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Insights *from* growing churches *in* North America

For many churches the word *evangelism* refers to a few weeks every year or so when the church rallies to hold public meetings. A lot of time, energy, and resources are poured into these events that sometimes yield good results but are often disappointing. This has caused some churches to abandon public evangelism. At the same time, pastors struggle to engage their members in relational evangelism on a large scale. Members often view evangelism as a church program rather than a way of life. Many churches lack a comprehensive strategy to maximize their evangelistic potential to reach their community. Consequently, most Adventist churches in North America mirror the Evangelical church trend of an 80 percent plateau or decline.¹ Nor are they keeping up with that of the population.²

This article attempts to outline some of the challenges the Adventist Church in the North American Division (NAD) faces today and then develop an effective model for evangelistic ministry to overcome these challenges.

The challenges we face

Public evangelism is not as effective as it used to be. Monte Sahlin, who researches trends in the NAD, shared in a personal interview about some studies he is currently involved in. He has discovered that the percentage of churches reporting involvement in public evangelism has increased;

however, the number of baptisms per evangelistic meeting has decreased.³ This, according to Ron Gladden, may be because the number of people willing to attend a public meeting and then join the church without previous relational contact are becoming fewer and fewer.⁴

Traditionally, the church has relied on sending out handbills to generate attendance for evangelistic meetings, and yet handbills are becoming less effective. Several studies have suggested that for every 1,000 handbills sent out to a community, only one person will attend an evangelistic program.⁵ However, those numbers may be considered generous in many settings today. In a recent analysis of seven evangelistic meetings, I discovered that for every 2,000 handbills one person not previously connected with the church attended.

Most members are not engaged in relational evangelism. Thom Rainer's research has shown that only 2 percent of members invite an unchurched person to church in a given year. From our interviews with 235 people in the Adventist Church, similar results apply in the Adventist context. We found some reasons behind the lack of involvement in witnessing were lack of spirituality, busyness, fear of rejection, and lack of know-how. That means 98 percent of churchgoers never invite a seeker in any given year. Seven out of ten unchurched people have never been invited to church in their whole lives.⁶

Most churches do not have a comprehensive evangelistic strategy. Studying a sample of 92 Adventist churches in North America, we found that 75 percent of them did not have a comprehensive evangelistic strategy. In practice, the churches existed to serve their members only. Church was a one-time event each week with little or no attempt of outreach to the community. Our survey asked the question, "If we took your church out of your community, would they miss you?" The response of 69 churches was about the same: "They don't even know we are here."

An effective model for evangelism

The model proposed here focuses primarily on personal research conducted on growing churches in the NAD,⁷ personal experiences pastoring growing churches,⁸ teaching seminary classes on church growth, and studying this topic extensively. The model consists of three core factors: focusing on discipleship, emphasizing relational evangelism, and utilizing multiple ways of reaching people.

Focus on discipleship. All growing Adventist churches we studied in North America focus on discipleship. They recognize that, in New Testament evangelism, disciple making is the Lord's command: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19).⁹ Jesus described the core of discipleship as loving God and loving

others: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (Matt. 22:37–39).

Christian discipleship is the process by which followers of Jesus grow in knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit equips them to overcome the pressures and trials of this present life and become more and more like Christ in His love, vision, mission, and character. This process requires believers to respond to the Spirit’s prompting to examine their thoughts, words, and actions and compare them with the Word of God. Discipleship happens through developing love and commitment to Jesus and strengthening it through the spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, Bible reading, fellowship, ministry, and evangelism, for example.

The result of true discipleship is to share one’s faith and the wonderful changes Jesus has made in one’s life. Focusing on discipleship allows the believer to be transformed by the Holy Spirit in a natural way and develop the desire and means to make other disciples.

When I met Martha, she was 73 years old, drunk, and smoking. She wanted a better life and agreed to study the Bible. I led her to Christ and shared with her about His healing power. She prayed and claimed the promises of

God, and Jesus gave her victory over her addictions. As we studied God’s Word together, her love for Him continued to grow, and she decided to be baptized. Baptism was not the end of her spiritual journey but the beginning of her life as a disciple of Jesus. I continued to teach Martha how to reach out to her friends, family, and neighbors. She prayed for them, claimed promises from the Bible on their behalf, ministered to their needs, and witnessed to them about Jesus and the amazing new life He had given her. As an outflow of her prayer life, she became much more intentional about connecting with and ministering to those in her circle of influence. She started a Bible study in her home and invited her family and friends. When opportunities came, she invited them to Sabbath School and worship services, evangelistic meetings, and other church programs.

Three and half years later, the North Pacific Union sent its communication director to shoot a video of Martha on Sabbath morning standing in front of the church, surrounded by the 57 people she had led to the Lord. The director went around asking the new disciples, “Why are you an Adventist today?” He got similar answers: “We saw the change in Martha’s life and we wanted it.” Then he asked Martha, “What did you do to lead your family and friends to the Lord?” She said, “I prayed for them and shared Jesus with them. When one of them made their

decision for Christ and was baptized, they had to join me in prayer and ministering to others. They had to start a Bible study in their home and repeat the same cycle I started. God has been so good to us.”

This is the essence of discipleship. As the Holy Spirit transforms believers, He also works through them to transform others in their circle of influence. Focusing on discipleship takes intentionality, time, and effort, but this brings great rewards by building healthy followers of Jesus who “reproduce” to expand the kingdom of God.

Emphasize relational evangelism. Evangelism is not about a program but is a way of life. The greatest evangelistic asset of any church involves its members who love Jesus and are excited about their church. Relational evangelism finds believers witnessing for Christ in everyday life and getting their friends and relatives into church Bible studies, fellowship groups, sports teams, and service projects. Relational evangelism works because it is natural, biblical, and effective.

In order to appeal to postmodern, secular people, evangelism must bring a message of peace, hope, and harmony. People today are continually assaulted by advertisements and political messages, so for something to be important and true, it must come in a personal, loving, and practical form. Thom Rainer found that 82 percent of the unchurched are somewhat likely

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to attend church if invited by a trusted friend or family member.¹⁰ My research showed that relational evangelism is instrumental not only in having the unchurched come to church but also in how they ultimately join the church. Seven to eight out of ten persons who become members were first brought into the church through a friend or relative.¹¹

In the past few decades many have realized the need for a shift to a more active personal witness. In his book *Evangelism as a Lifestyle*, Jim Peterson suggests that simply verbalizing the gospel message is not enough to reach secularized people. He says we must employ “affirmation evangelism in practice.” By this he means that evangelism is “a process of modeling and explaining the Christian message. God’s people must incarnate His [Christ’s] character through their compassion and love. Then they go on to verbalize the nature of His eternal reign.” Lifestyle evangelism wins people because it starts by “winning a hearing.”¹²

This was evident in the research we did on growing Adventist churches. When new members join these churches, the first thing they are asked to do is to sign up for His mission in everything they do. They are to “win a hearing” by doing good, caring for the poor, inviting neighbors over, building relationships with coworkers, and investing in friendships with those outside the church. Then, they are to tell these people the story of the gospel and what God has done in their lives. The churches assume the responsibility to motivate and help these new Christians live such lives that other people will want what they have.

James was a new Christian in one such church I pastored. He was an engineer, working for a large corporation with some 100 workers under his charge. He loved and served God passionately, preaching often, giving Bible studies, and going on mission trips. People noticed how James’ commitment to Christ touched every area of his life and would say to him, “James, you should be a pastor.” His answer

was always, “I already am a pastor. I’m just paid by my company instead of by the church. No pastor is allowed in my engineering firm, but I am here every day. When my employees are hurting, I hurt with them. When they are rejoicing, I rejoice with them. I pray for them on a regular basis and invite them over to my home.” He concluded by saying, “I am a disciple of Jesus Christ disguised as an engineer.” Through his consistent and effective ministry, James saw 20 of his fellow engineers come to the Lord.

Relational evangelism is about disciples of Jesus Christ living out His ideals in the world. They may be working as nurses, teachers, physicians, cashiers, farmers, and so on. While building trust with those around them, they find opportunities to minister and share about Jesus and what He has done for them.

Utilize multiple ways to reach people. All 23 growing Adventist churches in North America that met the criteria of our research utilize multiple ways to reach people. They blend relational and public evangelism together with ministries and church programs to maximize their opportunities for witnessing. They recognize that each form of evangelism must depend on other forms to reach its full potential. They implement a comprehensive evangelistic strategy that touches every aspect of the church’s life including Sabbath School, worship services, seasonal programs (Christmas, Easter, Mother’s/Father’s Day, for example), sporting events, and all of the other ministries of the church. Each event and activity centers on the purpose of connecting people with God.

Evangelism takes place anytime, anywhere, by anyone, under any circumstances. In one of my doctoral classes, *Innovative Evangelism*, I assign students to read the book of Acts and look for different incidents and methods of evangelism utilized by the early church. Every class has recognized at least 50 different ways of evangelism and ministry (public evangelism to crowds, one-on-one evangelism, healing, meeting needs, for example). It

becomes clear that the early church lived and breathed its faith. Their passion was to win the world for Christ. Nothing could stop them. They were preoccupied with Jesus, and thus their evangelism was the outflow of their daily living.

Utilizing a variety of evangelistic methods presents a threefold opportunity:

- It provides an opportunity for members to invite friends and family. When a church hosts a special program, members are much more likely to invite friends and family to that than they would to a routine service.
- It gives an opportunity for believers to witness naturally. When believers invited their friends to spiritual events, afterward they were able to talk comfortably about it.
- It reaches a broader group of seekers. Prophecy seminars appealed to some people, while creation seminars interested others. Cooking classes effectively reached one group, while sporting events connected better with another.

One of the pastors from a growing church we surveyed shared part of his evangelistic strategy. Every year he and his leaders audit all the ministries and programs of their church. They analyze the effectiveness of each program and its ability to bring evangelistic results by classifying each ministry into one of three categories: (1) nonessential and nonproductive; (2) essential and nonproductive; and (3) essential and productive.

Now the organizing teams set to work. First, they discontinue ministries that fall into the first category. Second, they repurpose the next category for evangelism. For example, they changed the primary focus of the Sabbath School classes from discussion to evangelism. When Sabbath School leaders and teachers united around this concept, they became intentional about inviting seekers, using lessons that appealed to them, and employing an atmosphere

and language that was conducive for evangelism.

Third, the team works to strengthen the third category of ministries that are essential and productive. For example, they recognized that the worship service was essential and productive but could be strengthened by gearing it more toward seekers. They launched an effort to provide an environment where seekers could feel at home. They did away with churchy and Adventist jargon, were careful to explain each element of the worship service, selected songs easy to sing, and made the preaching more practical and understandable.

Utilizing multiple ways to reach people is about prioritizing and channeling all of the energy and resources of the church toward expanding the kingdom of God. This will look different in every context according to the resources of the church and the needs of the community. Churches that strategically blend their evangelistic approaches capitalize on opportunities and allow the Holy Spirit

to work through any and every way to lead people into a passionate relationship with God.

Conclusion

Though the Adventist Church in North America and elsewhere struggles with significant challenges to growth, we can learn valuable insights on how to overcome them from the churches that are growing. From these principles, we discovered that effective evangelism in the church today must include a focus on discipleship, an emphasis on relational evangelism, and the utilization of multiple ways of reaching people. Jesus invites every believer to be His disciple, share with their friends and family, and unite with other believers to evangelize their community effectively. 

- 1 Daniel R. Sanchez, *Church Planting Movements in North America* (Fort Worth, TX: Church Starting Network, 2007), 18.
- 2 David Beckwith and S. Joseph Kidder, "Reflections on the Future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America: Trends and Challenges," *Ministry*, December 2010, 20–22.

- 3 Monte Sahlin, telephone interview, February 20, 2013.
- 4 Ron Gladden, *The 7 Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches* (Lincoln, NE: Advent Source, 2003), 49, 50.
- 5 In numerous seminars I have attended on public evangelism, many cite this statistic while a few suggest that one to three people attend for every 1,000 handbills.
- 6 Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 24–26.
- 7 From 2003 to 2007, my research team and I undertook a project to study the growth of the Adventist Church in the North American Division (NAD). We asked all 58 conferences within the NAD to identify churches that had sustained a minimum of 3 percent growth rate (in attendance, membership, and baptisms) for the previous three consecutive years. Congregations ministering to highly receptive first-generation immigrant communities were excluded. We identified 23 churches that met these criteria. In addition, we studied 69 churches in the same geographical proximities that were plateauing or declining for the purpose of comparison. The research instruments included a survey of attendees on Sabbath morning, personal interviews with pastors, and focus groups.
- 8 For the full story of God's working to grow the churches I pastored, see S. Joseph Kidder, *The Big Four: Secrets to a Thriving Church Family* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2011).
- 9 All Scripture passages, unless otherwise stated, are from the New King James Version.
- 10 Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door*, 24–26.
- 11 S. Joseph Kidder, "The Power of Relationships in Evangelism," *Ministry*, July 2008, 10–12.
- 12 Quoted in Elmer Towns, "Evangelism: Hot as Ever but Old Methods Are Cooling Off," *Fundamentalist Journal*, February 1984, 38.

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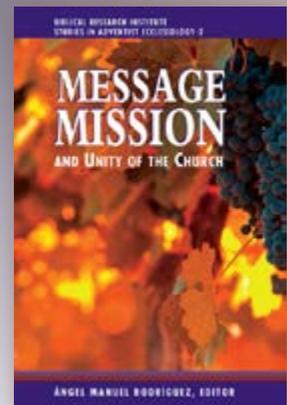


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