

# **Membership Retention in a Growing Church: The Case in the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

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*ABSTRACT—A major task of missions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is nurturing and retaining newly baptized church members. When a young baby is born into the family, the joy of its parents is its physical growth. A good pastor/evangelist is the one who takes care of the newly baptized members daily, progressively teaches them biblical truth, guides them in moral, ethical issues and introduces them to principles of church leadership and management. Making disciples is the God-given agenda for the church. That agenda is more than saving souls. It involves helping people make the transformational journey into Christ-likeness. When people make a commitment to follow Jesus and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church from another denomination or from no religion, most must go through a drastic worldview transformation.*

*Keywords: making disciples, establishing and retaining newly baptized church members, nurturing newly baptized church members, to help new members become permanent parts of Christ's church.*

## **I. Introduction**

A major task of missions in the Seventh-day Church is nurturing and retaining newly baptized church members. When a young baby is born into the family, the joy of parents is its physical growth. Good parents cannot give birth to a child and then leave it; they try their best to give the child its basic needs. There are pastors/evangelists who preach the gospel and convert many souls for Christ but they

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leave them without a basic understanding of the Christian faith and ability to work out this faith in their everyday lives. Thus the major problem for the church is not conversion to Christ, but reversion from Christ.

A good pastor/evangelist is someone who preaches and wins souls for Christ and, after an evangelistic campaign, continues to feed them with spiritual food. God's plan for humanity is to grow in all aspects. As earthly parents expect their child to grow, our heavenly Father expects significant growth and maturity in our spiritual life. Paul, the great church planter, says in 1 Cor. 3:6: "I planted the seed Apollo watered it, but God has made it grow." Therefore, there is no way the church will retain its newly baptized members if it does not feed them with spiritual food.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is facing a great challenge of losing hundreds and thousands of newly baptized members of the church due to lack of nurture and soul conservation. This paper discusses ways and means of receiving and training new members to help them become permanent parts of Christ's church.

## **II. Nurturing Newly Baptized Members**

Nurturing involves aspects of conservation in order to prevent loss. Just as erosion is dangerous to a bare soil, so is soul depletion dangerous to a young growing church. There is need of nurturing newly baptized members in order for them to be fully integrated in the church.

One of the ways of receiving and training new members is by giving them vital information. Newly baptized members need to be given instructions, sometimes during the Sabbath School class discussion, on what it means to be a Christian, how a person grows in the Christian life, the history of the church, organization and programs of the Christian church, what every member can expect from the congregation, and what the church expects from each new member in Bible classes.

Another way of nurturing new members is by mentoring them. Newly baptized members should be assigned sponsors who will be concerned about their well-being. This activity may go on for at least three years. The sponsor encourages and helps new members to discover and promote their talents and acquaints and familiarizes them with church programs.

To supplement the work of the pastor, small groups can be formed according to the size and character of the church. Each group should be headed by a chairperson who serves for at least a year. Formation of small groups will promote participation of church activities, the fellowship hour, and home visitations; provide prompt information about illness or trouble or need for help; foster material as well as spiritual growth of the church; and increase cooperation with other church officials like elders, deacons, deaconesses, and departmental directors.

### **III. Church Goals**

The church leaders should set their goals for:

a) Evangelism: New members should be taught how to reach and win non-Christians and those unsaved within and outside the community.

b) Christian nurturing: God's people should be taught and trained to become leaders of the future.

c) Household religion: The Christians' welfare of the home and church should be taken care of.

d) Church friendliness: This is a necessary component in the church because it fosters true love of God and members, thus creating harmony and unity.

e) Community betterment: The church in a community is the best tool for promoting peace and enlightening the community on how to live well, get good education, good health, and love the Lord.

f) National missions: The aim of the church should be to proclaim the Good News to the entire nation. It should not limit itself to its community.

g) Universal brotherhood: This involves spiritual attitude rather than programs and schedules. The church can participate in world mission financially and through prayer.

Generally, in all these aspects the church should act as an agent of God to guide people to achieve the goals mentioned above, hold and participate in common worship, participate in the great commission, plan with care, and fulfill them. However, one major area that the church needs to address is membership conservation.

Nurturing leaders should always be happy, cultivate a sense of humor, and fit the entire congregation.

#### IV. What Do New Members Need?

Once we recognize the challenges new members face, we need to ask ourselves: What do they need to be disciples of Christ and be assimilated into the church?

*A Relationship with Jesus.* Several pastors stated that the new members' need for a relationship with Jesus is the first and most important need.

*A Relationship with Church Members.* In more than one focus group, someone loosely quoted research that underscores the need for new members to find two or three friends within the first few weeks of joining the church or six or seven friends within six months or they will drop out. Many expressed agreement that new members need a mentor, coach, or spiritual guardian, specifically chosen by the church, who has the gift of teaching and friendship to take the new family under their wing. It should not be for a short time, but for six months, a year, or longer.

Besides immediately getting two or three new friends, it was noted that new members need to increase friendships gradually as they enter new circles, so that they don't lose what they had before baptism. They have to feel that they belong to their church family. To accept new members as friends and part of their church family seems like a simple thing to do until one realizes that new members and old members live and function in two separate worlds.

*A Relationship with the Church as an Organization.* For people who come into the church through an evangelistic series, the transition from the evangelistic meetings to the regular church may bring a difference not only in personal relationships but also in worship styles, meeting location, and other matters. A pastor gave an example: "Evangelism meetings are totally different from the church. [They are] more open [and have] lively singing. Then we put them in the church to sing."

*Relationships with Family and Friends.* The pastors presented two types of intentional instruction that new members need in relating to family and friends. First of all, they need to know how to explain their new lifestyle even while they themselves are still learning how to implement or adjust to it. All of the issues around Sabbath-keeping immediately become a source of curiosity or annoyance to their family and friends. There are also dietary changes and the giving up of alcohol. These lifestyle issues directly affect relationships.

Second, they need to be encouraged to bring their friends and family to church. “Capitalize on the fact that they have friends and family who become a cycle of evangelism. Get them involved in ministry and sharing their faith,” one pastor suggested.

Sometimes after winning souls to Christ, Paul said to Barnabas: “Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing” (Acts 15:36 NIV). It is very easy to win people to Jesus Christ and baptize them but it is very difficult to retain them in the church.

A good pastor/evangelist is one who takes care of newly baptized members daily, progressively teaches them biblical truth, guides them in moral and ethical issues, and introduces them to the principles of church leadership and management. This does not mean that none of the members will apostatize or backslide. This is unavoidable as Jesus explains it in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-9)—people have different reactions to the gospel. A pastor should rejoice with people in their initial, honest acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior. Then sadly, some will respond as did the first three groups Jesus described in His parable.

From Paul’s experience, as we read in his letters to the churches, after both long and short evangelistic campaigns, he won people who later fell into the sins of immorality, rebellion against church leaders, and following strange teachings. Many left the truth he had preached to them. However, we can learn the following from Paul:

1. He had a positive attitude, even toward the weak and failing members.
2. He trusted the people he won for Christ and left them in the Lord’s cause.
3. He encouraged converts to develop their spiritual gifts so that they could build up the church and grow in spirituality.
4. He kept in constant contact with the new churches by his epistles and thereby helped solve their problems.
5. He visited the newly baptized members whenever possible.

### **A. Long Range Plans for Follow-up Work**

The most effective plan for keeping newly baptized members and bringing them into a meaningful and lasting relationship with their Savior and His church is to arrange for a resident worker (minister) to work in the area immediately after the evangelistic campaign has ended. A committed minister should visit the members and make

sure that the church establishes a steady program. He will care for and counsel with those who are discouraged or have any other problems.

As a way of strengthening the new team, the campaign team should select one of the young people among the company and partially sponsor him at an Adventist school provided the budget allows and education possibility exists. Such a scholarship plan not only sends the message that the work must continue but ties the local community in with the Adventist institutions as they assist their member.

When an evangelistic team leaves an area, the members must maintain steady contact with the new group of believers. This can be in the form of writing a letter as Paul did. The 13 epistles carrying his name in the New Testament provide excellent examples of pastoral care by correspondence. In some cases today you may communicate by telephone, fax, cell phone, email, face book, and twitter. Correspondence with the church and the worker in charge of follow-up activities should be included in the work plan. However, the main evangelist should return to visit the new church four to six months after the first pioneering campaign.

## **B. Establishing New Members in the Church and Retaining Them**

The care of souls after they have been brought into the truth is a necessary part of the church growth.

Many members are often lost to the Adventist church because of failure to give them proper care in the church. Insufficient shepherding is one of the main causes of great losses due to apostasy.

Here are thirteen things which can help the pastor/evangelist to retain newly church members in the church.

### **1. Visit the newly baptized members in their homes**

Members should be visited regularly as problems arise to new members that are not anticipated, like the return to earlier unhealthy habits, the pull of the world, persecution, doubt, family problems and crisis. In such cases the counsel and help of a church pastor or an elder is needed. This can only be done through visitations. If people are not visited and given this needed help, they are likely to become discouraged and drop out.

## **2. Have particular care for those absent on Sabbath day**

Every week the pastor or someone else should visit each new member who is not present in Sabbath School and church services. Members should be visited the very week they are absent. Oftentimes, members stay away from church for several weeks and nobody goes to see why or visit them to give them spiritual help, which may be greatly needed.

It is unfortunate that in many churches members can and do drop out of the church and nobody seems to notice or care. The shepherd will be held responsible for the preventable loss of any in his flock. We must watch for souls as though we must give an account.

## **3. Absorb each member into the church family**

Many times members feel as if they were outside the door of the church, feeling like unwelcome strangers within their church. Every member, especially new members, should be absorbed in the church family, and they should be made to find joy and true fellowship in the church.

A union fellowship meeting could be held with profit once a month. True brotherly kindness in church fellowship helps to hold new members, and prevent much trouble, discouragement and loss.

Paul advises us in Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV): “And Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Fellowship will help us share one another’s burdens and warmth. It also provides answers to the needs of the members and, thus, it is the secret behind a fast growing church. Consider the case in Acts 4:32-37; 5:14. The believers of the early church were united in mind and in everything they were doing. They collected their possessions, put them together and shared them. Through this unity and fellowship, men and women joined the church. Unity and fellowship make the church’s efforts effective and prove the power of God’s Word. It reveals the reality of God’s kingdom. The psalmist says “Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him” (Psalms 33:1, NIV). A church is truly prosperous and strong when its members are united with Christ and each other. The saying, “United we stand and divided we fall” is even true in this context of the church.

#### **4. Small Groups**

Human growth results from the growth and division of the body cells. These cells are programmed so that when they reach a certain size, they divide into two. From this principle of cell division in the natural world we can learn a valuable lesson of spiritual growth. A unit that is subdivided into smaller entities and thus will grow more rapidly than a single unit should be encouraged. Each group should be made up of individuals with different gifts and interests and dedicated to a different kind of soul winning service. There is a dynamic force in this. Within the group there can be the sharing of problems and solutions, joys and frustrations, plans and results. There is great potential for prayer and fellowship and service in such groups. The principle of group formation, including companies for soul winning, is in accordance with the divine plan.

Jesus has always been part of a divine community with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. When He came to earth, He continued to live a life in small groups. He began His ministry by choosing 12 disciples to be with Him (Luke 6:13). He then spent three and a half years with this small group in selfless service. Spiritual transformation is not a solo event, but it is God who works in us through others.

Small groups can help our new church members to get courage, support, and press into God's love when life seems to be tough. They are a means of connecting people and offering them a place for self-disclosure and meaningful interaction. Small groups exist for Bible study, prayer, social activities, support, different games, and meals, to mention but a few.

#### **5. Maintain continuous interest in the spiritual welfare of every church member**

Paul's epistles show that he had a bond of brotherly love and perpetual interest with which he followed the spiritual welfare of the members. We should feel a special responsibility towards our brothers and sisters in Christ.

#### **6. Encourage members to read the Bible and our literature regularly**

The right kind of reading in human life has great influence on human life. We should make sure that our new members have Bibles.



We should also encourage them to have access to Ellen G. White's writings.

### **7. Make sure every member is enrolled in Sabbath School**

Every member should be given an opportunity to participate in Sabbath School. Those who really become interested in Sabbath School will benefit a lot. Every member should be enrolled in Sabbath School.

### **8. Place the young people in Adventist schools and AY**

Church members should be encouraged to send their wards to Adventist schools where they may receive Christian education. The Adventist Youth Ministry is also a most helpful agency in holding the youth. The youth should always be enlisted in youth ministry clubs.

### **9. Assign duties to church members in the church**

One of the best ways of holding members to the message is to lead them into active service and fellowship with Jesus. Each member of the church is to be assigned to different programs of the church, and this will create a sense of belonging in the church.

Failure to train new members to work for others and to bear responsibility in the church no doubt has played an important part in the loss of church members. Inactivity brings spiritual illness and death.

New members are usually the best witnesses. The highest potential for evangelism is through witnessing by new converts who still have natural bridges to unsaved friends and relatives.

### **10. Have revival meetings for members**

The members need to always be reminded of their commitment to Jesus Christ. In these revival meetings ask the members to bring their friends who are not members of their church. This may lead to having new converts. The newly baptized members should be spiritually nurtured in these revival meetings.

### **11. Lead members to be faithful in Tithe paying**

Church members need to understand the entire tithing plan and financial system of the Adventist church. There ought to be a sermon on this at some Sabbath service. We should explain in detail how the tithe is to be paid, what it is for, how a receipt will come from the treasurer and such other issues. Those who are faithful and regular in

returning tithe can be thanked and those who are not can be approached in a tactful endeavor to find out why they do not return it.

### **12. Establish in the lives of church members the habits of daily prayer, Bible study and working for others.**

Each church member must continue growing. No child was ever born into the world a fully grown man or woman. Likewise, no soul is born into the kingdom of grace in the full stature of Jesus Christ or fully grown as a steadfast Christian.

Three of the most essential factors for maintaining physical life are breath, food and exercise. Likewise, the three most essential things in maintaining one's spiritual life are: daily prayer, feeding on the Word of God, and working to win souls for Jesus Christ.

The Bible reading year plan and the daily Bible study guide are very helpful in establishing the habits of daily feeding on the Word of God.

### **13. Enlist new church members in a Bible-training course**

If a church member is to stand firm, he must study his Bible (1 Pet. 2:2; Ps.119:101). There can be no vital or enduring Christian growth or experience without sinking the roots of one's faith deep down in the rich soil and fresh springs of God's word.

## **V. MAKING DISCIPLES (EXPANSION GROWTH)**

According to Matthew's account, in giving the Great Commission as we find it in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus used four verbs: go - make disciples, baptize, and teach. Unfortunately, many Bible versions do not reflect the fact that, in Greek, the only verb that is imperative is to make disciples, while the other three verbs are participles. This means that the emphasis of the sentence is on making disciples—the other activities being dependent on it.

Jesus' mandate indicates three activities involved in making disciples. The three activities do not need to occur in a particularly sequential order; rather, they complement each other. While going to different places, eventually to the entire world, we should be teaching everything Jesus taught, baptizing those who accept Him as Saviour and are willing to observe all the things Jesus commanded.

We rejoice when somebody is baptized, but baptism is not the end of the story. It is just part of the process of making someone a

disciple. Our task is to invite people to follow Jesus, which means to believe in Him, to obey His teachings, to adopt His way of life, and to invite others to become His disciples too.

Discipleship embraces every kind of soul-winning endeavor. The church reaches out to add more members into the church. Every church member, every believer, should be involved in evangelism to bring souls to Christ. Therefore, like every skillful doctor makes it part of his life work to take advantage of every improved method in the field of medicine and surgery, every minister should make it a vital part of his program to keep abreast of improved methods of successful evangelism in order to add more members to the church.

Soul-saving is the grand object of the Father's unfathomable love. God so loved the world that He gave heaven's choicest gift to save man from sin and death (John 3:16NIV). Soul-winning constituted the impelling motive of the infinite sacrifice of the Son. Why did the son leave his place at the Father's side and come to this world to suffer and die? "For the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost"(Luke 19:10 NIV).

In his book, *Adventist Pastoral Ministry*, Dr. Carlos G. Martin gives an Adventist definition of evangelism: "Evangelism is the presentation of biblical doctrines in the power of the Holy Spirit in such a way that people will be persuaded to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and to serve Him in the fellowship of the church" (p. 89).

Evangelism is the supreme mission of the church—the primary business of every disciple. Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the ages" (Matt 28:18-20, NIV).

Making disciples is the God-given agenda for the church. That agenda is more than saving souls. It involves helping people make the transformational journey into Christ-likeness. Disciple-makers give light, hope, and help to those willing to be part of the present-day church, increasing and even expanding to a higher number of believers. This is a mechanism which only the Holy Spirit will work out to make the church, the only instrument God uses to reproduce spirituality. It is also good to note that discipling typically happens when believers meet around the Word of God to spur one another on to love and good deeds. The Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible for Christian growth. Disciple-makers should also seek to help others grow in loving God with all their heart, soul, strength and mind. Just

as parents procreate and reproduce new members of the family and long to see their children reach their potential, so disciple-makers long for the world to experience the impact of lives apprenticed to Jesus. Jesus is still looking for more disciples to follow Him, and the Holy Spirit is still able to turn the world around through the lives of people committed to keeping company with Jesus.

Evangelism is not a work merely for a few specialists. It is not a sideline to which men may turn occasionally. Evangelism is that work that Jesus Christ assigned to all his followers.

We should organize new churches, erect buildings, operate universities, colleges, publishing houses, and sanitariums as a way of carrying out the great commission and helping the church to grow worldwide. All of these are a true success only as they actually help win souls to Jesus Christ.

Whenever a church ceases to be evangelistic, it is like a house without light. How long could a fisherman support himself if he never caught any fish? In the same way, the very life of the church depends on saving souls. The church that is not winning souls is a dying church and does not grow. The making of disciples should be our business until the end of the world.

Evangelism should have the foremost place in every minister's life, regardless of that particular phase of the ministry to which he feels himself called to God. His job as minister is not just to preach. His business is to save souls. To win souls to the kingdom of God must be their first consideration. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry (2 Tim 4:5 NIV). The apostle was not advising Timothy to leave the churches placed under his care and travel into a new field to hold an evangelistic meeting, but to make his work evangelistic. He was to win souls in these churches while caring for them as their pastor. A pastor can provide proof of his ministry only as he is a soul winner.

When Adventists think of 'evangelism' we tend to think of public evangelism. Most church growth takes place through personal evangelism.

The results of evangelism are winning more souls to Jesus Christ and increasing church membership by conversion and planting more churches to continue with this holy and most important work on earth.

As soon as He began His public ministry, Jesus began to call disciples. He called and empowered twelve men to be His disciples—twelve men who would champion His evangelistic cause.

The wisdom of His method centered in the fundamental principle of concentrating upon those men whom He intended to use to transform the world, not programs and not the masses. Theologically speaking, this has always been the methodology of Jesus. Jesus challenged His disciples for this reason by saying, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2, NIV)

Jesus basically tells us to go and make disciples. We need more workers, more disciples, to gather the harvest—to go and make disciples. Our role is to pray for the harvest and especially for harvesters. God’s role is to send us people who will be the new harvesters.

The need to build disciples is so fundamental that Jesus spent three and a half years in full-time discipleship formation. In fact, if Jesus had not built His disciples, there would not be a church today.

The Great Commission ends with the promise: “and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Immanuel’s promised presence with His people at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel (cf. 1:23) is now specifically directed and provided for those who have joined Him in missionary discipleship.

The expression ‘with you’ and ‘the end of the age’ are typically Matthean. Once again, as he so often does in this final pericope, Matthew reaches back to themes he has developed in the earlier part of his gospel. In the case of ‘I am with you’, he takes up the words from Isaiah 7:14, which he has used in chapter 1:23, “And his name shall be called Immanuel (which means, God with us).”

Christ’s authority is universal in both place (“heaven and earth” 28:18) and time (“always” 28:20). “After the proclamation and the commandment, the promise now follows. The presence of Christ is the great gift to His disciples. The promise of the presence is the fulfillment—but now for all nations—of the promise expressed in the name Yahweh (Exod. 3)

The last words of Jesus, in the book of Matthew, not only express the continuing presence of Christ with His missionary disciples but also place all their work within an eschatological context. The promise of Christ’s presence at the end of the Great Commission not only is meant to constantly empower and comfort the disciples but direct them to the reality of the final consummation.

## **VI. Conclusion**

There is a great challenge in our local churches whereby newly baptized members join the church, and after sometime they decide to go back because the church does not care for them.

When people make a commitment to follow Jesus and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church from another denomination or from no religion, they normally go through a drastic worldview transformation. The comments and stories of the focus-group pastors reinforced the difficulty of such a change. At the same time, because these new members are faced with close family and friend relationship challenges, they have a great need to establish new relationships among believers and be given time to grow in Christ. How the church responds to them often determines whether or not they can make it through this difficult transformation.

In addition to establishing new members into the church family, the church should encourage them to win others to Christ by supporting and guiding them in discipling activities. Disciple-makers give light, hope, and help to those willing to be intentional about their growth. This should be the purpose and the intention of the present day church: increasing and even expanding to a higher number of believers and serving as God's instrument to reproduce spiritually. It is also good to note that discipling typically happens when believers meet around the word of God to spur one another on to love and do good deeds. The Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible for Christian growth. Disciple-makers should also seek to help others grow in loving God with all their heart, soul, strength and mind. Just as parents procreate and reproduce a new generation, the church has to do the same and reproduce new members. As parents long to see their children reach their potential, so disciple-makers long for the world to experience the impact of lives apprenticed to Jesus. Jesus is still looking for more disciples to follow Him, and the Holy Spirit is still able to turn the world around through the lives of people committed to keeping company with Jesus.

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