

SABBATH SCHOOL: AN AVENUE FOR DISCIPLESHIP

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Decline in Sabbath School

There was a period in my teen years when Sabbath School served an important function in my spiritual and social development. It was the closest thing I experienced to youth church. I was raised in a small church where my family was the youth group from kindergarten to youth, with a thirteen-year spread between myself and my oldest brother. My poor mother taught each of my three brothers and I. Needless to say—my Sabbath School experience was completely transformed when we moved out of state and attended a church many times the size of the one I had grown up in with an actual youth Sabbath School class. In this new environment, we had a real Sabbath School program and youth focused bible study/discussion. I even looked forward to Sabbath School since there were other teens my own age.

All you have to do is show up for Sabbath School at any given Adventist church on any given Sabbath morning to see how times have changed. Sabbath School as well as general church attendance in the North American Adventist church with the exception of children's Sabbath School, is in decline. Some have suggested the reasons for this decline range from spiritual lethargy among members to the need for improved Sabbath School format and relevant bible study resources.

Exploring A New Paradigm

For some the decline in Sabbath School attendance is a negative spiritual trend that must be reversed if the Adventist church is going to maintain a strong emphasis of consistent bible study and spiritual growth. However, I want to offer a different perspective. What if the decline in attendance is an indication that Sabbath School as we have experienced it over the years has served its purpose and Bible study and spiritual development demand a whole new process? What if we stopped trying to save Sabbath School, and instead focused our efforts on discipling and mentoring our youth?

Process vs. Program

The Great Commission calls us to make disciples, but nowhere are we commanded that the discipleship process must involve Sabbath School. The pro's for keeping Sabbath School include practice and convenience. Sabbath School is an ingrained part of our Sabbath worship practice and once a program becomes a practice it's hard to give up. It is also a convenient time just before divine worship to discuss a bible study lesson plan together. However, routine and convenience are not strong enough reasons to hold on to a practice that has less than half of the church involved.

Pros and Cons of Sabbath School for Discipleship

The cons for keeping Sabbath School are many. Though some see Sabbath morning as the most convenient time for group Bible study and discussion—obviously, many others do not, since they are avoiding the Sabbath School experience altogether. The truth is, Bible study time just prior to divine service may not be as convenient a time as it once was. Thom S. Rainer in *Growing Healthy Churches Together* blog reminds us in the article, “Five Reasons Why The 11 O’clock Hour is Disappearing” that the most probable theory for the 11 o’clock worship hour was an agrarian society. “Farmers had multiple chores that had to be done in the morning. They would finish the chores and then go to church.”¹ 11 o’clock was the best time for them to complete their chores. Sunday School developed as a great educational program for teaching youth. As Sunday School developed in America classes were scheduled after the divine service, during or before service, but eventually were most often held leading up to the divine service which seemed the best time for a rural society.² Indeed, the 9:30 a.m. Sabbath School was a convenient time back in the early history of the Seventh-day Adventist church. It may still work for those living in rural areas where chores come early in the morning. But, for most of us having a little more time to rest on Saturday morning makes a lot of sense in keeping with the Sabbath command after a long workweek.

The current Sabbath School schedule just before divine service may also be inconvenient for another reason. A one-hour discussion time is often not enough time to really connect with everyone in the group and have a good discussion. I have personally experienced many Sabbath School discussions that are just getting into a great rhythm only to be cut short to disburse and prepare for divine service. Our current Sabbath School model doesn’t afford the necessary amount of time for a healthy discussion and intimate small group experience.

Remembering the Purpose of Sabbath School

Sabbath School is not independent from other important dimensions of church life. In considering saving Sabbath School we must ask what part of the overall mission of the church does it serve? Pastor Rick Warren has identified five main purposes of the church in “The Purpose Driven Church.”³ These include Evangelism, Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship and Service. Keeping these five areas in mind and developing strategies to fulfill each area will help a church grow organically and automatically. Regardless of the mission values, every congregation must wrestle with how the Sabbath School program helps to fulfill the mission of the church.

In the Church Manual of the Seventh-day Adventist church, the section on Sabbath School clearly delineates the purposes of this important ministry: “The Sabbath School, the primary religious education program of the Church, has four purposes: study of the Scripture, fellowship, community outreach, and world mission emphasis. The General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department distributes the Sabbath School Bible study guide for all age levels, provides designs for Sabbath School programming within the

¹ <http://thomrainer.com/2017/02/five-reasons-1100-worship-service-disappearing/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunday_school

³ “The Purpose Driven Church”: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission by Rick Warren, 1995. Grand Rapids: Zondervan

context of the various world division cultures, provides resources and training systems for Sabbath School teachers, and promotes world mission Sabbath School offerings.”⁴

Ellen White also talks about the purpose of the Sabbath School as follows: “The Sabbath school is an important branch of the missionary work, not only because it gives to young and old a knowledge of God’s Word, but because it awakens in them a love for its sacred truths, and a desire to study them for themselves; **above all, it teaches them to regulate their lives by its holy teachings.**” (CSW, pages 10–11, emphasis provided).

Sabbath School should help serve the dual purpose of fellowship and discipleship since members meet in smaller groups and are encouraged with daily bible study throughout the week for group discussion in Sabbath School. In his dissertation, “The Role, History, and Decline of the Sunday School” Darren Thomas writes that the Sunday School went through its own evolution becoming the most effective evangelistic tool of the church. From the early 1800’s on, “The evangelical Sunday School became the primary outreach of the church.”⁵ I’m not sure that the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church would reveal the same about Sabbath School. However, small groups may be the most effective entry for non-Christians to connect with God and believers. Attending a traditional church service will probably not be the first step in coming to faith in Christ.

Sabbath School then, should serve the purpose of fellowship, discipleship and even evangelism. However, as mentioned already, our current Sabbath School experience struggles to provide this. Sabbath School classes are open groups with different members attending each week, which discourages deeper fellowship, and as has already been pointed out—the time factor precludes any real Bible study discussion. It is also, for most churches, not the first church experience we would invite our friends—who are making their first steps toward God—to.

Discipleship at LIFE Adventist Church of Berkeley

Our answer to this dilemma at LIFE Adventist Church of Berkeley—where I pastor a predominately college and young adult congregation—is to youthenize Sabbath School. By youthenize I mean we are putting our focus on fellowship, discipleship and evangelism instead of the Sabbath School per se. By youthenize, I also mean that we are making it about our students, members and new believers instead of the program. We are focusing more on the process of our own spiritual development and discipleship than the Sabbath School program. Sabbath School is all about the areas mentioned above: fellowship, discipleship and outreach. Sabbath School is no longer about practice and convenience. Our focus is on group time, a deeper experience in God’s Word and a place we can invite our non-churched friends to.

Here’s what it looks like: We have moved to a small group approach to fellowship and discipleship in place of the traditional Sabbath School format. We have four groups operating in our church. The main group is our college group,

⁴ “The Church Manual of the Seventh-day Adventist Church”: Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

⁵ <https://eridan.websrvcs.com/clientimages/36689/historyofthesunday-school.pdf>

which meets on Friday evenings. We begin with a meal together prepared by our students who take their turn in preparation. Following the meal, we move to another room for group Bible study. This semester we have been reading and discussing the parables of Jesus. Students stay until 9:30 p.m. to sometimes 10 or 11 p.m. discussing and hanging out together. This provides the kind of time it takes to build the deeper fellowship and a more rigorous discussion of the text. Students also feel comfortable inviting their non-churched friends.

We still have a Sabbath School gathering on Saturday's at the church. It is open ended and everyone is invited. However, fewer attend this since most have already participated in a small group Bible study experience sometime during the week. We have three Sabbath School options on Saturday morning. We have a children's Sabbath School for the kindergarten group, a traditional study of the prepared Sabbath School lesson and a non-traditional study that reads and discusses a passage of Scripture parallel with the sermon in the divine service. The non-traditional study is developed by the speaker and is intended to open people up to the topic being presented in the sermon. We have found this to be a great way to help people prepare for the sermon and we are not so concerned about getting through the lesson since the speaker will also be covering the topic in the sermon. The discussion is quite informal. We also provide hot drinks and bagels as part of the Sabbath School experience.

The Journey Bible Study Series

In fulfillment of the discipleship process, we also conduct a life group Bible study experience using the Journey bible study series. Journey is great for seekers and new believers. Currently it is a four-part Bible study series that introduces participants to the mission and message of Jesus in series one—*Invitation*. Series two—*Greater Things* covers discipleship according to Matthew and takes participants through the gospel of Matthew. Series three covers some of the main teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist church in an overview of Bible truths through *Cherishing God*. The final Journey series is from the book of Acts—*Acts on Campus* and emphasizes sharing our faith in whatever context we find ourselves. Journey is our discipleship process for the church and especially our students.

Let's Youthenize Sabbath School

Sabbath School has been a wonderful program that has served the church well for many, many years especially by enhancing fellowship, bible study and evangelism. However, Sabbath School is not an end in itself. When a program is no longer serving its purpose, we need to get back to the overall purpose of the church and ask how we are creating space for real fellowship and study of the Word. Discipleship is a necessary component for the spiritual growth of each member and the entire church family. Youth also need to be growing in their knowledge of God and in their relationships with one another. I would invite you to join me in youthenizing Sabbath School by refocusing our efforts on the spiritual fellowship and discipleship of each member. In essence, let us focus not on saving a program but on fulfilling our God given purposes. If in some churches, the Sabbath School program is the best vehicle to accomplish discipleship, fellowship and evangelism, then those churches should of course maintain and seek how to improve Sabbath School. But if for other churches, Sabbath School as a program needs to cease in order to make discipleship, fellowship and evangelism happen, then that should be the focus. May God help us all focus on and work towards His purposes.
