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Pastors' Perspectives on Assimilating New Members: Part 2–Discipling Strategies

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Pastors' perspectives on assimilating new members

Part 2—Discipling strategies

Review of previous article

In the summer and fall of 2008, four focus groups composed of pastors were held in three locations across the United States in order to find out pastors' perspectives on assimilating new members into the Adventist Church and discipling them to Jesus. Part 1 of this two-part article focused on the challenges and needs of new members as reported by pastors. Part 2 deals with some of their specific strategies for assimilating them into the church.

Making the transition to membership

When a person is baptized, their relationship to the church changes. To handle the critical transition from nonmember to member, pastors in the focus groups reported three types of initiatives: connecting new members to spiritual guardians, getting them involved in ministry, and taking them through a process of orientation. Some use combinations of these initiatives.

Although the terminology may vary from spiritual guardian, to mentor, spiritual coach, big brother/big sister, small group leader, to elder, deacon, and deaconess, the intent remains basically the same: to make sure that at least one longtime member takes responsibility for nurturing and teaching the new believer. One pastor said that he

makes the assignment of a spiritual guardian a public ceremony in the church service and gives to both the mentor and mentee a certificate that lists each one's responsibilities.

Getting new members into ministry as soon as possible is the goal of many of the pastors. "Involvement, involvement, involvement," said one pastor. "Even before they are baptized, we enlist them in some ministry of the church."

Some pastors have set up an entire process for transitioning people into church membership and their new walk with Jesus. One church has an hour and a half program the first Sabbath of every quarter to explain spiritual gifts and then uses an online assessment tool to help identify people's spiritual gifts and get them involved in ministry.

Right after the evangelistic series is completed, some churches begin a seminar series of some kind. The pastors told of using Mark Finley's Coming Events series, the CHIP program (Coronary Health Improvement Project), discipleship seminar materials, *Bible Readings for the Home* study, or a series they themselves developed. One pastor has put together studies that deal with the history of the Adventist Church and denominational terminology. Instead of focusing on denominational uniqueness, another pastor emphasizes basic discipleship.

Maintaining and strengthening relationships

Relationship building continues long after new members are brought into the church. Explaining the importance of relationships, a pastor said, "People come into the church primarily on the doctrine level, but leave primarily on the social level. You need to supplement the doctrines with social life. And that can be a whole list of things." And, indeed, the list of possibilities is long. A primary means for these pastors to develop relationships with new members seems to be through the teaching of a class or leading a small group.

"My most successful piece," one said, "is when I do a Friday evening meeting with all the new members and tie them to me. . . . They stay with me for two years and, in the cases where I have been consistent with those relationships, those members stay in the church."

Another pastor thinks the task begins before baptism and requires the work of others. He spends time with the people during the evangelistic series and finds out their interests. Then he connects the new person with a member who will spend time on similar interests. "It takes work on the pastor's part to make a correct match," he says. "I have to know what my members will do and won't do. I have to oversee it, and I have to

keep watching to encourage them to keep at it.”

Commenting on the need for keeping current members motivated to stay in touch with new members, another pastor said, “The operative word is *friendships*. People don’t get rid of friends. We get burnout because it is a task instead of a friendship.”

Dramatic differences exist between congregations in how they



use Sabbath for fellowship. Where practiced, this weekly fellowship also helps new members with Sabbath observance. “We’ve had a fellowship meal at every church [where I have pastored]. . . . [New members] are not connected with an Adventist family, so after church, they have nowhere to go. Come home to a TV blaring. [Sabbath fellowship is a] haven for people.” In some congregations, the church building is in use all day Sabbath.

But some churches do not have such fellowship on Sabbath. “In my church,” a young pastor said,

“People don’t hang out. There’s no fellowship. We preach the sermon, and twenty minutes later, everyone is gone. Five hundred people just disappear—like into thin air.”

Using small groups

For anyone who knows the literature on small group ministry, the answer to relationship building (and every other discipleship matter) is a small group. The pastors, however, explained the reality of getting their members to become excited and involved in that model.

“You’re talking about a kind of culture,” one said. “There’s something about Adventism [in my location] that doesn’t like the small group.”

On the other hand, some pastors use small groups successfully. In one church, every new believer coming into the church is placed in a small group with an elder serving as the leader.

One pastor gave his personal testimony on the power of small groups. “I had been out of the church,” he said, “but I came back because of small groups. And the people in that small group developed me in my sense of call-

ing, and I’m a pastor now because of that small group. But it is hard to get people interested in small groups. I’m afraid there is something drastic that is going to have to happen to get people to look at that paradigm.”

Teaching new members

“A new members’ class,” one pastor said, “is probably one of the most enjoyable classes to teach. The people are really hungry for Jesus. They are asking the real life questions.”

Although typical, for a pastor to have a new believers’ class, the

time, location, and type of class vary among the churches. The most common class seems to be the pastor’s Sabbath School class. One reason for choosing this time slot is to develop in new members the habit of coming to Sabbath School.

One pastor, whose church has a potluck meal every Sabbath, said, “I found that new believers want to be part of the general Sabbath School family. So I do two things: The hour before Power Hour or prayer meeting is the new believers’ class. And every Sabbath afternoon, I do Pastor’s Hour. New believers are encouraged to come. And there they can ask any question, biblical or organizational.”

Others meet only on a week night, particularly Friday night. One pastor explained why he changed to meeting on Friday nights: “They aren’t as open on Sabbath morning. More shy . . . I find that Friday night by far is the best. Hard to get them involved in a Sabbath School class.” One pastor solves his multichurch assignment by holding the class on Friday nights.

After baptizing about 20 people, a pastor said that he held a special class for about 10 months, telling those newly baptized that this class was part of becoming a member of the Adventist Church. He said, “I totaled up the hours. We spent seventy hours together, and I want to tell you the fellowship, the things that were learned, the experience, will last forever.” When one focus group had a discussion on how long a new members’ class should continue, there was a consensus that one year was not too long.

One sensitive issue that the pastors agreed they all had to deal with is whether or not to let long time members join the new believers’ class. “You can’t just open it up,” said one.

“I recruit,” said another. “I pick people geared around those families that I think will connect with new believers.” Another said, “I have key people who are nurturers. I like them to be in there.”

Resources pastors use

Because there is a real need to teach new believers how to study their Bibles, the Bible is a primary resource that pastors use in teaching. Referring to evangelistic series and Bible studies, a pastor said, "So far, it's all been prepackaged for them. If they have a question and there is the Bible, how can they find an answer?" Another pastor said that the most successful teaching strategy he has used is buying new members a Bible, "a nice one." "I asked thirty people to get a version they understand. I didn't care which they got. Twenty-seven of thirty got the New Living Translation. I now preach from it." He continued, "I challenged [all the] people to read through the Bible. Last year thirty-five people, who had never done it before, read through the Bible."

Steps to Christ is another widely used resource. "By the time they have been baptized," a pastor related, "most of them possess the book. In many cases, they would have it, but they wouldn't have read it."

Conclusions and reflections

In the four focus groups, we explored in depth the assimilating and discipling of new members. As I listened to the pastors and went over their words in great detail, I have concluded that there are three basic issues that need to be dealt with before our congregations will be fully prepared to welcome and disciple new members: (1) longtime members themselves need to be disciplined to Jesus; (2) quality discipling materials need to be produced for both longtime members and new members; and (3) pastors need a clearer understanding of the processes of discipling.

As one pastor said, "My challenge is, I have never been trained on how to disciple. There was nothing in the curriculum coming through the training. There has been no follow-up, and I've been a pastor for 37 years."

One pastor, talking about the lack of accountability for discipleship, said that it "doesn't have a culture around it. I can't speak for the others, but I am so busy that the kind of nurture you are talking about consistently means I have to pull away from the main things the church members want me to do."

Help appears to be on the way. From lay-led efforts to independent ministries' offerings, to the Growing Disciples initiative of the Ministries Coordinating Committee (including the Sabbath School Department's new member lessons under development), to the North American Division's current development of discipling helps, to new curriculum in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, an interest in discipleship is springing up all over this denomination.

In the fall of 2008, the Andrews University Theological Seminary introduced a new curriculum for the Master of Divinity program based on eight areas of competencies. One of those areas is discipling. The seminary also offers a Christian Formation and Discipleship concentration for the PhD in Religious Education. In 2010, the seminary will launch a new concentration in Discipleship and Spiritual Formation for the Doctor of Ministry program.

Many resources currently exist. For example, for assimilating new members, the book *You Can Keep Them If You Care*, by James A. Cress, offers a perceptive understanding of the unique challenges that Adventists face and gives specific methodologies. The

Trans-European Division has created *Life Development*, a discipleship pathway that begins with small group evangelism.

Remember, though, that not everything labeled "discipleship" is discipleship. Too often people will create a course or program in equipping the laity for evangelism and call it discipling. When we focus only on teaching people "how to witness," such teaching is needed,

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but it is not a complete discipling. Discipling must also include helping people become more and more like Jesus.

Our congregations need to assess the ways we are attempting to make followers of Jesus. Discipling cannot be contained in and taught only through sermons and seminar series. Everything a congregation does should be approached as partnering with the Holy Spirit to disciple because making disciples is at the heart of the church's mission. **M**

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