

SABBATH SCHOOL: REDISCOVERING THE “LIFE BLOOD” OF THE CHURCH

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General Overview

Statistics from just about every denomination suggest that church growth is either at a standstill or declining. Few denominations are experiencing what might be termed as measurable and sustainable growth. I believe the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath School is the key to attracting and retaining more members, and in particular, teens and young adults. In this article, I will discuss two Sabbath School formats that have been extremely successful. The first format was incorporated at the College View Church in 1990 when I served as Youth Pastor. The second format is an adult Sabbath School called “Something Else” that has been in existence at the same church for over 18 years. Both formats could serve as a “springboard” to help local SDA churches attract and retain more individuals, who in turn, will be committed to grow spiritually and witness in their communities.

The Current State of Affairs

Most of us would agree that Sabbath School attendance and participation has fallen off in recent years. Adventists are not alone; many denominations across the United States struggle to attract and retain individuals to the “Study Hour”. For example, statistics that confirm this can be found in books such as Calvin Miller’s “The Vanishing Evangelical,” Frank Newport’s “God is Alive and Well,” and Thom and Sam Rainer’s “Essential Church?—Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts.”

An Ideal to Pursue

Sabbath School should offer individuals, particularly youth, opportunities to socialize, pray, study,¹ ask questions, participate and be heard. Dr. Don Clifton, a life-long educator and former CEO of the Gallup Organization, told me that “individuals do not learn until they hear the sound of their own voices.” I believe the key to attracting and retaining individuals to Sabbath School is the creation of a dynamic environment where individuals look forward to participating and being heard each and every week. Traditional SDA worship services limit the involvement of each person.

It is the Sabbath School where individuals can best learn and grow spiritually. Frank Newport, Gallup Poll Editor-in-Chief, states, “Growth will come to branded churches to the extent that they emulate non-denominational approaches and highlight community, togetherness, and social fabric ties.”¹ In this position

¹ Newport, Frank. “*God is Alive and Well.*” New York: Gallup Press, 2006. 243. Print.

paper I will discuss two different Sabbath School formats I have experienced personally, both of which highlight the very same “ties” Newport speaks of. Seventh-day Adventists churches can experience growth and spiritual engagement if they are willing to spend more time “retooling” their Sabbath School formats.

College View Youth Sabbath School

I became the Youth Pastor of the College View Church (Lincoln, NE) in 1990. Immediately our team of volunteers set out to change the Sabbath School format. In this large SDA church, the class was averaging approximately 20 students per week, and many students either did not come or visited with each other throughout the church services. Offering averaged about \$8 per week. There was little interest in the denominationally sponsored lesson study. Students were not involved in any community service projects except those sponsored by the local day academy.

Rather than blame the young people for not being spiritually engaged, our team felt it was our job to offer alternatives and opportunities. We believed our youth would respond if given a reason to attend Sabbath School. The new format consisted of five segments or ministries that included food, social time and music, prayer, offerings for various community projects, and lesson studies that included current events.

Each week a parent or volunteer was assigned to donate and prepare brunch for the youth. Our thinking was not just to place donuts or juice on a table with paper plates. We used linen tablecloths, glassware, and provided a motif each week. Every Sabbath the brunch looked like it came from a nice restaurant or hotel. Students responded by not only eating brunch each week, but acting like they were in a nice restaurant or hotel. We simply did not have food fights and spills, though the critics warned us this would happen. We played Christian music during this time and students enjoyed the relaxing atmosphere.

Our next ministry involved introductions, candy bar or gift card giveaways for birthdays or special events, and more. We then launched into prayer time and tried not to rush this time. It took a while, but eventually students were raising their hands and asking the group to pray for a friend, or neighbor, or even someone in the news. Prayer time helped all of us realize that Christianity is more than just thinking and praying about your own problems.

Students also began to appreciate the power and blessing that comes from financial giving. We incorporated community fundraising projects to get the group thinking about sustained giving each week. Our first project was the “Sneaker Fund” fund, which was used to buy shoes for children throughout Lincoln. We used money that was given each week to purchase sneakers and then displayed them in Sabbath School. The thinking was that individuals are 70% emotional and 30% rational. When students saw the number of sneakers displayed in the room and growing each week, giving increased. Over a period of about 6 months and with the help of local retailers who gave us a discount, the Sabbath School purchased 300 pairs of sneakers for needy children and teens.

Another project was called the “Insight Out Challenge.” Chris Blake, then editor of “Insight” magazine had a real burden to publish a magazine for youth who did not know Jesus. Chris wanted Adventist young people to sponsor

subscriptions to “Insight Out” and send it to their friends. Chris proposed that any youth group that sponsored 50 subscriptions would have their picture placed on the cover of “Insight.” The College View Church Youth Sabbath School raised \$448.50 in less than a month and appeared on the cover of “Insight” on February 1, 1992. Chris told me this particular group was the only one to take up the “Insight Out Challenge.” These are only two examples of our projects. From 1990–1992 the average weekly offering went from approximately \$8 to \$60 per week.

For the lesson study, we chose a different topic each week and used the time in Sabbath School to study it. Sometimes topics carried into the next Sabbath. Topics included current events and how they affect Christians. We also scheduled interesting speakers that included an Adventist member of the church who was 21 and involved in the Gulf Conflict at the time, an athlete from the University of Nebraska, and various musicians and artists. In the two years I helped lead this program our attendance went from approximately 25 to about 55.

There were things our team would have done different, including getting the students more directly involved in some aspects of the overall program. But in the two years I was part of this Sabbath School, we reported measurable growth in attendance, bringing non-Adventist friends to class, offerings, and community service. Twenty years after I left this position, I took on a new role with the Gallup Organization. During my thirteen years at Gallup I did some work in the Faith Practice Division. I learned that “fully engaged” church members exhibit a number of traits that can be measured, including inviting others to church, serving their church and community, and increased giving.² I did not know this in 1992, but we were measuring the results of what Gallup terms “spiritual engagement” in our CVC young people. The key ingredient to spiritual engagement is to help the students feel they are part of a “community” and create an atmosphere of “togetherness,” just as the research indicates.

“Something Else” Sabbath School

In 1995 Chris and Yolanda Blake began an adult Sabbath School class at the College View Church in Lincoln, Nebraska called “Something Else Sabbath School.” This class consists of five ministries that include prayer, social time, money ministry, time ministry, and a lesson study. Chris asked me to be part of his team and I gladly accepted since this new kind of Sabbath School was just what I was looking for after leaving my work as a Youth Pastor in 1992.

Twenty-three years later our class continues to thrive. I was the original leader of the Money Ministry team. We always take up offerings for Sabbath School and Missions, but also include an offering appeal for various projects. Our first project in January 1995 was to raise \$350 for a local center for abused women. The adults seemed as excited as the teens in my Youth Sabbath School class to give money for these projects. Our next project was to help a student with clothing needs and the class raised \$440. Since 1995 the members and guests continue to give to Sabbath School and Missions, but have also raised over \$300,000 in funds for local and world-wide projects.

² Winseman, Albert L. *Growing an Engaged Church* New York: Gallup Press, 2006. 39–41. Print.

I love the projects that we do in this Sabbath School. At the same time, there are many who give their time and energy to Prayer Ministry or Time Ministry or other important parts of the class. The key is that we learn and grow spiritually by getting involved in the class and work together as a “community” of believers. Sabbath School is more than a class; it is part of who we are spiritually. Many individuals have commented that they look forward to Something Else Sabbath School, especially after a busy and hectic week.

Though I have been a member of “Something Else” for many years, I recently experienced what Brian McLaren speaks of in “A New Kind of Christianity.” He wrote: “the Kingdom of God is not a distant reality to wait for someday, the kingdom is at hand, within reach, near, here, now.”³ For a number of years I was on the road as a teacher and consultant. I averaged about 270 days on the road and was often tied up in airports late on Friday evening, and stranded many times until the next day. In addition, I was dealing with a number of family issues that I had to take care of on the weekends. I either missed Sabbath School because I could not get home or had to deal with issues at home.

Though I never left the SDA Church or the basic tenets of my belief, I was for a time AWOL in terms of church attendance. Over time I decided to switch jobs and get off the road so I could stay home more often. I also had two bad hips for over 20 years and needed hip surgery. While in the hospital for the second operation, some dear friends from Something Else Sabbath School visited me one Saturday night. It had been a long time since I had contact with them and I was pretty embarrassed. They treated me as if we just spoken the day before. Kathy brought a lemon pie and said, “We miss you”. For the next two weeks different members of the class: Bob, Sarah, Vicki, Ron, Jim, Terri, Lil, Derald, Shirley and Sherri made sure I was fed and taken care of. I began to think how much I missed the camaraderie and community of this Sabbath School. It was not the Second Coming or the Sabbath that helped to bring me back into the fold, nor was it a pastoral visit or 3ABN. Like McLaren, I began to realize that the members of this Sabbath School believe the Gospel is “here and now”, and that took the form of lemon pies and potatoes casseroles, along with phone calls and visits to my house while I was recovering. Today I am so thankful a group of church members who belonged to the Time Ministry Team were just as excited about their work as I was on the Money Ministry Team.

Conclusion

Sabbath School has always been the “life blood” of the SDA Church. Sabbath School offers members and guests opportunities to actively participate and be heard, and this is crucial to spiritual growth and retention. Declining participation in Sabbath School does not mean it has to be a thing of the past. Local churches must offer Sabbath Schools that emphasize community and togetherness. Though College View Church is a large church, the basic principles I spoke of regarding the two Sabbath School formats can be incorporated or “tweaked” to any type or size church. If local members are committed to change, any Sabbath School can develop engaged youth and young adults to carry the Message of Jesus to their communities and throughout the world.

³ McLaren, Brian D. “A New Kind of Christianity.” New York: HarperCollins, 2010. 140. Print.

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