

## SABBATH SCHOOL: A PLACE FOR HEALING

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Healing began the first day I stepped into the Sabbath School class of Kretchmar Hall in the fall of 1992. The small auditorium lecture hall was filled with a mixture of people intently focused on the class facilitator standing in front of the blackboard. Discussion was lively and varied. I had arrived on the campus of Walla Walla College/University (WWU) as a 34 year-old mother of three to obtain an education. As a Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) of nearly nine years, no upbringing in Christianity, and carrying the bitterness of hurt experienced by the “church,” and wondering if I even wanted to remain a SDA, I was in need of healing. Thus, the seeds were sown and ultimately grew into a research program in group communication within the local SDA church. What follows is a synopsis of the research process, findings, and potential application for youth in the church.

### **Organizational Identification**

Scholarship over the past few decades has focused on the relationship between individuals and organizations by examining the construct of organizational identification (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Morgan et al., 2004). Organizational identification generally refers to the extent to which an organizational member shares and expresses the organization’s values and decision premises (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). The quality of the individual organization relationship has important implications for both individuals and the organizations to which they belong.

Although many studies center on individual identity and organizational identification, they generally implicitly assume a direct link between the two and tend to ignore the role of groups in this relationship. Understanding the role groups play in the individual-organizational relationship can provide a number of important practical insights. In particular, such knowledge would be of help to leaders who seek to facilitate positive outcomes for both individuals and organizations that can result from useful member-organization relationships.

Broadly defined, identity refers to a sense of self. Selves are fundamentally subjects in social presentations and we encounter our sense of identity whenever we interact with others (Goffman, 1967). As Scott (2007) noted, “One’s organizational membership creates a very important social identity for many individuals” (p. 125). Identity is not static, however, but rather an “ongoing story we tell about ourselves” (Freud, 2001, p. 336). Communication is central to this dynamism (Scott, 2007).

The concept of identification has evolved over the years from a perception of sameness and connection with others (Lasswell, 1935) to the more administratively-focused definition put forth by Cheney and Tompkins (1987): “A decision maker identifies with an organization when he or she desires to choose the

alternative which best promotes the perceived interests of that organization” (p. 194). Communication scholars highlight the negotiated and dynamic nature of identification, demonstrating how individuals continually, and communicatively, negotiate their identities (Scott, 2007). Applying structuration theory specifically to organizational identification, Scott, Corman, and Cheney’s (1998) model explicitly addressed the link between activity, identity, and the communication used to express identification.

### **Sabbath School and Organizational Identification**

The study I conducted focused on Sabbath School classes at the Walla Walla University church examining individual, group and organization identification. To obtain the information, 33 interviews were conducted with class members, ages ranging from 19–76 years old. The questions identified the members’ perceptions of their relationship to the larger organization and communication practices in the group context that enabled (dis)identification with the organization. Further, videos of the classes were used to analyze the communication in order to validate consistency between interview results and actual behavior. Results revealed three ways groups link individual members and the organization via identification.

**1. Connection:** groups provide members with local co-present linkages to the organization and an environment in which to express their connection/relationship to the organization. One participant explained that the class influenced his identity as an Adventist by providing a place to explore or a process of “finding out what I thought” about Adventism. The act of voicing his opinions became a vehicle for further connection with the church organization. One participant put it clearly, stating, “My class is one of my ways of staying connected to the church.”

Another described the importance of the group for her identification with the larger organization, explaining, “It’s changed in that I see the church has now included the group that I am in” in contrast to how she saw herself prior to her group experience, as an outsider versus a part of the church. In a clear statement of organizational identification, one participant succinctly stated, “In very simplistic terms it actually makes me feel good that I’m associated with this group of people and they are Adventist...it just makes me feel better about being an Adventist.” During another group discussion, a participant explained the connecting function of the group, by stating, “in[a] way this [is] my only participation in the church. Because it is a larger area and it is harder getting involved and stuff... I would say more than affecting my outside of my class, [the class] is one of my ways of staying connected to the church.”

**2. Restructuring:** groups also enable members to restructure/adapt conflicting individual and organizational identity. When individuals’ identities conflict with that of the organization, they often experience tension and uncertainty regarding continued membership in the organization. Group interaction in the SSCs helped individuals manage such tensions by providing opportunities for discussion and learning that functioned to restructure their organizational identity.

Interview participants noted how group discussion helped manage tensions members experienced between their individual identity and their identification with the organization. As one participant explained, being exposed to more ideas in the group “broadens my understanding of the church as a whole, more

than just me” and “helped me to better understand...the church and how I fit into the church.” Hearing a wide spectrum of thoughts, from “conservative to liberal” helped individuals determine how they fit into the overall organization. Such discussions were important to members’ development and negotiation of organizational identification; as one participant explained, “It [group discussion] has really helped me to settle into being comfortable not with just being a Christian but being an Adventist.” Another participant explained, “it [group discussion] spins my wheels and gets me thinking a little bit more than what I hear in the church service.” Thus, conversations in the group locale functions to transform and restructure the relevant organizational identity.

**3. Buffering:** lastly groups afford a buffering function enabling members to dis-identify with a portion of the organizational identity and still maintain a sense of organizational identification. Although group discussions often helped members restructure different identities in ways that helped maintain their identification with the larger organization, occasionally members chose to accept, rather than resolve, conflicts between their personal identity and the organization’s identity. In such cases, the groups functioned as a buffer between the individual and the organization. The groups provided a safe and comfortable environment for acknowledging and expressing different identities.

Interview participants explained that the SSCs provided a context in which to express their disagreement with the larger church, noting that the group was a place where they could more freely share their opinions and beliefs. As one interview participant explained, “it is wonderful to go and share my views and talk with other people who share their ideas. And that is so refreshing after a week of keeping my personal opinions to myself.” Another highlighted the buffering function by explicitly acknowledging her perception of the fluid nature of her own identity compared to the identity of the larger organization, stating, “This class has made me even more aware and makes me think about my responsibility, you know, that I, we can’t change anyone else, we can’t change the Church, we can only change ourselves.”

One interviewee provided an illustration of the group’s buffering function recounting a recent period during which she experienced serious doubts about the local SDA organization. At that time, her son went to prison and her husband lost his job at the SDA college in town. She felt her family had been treated unfairly compared to other SDA members and she felt unsupported by the church. The SSC group helped her through that experience, not by helping her restructure her identity to be consistent with that of the organization, but instead by providing support and allowing her to disidentify with the organization. As she explained:

When our son went to jail for the first time, I had a really hard time with that and when [my husband] lost his job at the college I had a really hard time with that. I had a harder time, I think, than he did. There were people in the college who, for instance, had gotten divorced for what didn’t seem to be really good reasons and they were still there and he was let go and [I thought] “God why is this happening?” After a long time the one thing that really helped me during that time was my Sabbath School Class...[it] really helped me to understand that I was to stay close to God...that I had to divorce the church from the [SDA] institution. I had to do that for my own sanity...My Sabbath School Class supported me during that time...

This example illustrates the stress that can result from a disconnection between one's individual identity and the organization's identity, and the important role groups play in helping individuals deal with that stress by providing a buffer between the individual and the organization. The buffering function, therefore, enables members to simultaneously decline to restructure conflicting personal identities and still maintain organizational identification and membership.

### **Application**

Church leaders could benefit from recognizing groups, specifically SS classes as a crucial resource for maintaining links between individual members and the larger organization. As necessary as organizational identification is to the church, individual identity is equally important to the member. Positioning groups as locales between the potentially divergent needs of both can provide "zones" where church members are free to examine and adjust identity and identification. In other words, groups help make church and member connections to the church, more palpable and "real."

I offer a case in point. My son and daughter in-law moved to a medium sized city where few young adults attended church. Soon they met several young people in the community who were raised a SDA and didn't attend church due to the angst felt toward the church organization. My children established a SSC where these people were invited to come without any "strings" attached. After experiencing a group/class environment where they were able to share frustrations and sort out disconcerting ideas and experiences in a safe environment, most eventually started integrating back into the local and larger church leading to changes that further attracted others to the church.

Similar to my own experience where a SS class became a place of healing and reconnection with the SDA church, these group contexts, enabling members to create a purposeful and strong sense of community and connection, can provide a strong platform for member satisfaction and identification. Ideally groups such as these will be instrumental in producing a stronger more vibrant church where both old and young can flourish.

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