They will weep before God over the lost, crying to God for His power to create a breakthrough for God. Ellen White describes what this passion looks like:

Why do not believers feel a deeper, more earnest concern for those who are out of Christ? Why do not two or three meet together and plead with God

for the salvation of some special one, and then for still another? In our churches let companies be formed for service. Let different ones unite in labor as fishers of men. Let them seek to gather souls from the corruption of the world into the saving purity of Christ's love.<sup>1</sup>

Let the workers grasp the promises of God, saying, "Thou hast promised, 'Ask, and ye shall receive.' I must have this soul converted to Jesus Christ." Solicit prayer for the souls for whom you labor; present them before the church as objects for the supplication. It will be just what the church needs, to have their minds called from their little, petty difficulties, to feel a great burden, a personal interest, for a soul that is ready to perish. Select another and still another soul, daily seeking guidance from God, laying everything before Him in earnest prayer, and working in divine wisdom. As you do this, you will see that God will give the Holy Spirit to convict, and the power of the truth to convert, the soul.<sup>2</sup>

Once the leader has partaken of the passion of Christ for the lost, it is time to preach to the congregation about the lost. Our preaching must stem out of our deep passion, placed in our hearts by the Christ who intensely seeks for the salvation of lost people. So it is not just preaching about the lost, but doing so as a reflection of the passion of Jesus for the lost.

Congregations will not immediately turn around after one sermon. It will take multiple sermons. Passion for the lost will come through in all the leader's sermons, not just when that is the specific topic. When the passion of Christ becomes our deep passion, we, like God, will not be able to control ourselves: we will have to actively go forth to reach the lost.

Congregants rarely remember a specific sermon. They remember illustrations, but not the details. Why then preach? What will be conveyed and ultimately adopted by the church will be the passion that they hear the preacher enunciating week after

week. They may not remember the details, but they will begin to feel the passion.

One of the biggest barriers church leaders face in developing this culture of evangelism is a nagging doubt about some part of the Adventist message. Over the years I have observed pastors with doubts and have noticed that they rarely exhibited passion for reaching people. Why would you want to bring people into a church that you were not sure was 100 percent right? At times I have observed a pastor with such doubts, who finally got the doubts removed. Almost immediately a deep passion for the lost developed and the pastor soon began bringing people into the church. There is a definite connection between belief in the Adventist message and a passion to reach people with God's last day message.

God has called the Seventh-day Adventist Church into existence. It is God's remnant church. Exposing people to this last day message is a life or death matter. The Adventist church is not just another denomination; it is a movement called by God to prepare a people for the coming of Jesus. If this does not describe your feelings about the Adventist church, then maybe you need to get your doubts settled so you can possess this passion.

## **How to Display Passion for the Lost**

Now that you have imbibed the passion of this Christ and you have been expressing it in your sermons week by week, what else can you do to see the passion absorbed by the rest of the church? Sermons are basic and are probably the easiest part of the process, but this passion must then build into the entire fabric of the church. How does one communicate the passion in the every day life of the church?

Here are several practical suggestions. First of all, if the leader has the passion for the lost, the leader will be actively seeking the lost. For example, if one preaches about reaching the lost, but is not actively reaching out in one's personal life to bring lost people to Jesus, then the church will observe a contradiction between the life of the leader and the words of the leader. When such disparity exists, the words spoken from the pulpit will fall on unhearing ears.

There must be consistency between what the pastor preaches and what the pastor lives. The life reveals how the passion is lived out. Members will catch what they see their leader doing. If the leader is bringing neighbors to church, then the members will, too. If the leader is giving Bible studies, so will the members. Consistency here is absolute.

Secondly, tell stories that illustrate the passion. I am not talking about stories that are sermon illustrations, but stories told throughout the church. They may be told in the missionary period before worship, or at social gatherings. Churches are always telling stories. Make certain your stories are consistent with the passion for the lost. For example, back in the days when I pastored and had prayer meeting, I would always ask for prayer requests. I made certain that I also mentioned, without naming names, the people I was studying with. Telling members the stories of people who are interested in the message always helps to convey this passion for the lost as the very basic ingredient of the church.

Thirdly, the leader conveys this passion in all his personal contacts within the church. As the pastor visits with different families, the talk always moves to passion for the lost. Whether it is sharing the name of a lost acquaintance that needs prayer, or some other avenue, the leader never allows a visit to conclude unless some time is spent communicating the passion.

As this passion begins to spread beyond the church pastor to many of the lay leaders in the church, their collective passion will then have an impact on what is happening in the local church. For example, when nominating committee time rolls around, people are selected for church office because they are demonstrating in their lives the passion of God for the lost. The church will not put people into major positions of leadership who are not living this Great Commission mandate. Obviously, this cannot be done until the culture of evangelism has begun to consume the church leadership.

Sadly many churches select leaders on the basis of money, power, and influence. What is suggested here is a total abandonment of that approach and an acceptance of the passion

of God as the determining factor. In other words, if you had two equally qualified leaders, you would choose the one with the greatest passion for the lost. This of course cannot be legislated, but is something that will occur as the passion of God consumes the church.

Consistency in all aspects of the church is the next necessity as the church takes the passion for the lost as its focus. The local church budget will now reflect the priority of God for the lost. It will now assign funds in a way that reflects this priority. The church will not be consumed with just maintaining a building, but instead will become passionate about how that building can be used to assist Jesus in reaching the lost.

### **What Will be the Results of Establishing the Culture of Evangelism?**

Can you imagine a church like this? You may think this is a pipedream that could never be fulfilled, but the reality is that some Adventist churches are beginning to look like this and some of them are experiencing amazing growth. In developing countries, the Adventist church is experiencing a 10-12% annual growth rate, but at least one large Adventist church in North America is experiencing over a 20% annual conversion growth rate, while others are averaging over 10% growth rate in a division that averages less than 2% growth rate. The abundant growth rate of the third world can happen in westernized countries, but the church must beat with the passion of God.

All growing churches are not initially consumed with the passion of God. Growth occurs as soon as a church begins to move into the culture of evangelism. Spectacular growth takes place when that passion becomes the all absorbing life of the church.

The more I study church growth, the more I am convinced that what we are discussing here is the heart of the issue. We can put on the trimmings and create growth for a short period, but unless the passion of God is there, the growth will be sporadic and short lived. I am convinced that rather than recommend “methodologies,” we need to help our churches develop this passion for the lost.

Once it is in place, any methodology will work. This is the bottom line. Success or failure in church growth begins and ends here.

Church growth authorities in the past have referred to this as a “church growth conscience.” And that is exactly what it is. What is a conscience? A conscience is a feeling deep inside that tells me what is right or wrong. We are not born with a good conscience. Our conscience needs to be educated. When it is educated, then we feel guilty when we do something wrong. This is not a false guilt, but a genuine God-given guilt.

Before I was an Adventist, during my teenage years, my two favorite foods were pork chops and fried clams. I could never get enough of them. My conscience never bothered me when I consumed them with relish. Now if I would even touch one of these foods, it would bother me. Why? My conscience has been educated, and if I wouldn't eat such an unhealthy item today, the guilt would be enormous.

Our churches in all parts of the world need to have their consciences educated on the passion of God. When that happens, it will bother them when the church is not growing. If no one was baptized last month, the subject will come up at the church board and the board will hold themselves accountable. When the culture of evangelism is in place, it will bother the church leadership when growth is not happening, because they know the church exists for the purpose of fulfilling the passion of God for the lost.

A theology of outreach and proclamation must be deeply rooted in the very psyche of the church. This is who we are. Our self identity as a church is all wrought up with this insatiable passion of God for the lost. We cannot contain ourselves. We have to seek the lost because that is who God is, and we are His people and are reflective of His character and His passion.

As a result, the church will be willing to pay whatever price is needed to bring about growth. The church recognizes that it is not a social club that exists for the benefit of the members, but a mission agency involved in the work of the Redeemer God. There is, therefore, no cost too great for the church to pay. Everything the church does revolves around the process of reaching the lost.

The members take this as their self identity: they are indeed consumed with the passion of God for the lost.

Isn't it time now to begin to ask God to instill this passion in your own heart, as well as in the heart of the church? If Adventists truly believe that God has called this church into being to give the final message to the inhabitants of planet earth, then we have no choice. Our self- identity as a church is totally absorbed with the fulfillment of the Three Angels' Messages. We have no choice. If we are the people of God in earth's last hour, then we must be consumed with the passion of God. We must become a mission-centered church. The culture of evangelism must permeate every fiber of our being or we are not God's final remnant.

## *Section Two*

### **Common Methods Used By Growing Churches**

Once the culture of evangelism has been established in the church and the passion of God for the lost is the consuming fire of the believers, then almost any evangelistic method will work. The growing churches we have studied have few things in common. They use different methodology and it all works. The only conclusion we can draw is that it is not the methodology that works—it is the consuming passion of the church that contributes to the success of the church in convert growth.

Yet there are some common elements that seem to exist in most of the growing churches. The two most prominent methods we have discovered are the ability of the church to galvanize the laity into ministry for the lost and the use of public evangelism. Yet non-growing churches will also utilize these methodologies and they do not produce significant growth. What is the difference? The growing churches have utilized these methodologies along with the culture of evangelism.

### **Utilization of Laity**

Many churches have created lay ministry programs, but still do not produce outstanding convert growth. However, the churches that are reaching lost people have not only reawakened the laity to their responsibility, but they have been able to translate that awakening into actual work for the salvation of lost people. In

some of the growing churches we have found up to 80% of the laity involved in some kind of ministry.

Here is what I believe is happening. The culture of evangelism operating in the church results in members having a greater desire to share their faith and be involved. In other words, you can't force members to get involved in ministry through guilt. However, when the passion for reaching the lost is present, they want to be involved and they want to get trained for their ministry.

I have observed many pastors through the years get excited about lay ministry after reading some of my books, such as *Revolution in the Church*.<sup>3</sup> They have then called their members to a training event, but very few ever show up and the pastor becomes discouraged. Here is the problem. The culture of evangelism must first of all be established. Once this passion for the lost grasps the mindset of the church, the members ask to be trained so that they can get involved. In our desire to quickly move the church ahead, we sometimes bypass the important step of creating the culture. If you do so, you will not succeed. Lay involvement must spring out of a renewed understanding and commitment to the mission of the church.

Dr. Kenneth Van Wyk several years ago observed the relationship between the culture of evangelism (mission mentality) and lay involvement:

The church is a training center where the people of God are equipped for their respective areas of ministry and mission. Nurture, indeed, comes as a by-product of being equipped and involved in ministry. My experience in Christian education is that a mission mentality in the church motivates people to training and produces astounding results in personal spiritual growth as well as church growth.<sup>4</sup>

As laity are dispatched into ministry, it is important that there be balance in their assignments. You don't want all of them on the front lines. You need the "back up troops". A good ratio would be one out of every five people involved in the church would be involved in outreach. In other words if you had 100 laity involved in ministry, 20 of them would be involved in outreach ministry and the



other 80 involved in assimilating the new members and keeping the machinery of the church in good operation.

We are not interested in just getting numbers on the church books; we are interested in souls prepared for the coming of Jesus. This is why it is so crucial to have a balance in the dispatching of the workers in the local church. Keeping people in the church is just as important as getting them in the first place. However, the reality is that most churches are spending little time in outreach and most of their time in nurture. So the present problem is the opposite. We are not currently in danger of too much emphasis on outreach. Our problem, in reality, is getting the twenty per cent involved in outreach.

The basic issue to recognize is that once the church has grasped the culture of evangelism, then it appears that one of the first things that needs to happen is the employment of the laity in ministry. To attempt to put people into ministry without the culture in place will result in the placement of members in the wrong kinds of ministry. It is not just placing people in ministry in harmony with their spiritual gifts, but maintaining balance between nurture and outreach. A church could conceivably have 100% of its members involved in ministry and still not grow. This would occur if all members were dispatched to nurture ministries. The balance is crucial for success.

## **Public Evangelism**

As church growth students have researched churches with the most baptisms, inevitably they will come back and state that there is nothing in common among them. In fact some have said the only thing in common was that they held a meeting. And that is true. Public evangelism is still playing a vital role in Adventist church growth.

This is not true in evangelical Christianity generally, but it is a clear difference in Adventism. This is why Adventist churches cannot completely copy the methodologies of the evangelicals. The techniques do not produce the same results in Adventism. It appears that there has to be some format for teaching the Adventist message. And the best format we have discovered is public evangelism. Public evangelism can be done in various

forms. All churches are not using the same formula. Some use the traditional five week prophecy-oriented preaching series, while others use a seminar approach or a Sabbath morning covering of the message. The main point is that they share the unique Adventist message publicly, in some way.

This finding would differ with other studies that have been done of Adventist church growth. However, most of those studies have not differentiated between transfer growth and convert growth. If you combine them, then you end up with different results. In those studies, it has been shown that public evangelism does not play a significant role in church growth. One needs to understand, however, what is being measured. If you include churches growing primarily by transfer growth, they will overshadow the churches growing by convert growth, since most Adventist growing churches are growing by transfer growth in western civilization.

When one separates out the churches who are primarily growing by convert growth, then public evangelism becomes a major player in church growth. I have personally examined many of the churches that have been using a contemporary approach to worship so that they can reach the unchurched. At least this is their intention. However, when I examine their baptismal record, I discover very few adult baptisms. Yet the church is growing. How? It is primarily by transfer growth.

Most of the successful contemporary churches that I have observed have been birthed in an area where there are large Adventist settlements or institutions. Their freshness and contemporary style has attracted many former and inactive Adventists, as well as some of the disenfranchised people attending other churches. At first these churches grow rapidly, but then they have a tendency to level off and decline. One cannot build a church on the disenfranchised or it will ultimately self-destruct. It is amazing how many of these churches that Adventist leaders flocked to observe a few years ago, no longer exist or have even left the denomination.

These kinds of churches do have a place, especially if they can reach out to former and inactive members and get them

involved. However, if they don't couple that effort with the reaching of new people, these churches usually do not continue for very long. The tragedy has been that others have attempted to copy this contemporary model and assumed they could have similar success in their community. However, most communities do not have a lot of former Adventists living there and the model does not work—the only result is that this model makes the existing Adventists mad over the style of worship. One must understand that the reason for the success of these churches is that they are planted where there are already a lot of Adventists that can be enticed to join the new church.

With evangelicals, the seeker service is built around the premise that when people decide to go to church, they will show up on a Sunday morning. Therefore the Sunday morning service is geared for their reception. Obviously that does not translate into Adventism. Most people don't just decide to go to a church on a Sabbath morning except in these high density Adventist areas. In those communities the seeker service will work for us, but it does not seem to work apart from the Adventist community, unless something else is added to the mix.

In contrast, there are a few Adventist churches that utilize a contemporary approach to worship, but are also successful in reaching the unchurched. They are baptizing significant numbers of people and are some of the best growing churches in Adventism. They are also faithful to our Adventist heritage and doctrine and do not compromise the faith in order to reach people. So the issue is not whether one uses contemporary worship. Some churches that reach new people and some that reach only former Adventists are using contemporary worship.

What is the difference? The churches that are reaching new people also have public evangelism somewhere in their programs. This is the amazing difference between those churches that reach new people and those that are reaching the inactives. I believe that if the churches reaching the inactives would add public evangelism into their programming, they could reach the unchurched in their community. From my experience and observation of over 40 years, as well as studies we have done, it has become abundantly clear that public evangelism must be a

vital part of the prescription for successful convert growth in Adventism.

This does not mean that everyone must hold a five-week meeting. There are many ways that public evangelism can be done. What we are suggesting here is that in some way the church needs to expose people to the unique Adventist message and publicly invite them to become a member. In all honesty I must say that I have seen a few churches experiencing convert growth without public evangelism, but they have been extremely rare. This is why I strongly suggest that any church serious about reaching the lost include some form of public evangelism in its growth mix.

### **Growth Mix**

What do we mean by growth mix? A growth mix is those forms of evangelism that are included in the church's portfolio of methods it uses to reach people for Jesus. What I am strongly suggesting here is that public evangelism, in most cases, must be part of that mix for successful Adventist church growth. Growing Adventist churches have put together a successful growth mix that fits their congregation and its style of ministry.

A growth mix makes certain that the church is doing sowing, cultivating, and reaping. This is another factor that appears to be common among Adventist churches growing through convert growth. They have planned a process of evangelism that involves all three areas.

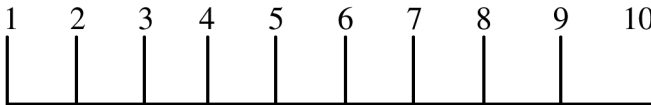
Evangelism is not an event; it is a process. Growing churches have learned this. Many Adventist churches will have periodic growth when they hold an evangelistic meeting. To them evangelism is an event. When it is over, they can go back to life as normal. The difference with the growing churches is that they view evangelism as a process of which public evangelism is a part—the reaping part.

The growing churches have realized that there is more to evangelism than the public meeting. One cannot continually reap if one has not continually sown. What we have noticed in the studies we have done is that a meeting is rarely successful if there has not been a clearly thought out strategy to prepare the community for

the meetings. The harvest reaped is compatible with the seed sown and cultivated.

Yet in the growing churches this process is not confined to just one evangelistic meeting. Some churches will enter into a process of sowing, cultivating, and reaping for one meeting and then it stops. With the growing churches this is a continuous action. As soon as people are reaped, the process repeats. The latest people won are immediately put to work for their friends and family, preparing them for the next reaping event. The entire church is constantly involved in sowing, cultivating, and reaping. The process of evangelism is a vital part of the life of the entire church.

Few people are won to Christ through one exposure. They need multiple exposures to the gospel. This is why it is imperative that a church not put all its eggs in one basket. They need multiple approaches for the many varied minds that exist in their community. Process evangelism is best illustrated by the following diagram:



On a scale of 1 -10, the 1 represents a person who is extremely negative about the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He is the one who sees the sign on the church, spits, and walks on the other side. In contrast, the 10 represents a person ready to jump in the baptistery. Everyone is somewhere on this scale in their relationship to the church.

The people who normally attend an Adventist evangelistic meeting are 8, 9, or 10 on the scale. They are ready to be reaped. They have been prepared by God or through church members, used by God. They make a decision in the evangelistic meeting and are quickly baptized into the Adventist church. If a person who is a 3 happens to come to the evangelistic meeting, they normally would not return. It wasn't for them. This is understandable when one realizes they are a 3 on the scale. They probably should never have been invited to the meeting. They were not ready for reaping. Remember public evangelism is the reaping part of the process.

The 3's and 4's need cultivation before exposing them to a reaping event.

Mary is a 3 on the scale. She has just recently gone through a divorce. An Adventist friend invites her to attend a divorce recovery seminar offered by the church. She attends and is extremely grateful to the church for the help provided. Is she now ready to be invited to the evangelistic meeting and reaped? No. She has moved up the receptivity scale and while formerly a 3, she may now be a 5. It will usually take several exposures for a person to move up to the 8, 9, or 10 level where they should be invited to the reaping event.

Most people are between 1 and 7 on the scale. If the church does nothing to move these people up the scale in their receptivity, but continues to hold meetings aimed at the 8's, 9's, and 10's, pretty soon the pool of people in the 8, 9 and 10 area will dry up and the public meeting will not be successful. This is why it is so critical for the church to possess a process understanding of growth. If the church is continually ministering to people in the 1-7 area, there will be a constant supply of people moving into the reaping range.

Sometimes churches get so excited about meeting the needs of the people in the 1-7 range, that they spend all their time seeking to minister to them and never hold a reaping event. These churches do not grow. Once you neglect any part of the process, growth will stop. Growth is a process and if you neglect this concept, you cannot expect to see new people continually joining the church.

The growth mix found in various churches will be different. One size does not fit all. Each church will need to discover what events are part of their own process. The important thing to remember is that all three parts of the process are in continual operation. In other words, keep monitoring what should your church should be doing in the areas of sowing, cultivating, and reaping. Neglect any part of this process, and growth will not happen.

## Summation of Section 2

In this section we have observed two methodologies that seem to be common to growing Adventist churches. These churches have established the culture of evangelism where the laity are utilized in meaningful ministry and, second, they have a process of evangelism in operation that includes sowing, cultivating, and reaping events. Most of them are utilizing public evangelism in some form for their reaping event.

This process of evangelism permeates the thinking of these growing churches on every level. When process thinking controls the church, the members realize that every ministry of the church is involved in soul winning. Thus the Sabbath School, the church school, the Pathfinder club, and the local Adventist Community Services are all making a contribution to the process of winning people to Jesus. This is not just theory; it becomes a living reality for these churches.

## Section Three

### A Brief Review of Church Growth Theory

Donald McGavran, the founder of the church growth movement enunciated seven major components of church growth theory. These are the factors that must be in place for a church to grow and they are still valid today. What are they?<sup>5</sup>

#### ***1. A pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth.***

Early church growth scholars quickly recognized the critical role pastors play in church growth. They correctly observed that the growth history of the church kept changing as pastors changed. A church could be growing, a new pastor could arrive and it would stop growing, or vice versa. The leadership of the pastor and the ability to see the possibilities for growth, and then create the vision to move into the future is absolutely critical for growth to occur. The key issue is the creation of the mission mentality or evangelism culture. It takes strong pastoral leadership for that to happen.

***2. A well-mobilized laity which has discovered, has developed, and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth.***

This major component we have commented on extensively in the previous section. The pastor cannot be a lone ranger. One must be able to mobilize the laity behind the vision and enable God's people to utilize all the spiritual gifts that He has placed in the church.

***3. A church large enough to provide the range of services that meets the needs and expectations of its members.***

Church growth scholars did not mean that only mega churches could be adequate in this area. In fact, during the 70's, when these components were discovered, mega churches hardly existed. McGavran simply recognized that a church needs to be large enough to accomplish what it feels God has called it to do. That could be a 50-member church as well as a 1,000 member church.

***4. The proper structural balance of the dynamic relationship between celebration, congregation, and cell.***

"Celebration" as used by these early church growth scholars was not about "celebration" churches that have developed in Adventism. They used the word "celebration" to indicate that the church member needs to feel they are part of something bigger. Adventists usually accomplish this at camp meetings or General Conference sessions. Some larger churches also can give this impression to believers.

"Congregation" referred to a group of around 50 people that each member is acquainted with in the church. The member might know their name, but has not formed a deep relationship with these people. "Cell" is a reference to a small, intimate group of 10-12 people in which the members share their life in Christ and build deep relationships. To be healthy, a church needs to provide all three exposures. Adventists have done fairly well with congregation and celebration. Our weakest area has been in the realm of the cell or small group. As a result, many Adventists are only loosely attached to their church and do not have solid relationships in the body.



### ***5. A membership drawn basically from one homogeneous unit.***

This component became the most controversial principle of church growth theory. McGavran was descriptive here and not prescriptive. His studies revealed that most congregations ended up reaching people who were like them. As a result, large segments of the harvest were unreached. That is why it was so necessary to plant new homogeneous churches in these unreached people groups.

### ***6. The use of evangelistic methods that have proven to work and focus on making disciples.***

McGavran was concerned that churches had a tendency to keep doing the same thing year after year, even though the results were not good. To him it made sense that a church should evaluate what it was doing against the backdrop of the Great Commission. Were the methods successful? Churches should not use evangelistic tools just because they have always done it that way.

Interestingly, an Adventist church could hold evangelistic meetings year after year with little or no results. It could easily conclude that the methodology no longer works. Yet, as seen in the previous section, the methodology is clearly working in hundreds of Adventist churches. So what is the problem? It might be that the church has conducted the meetings as an event rather than as part of the evangelistic process, or perhaps they are holding meetings in place of establishing a culture of evangelism in the church. It would be easy to discontinue the evangelistic series, convinced they no longer work, when the problem is not in the meetings, but in the holistic approach to evangelism. This is why a clear, well thought out evaluation of what is happening is so important. A church cannot look at the surface methodology, but must also examine why that methodology is no longer working.

### ***7. A philosophy of ministry that has its priorities arranged in biblical order.***

According to McGavran, biblical order occurred when the salvation of the lost took top priority in the church. Either the Great Commission is the main concern of the church or we are following religious philosophy rather than the Savior. By mandating the Great Commission, Jesus established the making of disciples as

the chief work of the church. Any church that puts anything else over the making of disciples has its priorities arranged in a non-biblical order.<sup>6</sup>

## **Axioms of Church Growth<sup>7</sup>**

In addition to the major components of church growth theory, the early scholars of church growth identified four axioms they found to be true in pursuing the fulfillment of the Great Commission in local churches.

### ***1. The pastor must want the church to grow and be willing to pay the price.***

Once, again, church growth is seen as being dependent on pastors and their willingness to pay the price of growth. That price includes very hard work. Growth-oriented pastors consistently work longer hours. But it is not just working longer, but working smarter. These pastors galvanize their whole membership for the accomplishment of the Great Commission. Many pastors are not strongly motivated to get more members. They have all they can do just to pastor the ones they already have. So, part of the cost of growth is that the pastor must be willing to have members he cannot pastor. The pastor must be willing to train elders and other members to do the work of pastoral care.

### ***2. The members must want the church to grow and be willing to pay the price.***

Not only must the pastor be committed to growth, but so must the congregation. We have already noticed this axiom in the previous sections. Sometimes the pastor is willing to pay the price for growth, but the members are not. The price members pay is that they may not know everyone in the church anymore; in addition, they might lose some of their positions. Then there is the problem of overcrowding and the need to plant a new church or build a bigger one. Are the members committed to paying the price of growth?

In one church that I pastored many years ago, we were growing rapidly with nearly 100 baptisms a year. One of my elders came to me to express his concern. He said: "Pastor we have a problem in our church." Of course I was anxious to hear about the problem. He went on to explain that we had too many new

members! That may sound shocking, for this is what the church is all about, but I needed to hear him out. In the past, he had always known everyone in the church. Now there were many people in church on Sabbath that he did not know. Furthermore, he was concerned that the old members would lose control of the church. These are legitimate concerns that have to be addressed. Fortunately, I was able to help him see that this was a positive thing, but many times church leaders are not willing to pay the price and they will sabotage the growth.

### ***3. The church must agree that the goal of evangelism is to make disciples.***

McGavran defined disciple as the “initial bringing to Christ.” Thus the axiom was meant to convey that evangelism should major in bringing people to Christ and not in developing them into mature Christians. While Adventists would agree with the intent of McGavran, we would not want to limit discipleship to just the initial coming to Christ. Our goal is not to get people in the door, but to help people become fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ, ready to meet Jesus when He comes.<sup>8</sup>

### ***4. The church must not be suffering from a terminal illness.***

Obviously churches afflicted with a terminal illness are unable to fulfill the Great Commission.<sup>9</sup>

## **Terminal Illnesses<sup>10</sup>**

McGavran defined eight illnesses afflicting churches that he considered terminal. He then proceeded to assign them names that sound like diseases. In the author’s opinion, some of them are not as hopeless as others. However, it is true that if they are not addressed, they will result in the demise of the church.

### ***1. Ethnikitis or Ghost Town disease***

This disease-sounding affliction is a problem in all kinds of churches. It has afflicted many Adventist churches. Take, for example, the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in downtown metropolis. For years it has been the flagship church in that area. It was the plumb church for pastoral assignment. To be the pastor was to have prestige. However, over the last several years it has been declining. All attempts to turn it around have failed.

Here is the problem. When First Church began, the neighborhood around the church was primarily peopled by middle class whites. Now, 50 years later, the neighborhood around the church is populated largely by low income Hispanics. As Hispanics moved into the area, the whites slowly moved out to the suburbs. New churches were launched in suburbia and the membership of First Church began to decline. Out of loyalty, a few members continued to drive to First Church each Sabbath, but then quickly retreated to their suburb for the rest of the week. They showed no interest in the community around the church. When members would attempt to bring their friends from the suburbs to church, the friends indicated it was too far to travel. They preferred a church closer to home. As their children grew up, they did not have the loyalty to First Church, so they began attending the churches in suburbia.

The result of this scenario is a church populated by one kind of people, and surrounded by another kind of people, and the two never interact. Unless First Church can find a way to minister to the surrounding Hispanic community with the idea of turning the church over to them, then, ultimately, either First Church will sell the building and move to the suburbs or it will finally conclude that its ministry is over and shut the doors. There is no hope to revive such a church without these changes. This is why Ethnikitis is a serious terminal illness, affecting primarily urban churches. All such churches will eventually die unless they turn their church over to the new ethnic group.

## **2. Old Age**

While Ethnikitis is a disease primarily affecting urban churches, old age is a similar disease facing rural churches. Many Adventist churches began in rural America. In fact, in many parts of the world Adventism has been primarily a rural movement. Many small towns and communities had an Adventist church. However, migration to the cities has drained many of these churches of their membership. It is not only the church in rural areas that is dying, the towns themselves are dying. Sometimes the only building left in town is the church. Many of these churches continue to struggle year after year. The worshippers can easily be

counted on one's fingers. The members are old and it is obvious that death for these churches is just around the corner.

Since people are migrating out of these towns and few people are moving in, the prospect of new members is rapidly diminishing. It will not be long before such churches will close. Is there hope for such churches? I wish there were, but McGavran identified this as a terminal illness and the last 40 years have demonstrated that he is correct. Unless new people begin moving into the community, such a church cannot grow and therefore it will die.

### **3. *People Blindness***

This disease is more easily corrected than the previous two maladies. This is the failure of the church to observe the many cultural differences of people that surround the church. They assume that most everyone in the community is like them, so if they reach these people, they are reaching the community. However, no community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is monolithic. Numerous people groups exist, even in the same cultural or ethnic pool.

When a church fails to reach out to other groups in their area and makes no provision to expand beyond the homogeneous group that exists in the church, then McGavran suggests the church will ultimately die. Churches live and die in one homogenous unit. In order to grow, a church must continually be reaching out to new homogeneous units of people. So this disease has a remedy. The church can become aware of the different people in their community and reach out to them with methodologies that connect with the new groups.

Reaching new cultural groups can cause severe problems for the church if the members insist that their cultural expression of faith is the only way things can be done. Reaching new groups means sharing different cultural expressions, especially in the area of worship. If a church cannot do that, it will die.

### **4. *Hyper-Cooperativism***

This is a malady that is more apt to afflict non-Seventh-day Adventist churches than it is Adventist ones, but it can still occur, so we should look at it. McGavran observed that churches that

only did evangelism when there was a joint evangelistic event, in which all denominations participated, did not grow. The local church had to be central in the evangelistic process.

Likewise, if the only evangelistic meeting an Adventist church engages in is the one where all the Adventist churches in town come together to sponsor a meeting, little permanent growth will occur in the church. This does not mean the church should not engage in large city-wide meetings with all the churches coming together. The point here is that this should not be the only evangelism done.

I was pastoring a church in an urban area. The conference had invited a very prominent evangelist to hold a series of meetings in one of the large auditoriums in the city that seated 3,000 people. All the churches were to participate, but no one church owned the meeting. There was no attempt to create ownership among the churches. The result was that on opening night only 400 people attended. The Adventist population in the city was over 2,000. Very soon, the meetings dwindled to around 200 each night in an auditorium seating 3,000. Very few positive results occurred. If the participating churches decided that public evangelism did not work because of their experience with that meeting, and, therefore, this was the only time they did evangelism, then those churches would eventually die. However, in my church, six months later we held a meeting with just my church participating and we baptized 50 people.

This malady is easy to eliminate. Each local church must develop its own strategy of evangelism. While they may at times join forces with other local churches, they will regularly conduct their own local meetings. Only then can the church grow.

### **5. *Koinonitis***

This disease is drawn from the Greek word, *koinonia*, meaning fellowship. When this disease afflicts the church, the focus is all on internal relationships within the church. In a certain sense the church has become a social club where the members enjoy each other's company, but there is no concern to reach out to new people and bring them to Jesus. This disease is very prominent in many Adventist churches.

Those who grow up in an Adventist culture assume knowledge of the culture. They fail to realize that new people joining the church discover quickly that they have entered into a foreign culture. If those already in the church do not extend the hand to help the new people adapt to the cultural changes, the new people will quickly be migrating out the back door. A church having problems assimilating new members may be afflicted with this serious disease.

The evangelistic meetings ended last Saturday night with a spectacular baptism of over 30 new people into the local Adventist church. For five weeks the members had come out night after night supporting the meetings. They rejoiced over these precious new people who had accepted the message, but they were exhausted and ready to get back to normal. So next Sabbath when the new people came to church, it looked different. There were no greeters in the parking lot. When they entered the foyer a greeter quickly handed them a bulletin. They struggled to find the correct Sabbath School class. They had been used to vibrant lessons and inspiring music and sermons in church. This Sabbath a man got up and read an article for the sermon. What happened? They figured they were in the wrong church, so didn't come back.

It would be easy to conclude that this problem developed because the evangelist had not taught the church members sufficiently. Or could it have happened because the members failed to reach out and embrace the new ones, drawing them into the church by helping with the adjustment to the culture of that local church? So often we "dip them and leave them." Once they are baptized, the new members have to fend for themselves. Sadly, few survive.

This disease, while problematic, does have solutions and remedies. The church needs to move out of its comfort zone, embrace the new people and help them feel at home. This church needs to help the beginners feel the wonderful *koinonia* that does exist in the church. Only if it can assimilate the newcomers can a church truly be a growing church.

## **6. Sociological Strangulation**

This sounds like a very serious disease, and it is. It recognizes that the ability of the church to grow is limited by the space available for new people. Whenever a church reaches 80% of its seating capacity, its parking space, or its Sabbath School facilities, it will stop growing.

I was pastor of a large church with 500 members on the books. For the previous ten years before my arrival, the membership had fluctuated between 500-525. The sanctuary seated 325 people, but the Sabbath attendance was only 280. I recognized that they were at the 80% factor and it was hindering their growth. Available space alone does not guarantee growth, but lack of space definitely hinders growth. There simply is no place to put new people. People in western societies like to have space. Just look at any airport waiting area. There are plenty of seats available, but people will stand rather than sit close to a stranger. In non-westernized countries, people are more used to crowded conditions, so these factors may not apply as they do in westernized countries.

Recognizing the problem, I brought it to the church board and offered three solutions. They could plant a new church, build a new church, or go to two services. The board responded with a fourth suggestion: none of the above. In my youthful enthusiasm I declared that this was not an option and pushed them to go to two services. In hindsight, I should have allowed some time for them to think it over and get used to the idea, for during the entire five years of my pastorate there, they resented the second service.

Yet, you cannot argue with the success. Very quickly our attendance shot up until we had reached between 450 and 500 attending, where we plateaued, because, once again, second service was filled up. When I left the congregation, they planted a new church with 50 people going to the new site. They then suggested that they no longer needed the second service, even though they had an attendance of 400 and a sanctuary that was crowded to capacity at 325. Very soon the attendance dwindled back to 280 and, at times, even descended as low as 150. The 80% factor is real.



When I arrived in my next church I discovered a church with a seating capacity of 500, but an attendance of 280, again. This time the sanctuary space was not hindering growth; it was the Sabbath school space for the children's divisions. The church decided to build an addition to the church to accommodate the need. To do so meant they had to utilize part of the parking lot for the new building. In anticipation, we first added an additional parking lot to replace what we were about to lose. Amazingly, our attendance shot up by 50 people each Sabbath with the additional off street parking. When we broke ground for the new addition and lost the parking space, the attendance dropped 50 people. It is amazing how accurate the 80% factor is in Adventist churches. In inner city churches the parking space issue does not hold because there is no expectation that there will be parking space for everyone. Also, some ethnic groups will tolerate sitting closer together, so the ratio may rise to 90% of the seating capacity in those churches. However, in all instances, the church cannot grow beyond its ability to house the people who will attend.

A church, however, should not wait until it hits the 80% factor before doing something about the available space. Otherwise the growth curve will be broken and the church will lose momentum. Once the growth momentum is lost, it is very difficult to regain. Therefore, a church should anticipate that in one year they will have reached the 80% factor and make plans to do something about it as they approach the maximum ratio. This way they can keep their growth moving forward. There are three solutions to the 80% factor: build a new church, plant a church, or go to multiple services. The choice belongs to the church, but it must make one of these choices or risk being unfaithful to the Great Commission.

### ***7. Arrested Spiritual Development***

This is a disease that primarily affects new Adventists. There is rapid spiritual development occurring with these people during most evangelistic meetings. However, after they are baptized there is no more spiritual growth. It is as if they have now arrived and there are no more heights to climb. This disease afflicts many Adventist churches because they fail to provide for the ongoing spiritual development of their new people. They assume that each person can make it on their own, once they are baptized. This is a

fatal error. If a church does not help people develop their spiritual life, ultimately a large segment of the church will be caught in “Adventism 101” and will fail to move on to deeper spiritual commitment. A church without deep spiritual commitment is a church headed for disaster. Therefore, this is a fatal illness.

### **8. St. John’s Syndrome**

McGavran called this disease St. John’s Syndrome after John the Apostle. However, Adventists know the disease better by the term “Laodiceanism.” Whereas arrested spiritual development is a disease afflicting primarily new Adventists, Laodiceanism afflicts old time members. They are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot. God declares them to be disgusting in His sight. This disease as we know is very prevalent in the Adventist church. As Ellen White declares:

The message to the church of the Laodiceans applies especially to the people of God today. It is a message to professing Christians who have become so much like the world that no difference can be seen.<sup>11</sup>

Churches that are afflicted with this illness are filled with people who are nominal or cultural Adventists. They may have grown up Adventists and enjoy the culture and lifestyle, but they have no serious commitment to the fulfillment of the mission of Christ. They go through the motions of the church, but vibrant spiritual life is missing from the experience of these Laodicean members.

What is the remedy for this disease? The Holy Spirit. Only He can bring the needed revival to renew the church to its spiritual moorings. It also helps if many new Christians are present. New Adventists are usually on fire for Christ. If there are enough of them around, the old Adventists caught up in Laodiceanism might recatch the wind of Holy Spirit power.

I was 17 and had just joined a small Adventist church of 25 members in a city of 50,000. Ten miles away was a city of 100,000 and we had no church there. I was excited about the message I had just accepted, but in the church were several Laodiceans who evidently were disturbed by my enthusiasm. I will never forget one dear old saint who approached me and put his arms around me

and said: “Brother you have your first love experience. You just wait and you will lose it like the rest of us!” If that is what happens to new people, no wonder Laodiceanism is a fatal disease for Adventists.

### **Summation of Section 3**

Eight fatal diseases have been presented and all are prevalent in the modern Adventist Church. If your church is afflicted with one or more diseases that are curable, then do something about it. We cannot afford to have churches lingering on life support and refusing the medicine God offers. As long as one of these diseases is afflicting your church, McGavran observed that the church will not grow. So part of the process in dealing with creating a growing church is to remove those hindrances to growth so that nothing will block its progress.

## *Section Four*

### **Church Growth Principles**

A church growth principle is a universal truth about church growth that exists in every culture and group, whereas a method is a way a church applies a church growth principle. Many times churches confuse principles with methods. Some of the issues we have already examined in this leaflet are really principles, such as developing a culture of evangelism. Utilizing laity and viewing evangelism as a process may also be considered solid principles that have been identified through the years by church growth scholars. In this final section we wish to explore a few other principles recognized by church growth scholars as applicable in the church today.

### **Church Growth Involves a Union of Human and Divine Forces**

When all has been written about church growth, one fact will never be altered: ultimately all church growth is attributable to God. He is the Empowerer of the church. Without His blessing all our human efforts cannot cause the church to grow. Church growth is a divine work. Yet God does not work independently of humans. For church growth to be effective, God and humanity

work together. God did not commit the gospel commission to angels, but to humans.

This is why the preaching of the gospel was committed to erring men rather than to the angels. It is manifest that the power which works through the weakness of humanity is the power of God; and thus we are encouraged to believe that the power which can help others as weak as ourselves can help us.<sup>12</sup>

This does not diminish the fact that angels are working alongside us as we seek to fulfill the Great Commission, for it is a divine-human combination, but angels always put people in contact with God's church.

An angel guided Philip to the one who was seeking for light and who was ready to receive the gospel, and today angels will guide the footsteps of those workers who will allow the Holy Spirit to sanctify their tongues and refine and ennoble their hearts. The angel sent to Philip could himself have done the work for the Ethiopian, but this is not God's way of working. It is His plan that men are to work for their fellow men.<sup>13</sup>

This is the divine-human combination that God continually utilizes in His work with the human race. He demonstrated it in the person of Christ and continues to carry out this divine-human relationship as He seeks the salvation of the lost. The good news is that the church is not in the soul winning business alone. God is there. He is guiding the church for the accomplishment of His mission.

God is at work in our world. Jesus is drawing all people to Him. The Holy Spirit is the active agent of God directing the salvation enterprise. All three members of the divine Trinity are actively involved in the salvation of humans. At the same time humanity must work in cooperation with this Divine agency. Humans must have a right relationship with this God. They must have the right vision. They must have the right goals and tasks, and be in the right time and place and reach the right people.

The right people are the people that God is working with. We humans must be so in touch with our God that we hear Him speak,

so that we work along the same lines that God is working. This is why spiritual focus is so crucial in the battle for the salvation of lost people. Perhaps you've heard the story of a colporteur or pastor who was traveling down the road in a certain direction, felt a strong urge to turn around and go the opposite way. The person obeys the impulse, follows the leading of the Spirit. Somehow he manages to drive to a certain address, park the car and walk up to an unknown door. When he knocks, the person opens the door with the news that the person was praying that someone would come. That is the divine-human combination.

This is God and humanity working together. This is why spirituality can never be divorced from genuine soul winning. Soul winning and church growth can never be the performance of certain psychological tricks that cause people to become a part of the church of God. It is above all, a work of God, of which we Christians cooperate with a God who is passionate about using us to reach people who do not know Jesus.

## **Meeting Felt Needs**

A church can never grow beyond its ability to meet the felt needs of people. Churches that are serious about reaching people in today's sophisticated society are those who carefully understand the needs that exist in their community and reach out and meet those needs. The vast majority of unchurched people are never going to be reached if we don't first of all meet them at their point of need.

This is the essence of the Adventist holistic approach to evangelism that Ellen White so clearly annunciated. In her classic passage, she outlines what I often refer to as the "magna carta" of Adventist evangelism. It is a passage that I make every seminary student memorize, for it is the heart of her evangelistic understanding.

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me."<sup>14</sup>

Here Ellen White emphatically declares that this method alone will give true success in evangelism. This would indicate that other methods might give a false sense of success, but only Jesus' method will provide true success. And what was that method? Ellen White continues informing us that it was a relational, need-meeting approach that Jesus used. The only method that gives true success involves meeting people at the point of need.

Felt needs are absolutely essential. Any church utilizing any other approach as part of the process of evangelism is outside the will and plan of God. Ellen White continues in this passage to stress the importance of this approach in the personal realm rather than just in the corporate level. Notice her next words:

There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonizing, and more time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice. Accompanied by the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit.<sup>15</sup>

What is indicated in the first statement is elaborated by the second. She is clearly talking about meeting felt needs. The servants of God must become close to the people they are trying to reach by meeting their needs. One cannot get close without spending time with the lost. Jesus was a great mingler and Ellen White indicates that so must God's church today. The members are salt and must permeate the community.

There is no call here to hibernate in the wilderness evangelizing jack rabbits. Here is an awesome invitation given by the prophet of the Lord to mingle like Jesus with the unlovely, the poor, and the lost. Jesus was friends with sinners. He attended their parties, met them where they were. Jesus never compromised His faith, but Jesus loved to go where there were sinners. The people most comfortable around Jesus were sinners, while the ones most uncomfortable were the so-called saints. But

Jesus didn't pay attention to that, because He had His priorities straight. He came to save sinners. That was His mission and it should be our mission, even if we make some saints upset.

You cannot meet the needs of the people you are seeking to save unless you mingle with them and get acquainted with them. This is not a call to merely do a survey to find out needs; it is a clarion call to obey the counsel of its prophet and get out of the fortress and mingle in the community. For too long Adventists have isolated themselves in safe havens and ghettos, as if the rest of the world did not exist. That time has ended. We cannot, we dare not live in apostasy any longer. It is time to enter the community as individuals and as a church. We are not an isolated cult; we are the messengers of Jesus to a needy world that desperately needs to see authentic Christianity in action rather than make decisions on Christianity based on the portraits painted by the media.

In addition to mingling with people, an important consideration in meeting people's felt needs is not to rely on guessing what those felt needs might be. As you mingle with and get acquainted with people in your community, you may discover their felt needs, or you may not. Churches need to be intentional in needs assessment. A proper needs assessment will reveal a more precise picture of the community and its needs, and will involve various important activities, including individual interviews with key community leaders to ask them what they think are the needs of the community. Also, gathering demographic information, and walking or driving through the target area yields additional valuable information regarding the people in the community and their needs. It is very important to intentionally ask about community needs before a church tries to meet them. Otherwise, the church will be like a doctor prescribing medication to a patient before diagnosing first. Another benefit of doing an intentional community assessment is that meeting community leaders and asking for their counsel on local needs builds bridges and they form new friendships with members of an Adventist church.<sup>16</sup>

George Barna once did some research indicating that many unchurched people said they did not know any Christians. No wonder they don't come to Jesus. The truth, however, may be that they do know Christians, but the Christians have not identified

themselves. What an indictment on believers. This does not mean we need to be out there publicly flaunting our faith before the world, but we need to be involved, and not only in our cocoon, so that they see genuine Christianity in action.

It may be that we will have to go to some places where we are not comfortable, but so did Jesus. He visited the woman at the well; He found Mary Magdalene and brought her out of a den of iniquity; He befriended Matthew and Zacheus, tax collectors, and then partied at their homes. That is the Jesus who calls us today to go and do likewise.

But someone will bring up the objection that if we attend parties with the lost, they might be serving alcohol and what will we do. Well obviously you don't need to drink the alcohol, but it does not prohibit you from attending. You can ask for a glass of 7-Up. Joe Aldrich tells the story of a Baptist pastor who attended a neighborhood party where they served alcohol. His church took a strong stand on alcohol, but he still went to the party and drank his Sprite. As they were standing around the punch bowl, someone asked who they thought was the greatest person in the world. Wow, what an opportunity. He led three couples to Christ that night. However, when his church discovered that he had attended a party where alcohol was served, they fired him<sup>17</sup>. Are you willing to take that risk for Jesus?

In addition to personal involvement with the people in the community, the church must be involved corporately. This means being involved in community affairs; it means the pastor being in the local ministerial association; it means being involved with felt needs events happening in the community. It also means conducting seminars and helpful things for people in the community.

Yes, there is still room for the Community Service people to meet the needs of the homeless, hungry people in the community, but we must also meet the other needs. God has equipped the Adventist church with helpful insights in the area of vegetarian cooking, parenting, stress, smoking cessation, etc. Conducting these kinds of seminars enables the church to build good relationships with people in the community and also to make



strategic contacts that they otherwise would not be able to make. A community needs assessment will help the church to focus on the most relevant seminars/services for a given community.

Here is a marvelous opportunity to get acquainted with people. Yet I have seen church after church conduct such seminars with no evangelistic relational component. They simply put on the seminar for the community. The community folk sit in the front for the seminar while the church members gather at the back and watch and never do the two meet. That is disgraceful and is not in harmony with God's counsel of mingling.

The whole purpose of conducting these seminars is to give church people a chance to mingle with unchurched people. In one church, we attempted to solve the problem. We were conducting a stop smoking program. Rather than buddy the people with other smokers, I trained some of my members to be buddies. When a smoker came to the event, the person was immediately paired with one of our Adventist buddies, who sat beside them every night, gave them their phone number to call, and became their buddy. At the end of the seminar the participants had become deeply acquainted with their Adventist buddy. That provided a far better evangelistic opportunity than just helping them quit smoking. If you fail to build the relational component into these events, you will not be successful. Otherwise all you are doing is creating healthy sinners going straight to hell with no stress.

In the statement from *Ministry of Healing*, Ellen White emphatically declares that until you have met a person's needs you have no right to address them spiritually. Where do we read in Scripture of button-holing people for Jesus or going up to strangers and asking if they are saved? No, the Bible and Ellen White are abundantly clear. We must first of all meet them at their point of need. Only then can we invite them to "Follow Jesus." This is a clear call for relational evangelism.

Once you have gained the confidence of people, it is much easier to share the gospel with them. Nothing is more obnoxious to unchurched people than these well meaning Christians who will walk up to them or knock on their door to ask them if they are saved. I have talked to some who were so disgusted they quickly

said yes to the invitation, not meaning it, just to get the person off their back. This is not evangelism; this is exploitation. It should not be found among those who are sharing the compassionate Christ with the people they meet. Rather than rushing to share Jesus or the Sabbath truth with people, first of all take time to get to know them. Then you will have won their confidence and they will hear you. Otherwise you are a clanging cymbal without light or heat.

Felt need relational evangelism is a very strong principle of church growth. It is recognized not only by church growth scholars, but is the heart of evangelism as understood by the prophet of the Lord to the Adventist Church, Ellen White. Remember her declaration: only this method of evangelism will give true success. We dare not be delinquent here. We must utilize the relational approach to reaching lost people.

## **New Ways**

Growing churches are willing to take risks to advance the cause of God. They are not afraid to try new ideas and discover new ways of working. The adage: “we don’t do it that way here” finds no hearing in such churches. Because culture is constantly changing around us, the church must change its methodologies constantly in order to impact the community it is attempting to reach.

This does not mean that the church changes its message. Eternal truth is changeless, but how that truth is packaged will vary and change as the culture changes. Sometimes churches become so fearful of failure that they never attempt anything new. Such churches will surely fail. One church reported that three out of four things they tried, failed, but they were not afraid to try the new idea. One church even reported that they gave an award each year to the person who came up with the best new idea that flopped. They wanted to encourage innovation and were not afraid to explore new ideas.

Long ago Ellen White counseled the Adventist church to constantly find new methods and new ways of working. She was a great advocate of innovation in the Adventist church. Sadly, many in the church today think they are following her counsel when they refuse to change, but a careful reading of her writings would

indicate that their refusal to change methodologies is in direct disobedience to the prophet of the Lord. Read some of her counsel on innovation that I have selected below:

In the cities of today, where there is so much to attract and please, the people can be interested by no ordinary efforts....Put forth extraordinary efforts in order to arrest the attention of the multitudes...Make use of every means that can possibly be devised for causing the truth to stand out clearly and distinctly.<sup>18</sup>

The methods and means by which we reach certain ends are not always the same. [You] ...must use reason and judgment..."<sup>19</sup>

Different methods of labor are to be employed to save different ones.<sup>20</sup>

Different methods of labor are really essential.<sup>21</sup>

New methods must be introduced.<sup>22</sup>

God would have new and untried methods followed. Break in upon the people—surprise them.<sup>23</sup>

We must do something out of the common course of things. We must arrest the attention.<sup>24</sup>

Your efforts are too tame.<sup>25</sup>

As field after field is entered, new methods will come with the new workers who give themselves to the work. As they seek the Lord for help, He will communicate with them. They will receive plans devised by the Lord Himself.<sup>26</sup>

Church organization...is not to prescribe the exact way in which we should work.<sup>27</sup>

There must be no fixed rules; our work is a progressive work, and there must be room left for methods to be improved upon.<sup>28</sup>

Some of the methods used in this work will be different from methods used in the past, but let no one, because of this, block the way by criticism.<sup>29</sup>

There is to be no unkind criticism, no pulling to pieces of another's work.<sup>30</sup>

Can one find a stronger endorsement of innovation anywhere? The messenger of the Lord is abundantly clear. Methods change, but eternal truth never does. Churches that are serious about following the counsel of the Lord will constantly be attempting to discover new ways of working. New ideas, she declares, will especially come from the young adults who are new workers. Churches should be exceedingly careful not to stifle the new ideas coming from young adults. They may come up with better ideas to reach people. To hold them back and criticize their innovation is to stand in direct disobedience to the counsel of God. There are no fixed rules, she declares. Therefore all methodology is open to innovation. Don't be afraid to try something new for God.

#### **Summation of Section 4**

In this section we have explored three more principles of growth that should encompass the planning of churches that are serious about reaching the lost. As they move forward, they will realize that they do not proceed in human strength, for church growth is a divine human enterprise with God and humanity working together. These churches, in obedience to Christ's method will reach out and interact with their community, meeting the felt needs of the people so they earn the right to address them spiritually. They will be constantly innovating and trying new ideas, attempting to find a better way to reach earth's bulging population with heaven's final message.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Medical Ministry*, pp. 244-245.

<sup>3</sup> Russell Burrill. *Revolution in the Church*. (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Van Wyk, *Pastor's Church Growth Handbook*, vol. 1, edited by Win Arn. (Pasadena, CA : Church Growth Press, 1979), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Publishing, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> The principles announced in this section come from Donald McGavran. The comments on each principle are the words of the author.

<sup>7</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Be Healthy*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), pp. 24-28.

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of McGavran's view of discipleship as the "initial bringing to Christ", along with the author's attempt to create a biblical definition of disciple, please consult the author's work, *Radical Disciples for Revolutionary Churches*.

<sup>9</sup> The axioms enumerated here are attributable to Donald McGavran. The comments, however, belong to the author.

<sup>10</sup> The names of the terminal illnesses are from Donald McGavran. The descriptions are in the words of the author, but their understanding has been gleaned from McGavran. See C. Peter Wagner. *Your Church Can Be Healthy*.

<sup>11</sup> Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, August 20, 1903.

<sup>12</sup> *The Desire of Ages*, p. 297.

<sup>13</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> *Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on the logistics of community needs assessment, see *Keys to Adventist Community Services*, published by AdventSource, another leaflet in the Personal Ministries Leaflets series. Also, see *Understanding Your Community*, by Monte Sahlin, published by the Center for Creative Ministry, Lincoln, Nebraska.

[www.creativeministry.org](http://www.creativeministry.org)

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Aldrich, *Gentle Persuasion* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press), pp. 195-196.

<sup>18</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*. vol. 9, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> *Gospel Workers*, p. 468.

<sup>20</sup> *Evangelism*, p. 166.

<sup>21</sup> *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 251.

<sup>22</sup> *Evangelism*, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 476.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> *Evangelism*, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. pp. 7, 25.

<sup>30</sup> *Evangelism*, p. 106.





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