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# Addressing Reasons for Members' Non-Attendance at the Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church

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ABSTRACT

ADDRESSING REASONS FOR MEMBERS'  
NON-ATTENDANCE AT THE  
ELMHURST SEVENTH-DAY  
ADVENTIST CHURCH

by

Glenn Paul Hill

Adviser: Benjamin Schoun

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Project Document

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: ADDRESSING REASONS FOR MEMBERS' NON-ATTENDANCE AT THE  
ELMHURST SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

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Date completed: June 2014

### Problem

By 2010, when this project began, the Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church (ESDA) had 199 members (December 2009 clerk's records). Yet ongoing, direct observation indicated that 122 of these (61%) were attending the church service fewer than six times per year. Only 66 of the members (33%) were attending at least once a month—a fact partially obscured by the routine presence of visitors. The underlying reasons for their regular absence remained unknown due to insufficient personal contact. As a result, it was not possible to define the kinds of meaningful ministry that would best serve the non-attending majority.

## Method

Eight, non-attending, adult members of Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church were interviewed using a survey instrument with 10 questions. Six of the interviews took place between May 3, 2012 and July 12, 2012 and two more were completed in December 2012 and June 2013. Following this, an intervention was implemented to address concerns stated in the interviews. This intervention included direct work with these eight individuals as well as specific adjustments in my personal ministry in this church.

The intervention focused on getting non-attending members to take a proactive approach in creating and maintaining their own connection with the church. It also focused on listening, and conflict resolution. It sought to address limitations of the Dunbar Effect which led to the formation of mini prayer groups. In addition, it dealt with the personal church involvement of attending members (seeking to avoid the opposite extremes of burnout and inactivity). It also necessitated creating a system for tracking the attendance of individual members.

## Results

From May 2012 through December 2013, two of the interviewees transferred to other churches. One completely discontinued attendance. Three now attend intermittently. One now normally attends fairly regularly (more than once per month). And another (who returned long before the interview) is reaching out to non-attending members himself. Insights gained through the interviews have helped to shape the way the church uses resources of time, money, and personnel.

In the larger picture, as of May 2014, ESDA had 227 members (May 2014 clerk's records). Of these, 123 (54%) attend fewer than six times per year. Eighty-eight (39%) attend at least once per month. This is partly due to some non-attending members returning to various levels of participation. It is also one result of a large influx of people from a neighboring congregation. These people were at a crossroads with their church attendance. Rather than becoming permanently, non-attending members of the neighboring church, they became a part of our congregation.

### Conclusions

Ministry to non-attending members can be complicated and person-specific. This study suggests that certain ministry adjustments can make a significant difference. These adjustments include at least three areas. First, non-attending members can be helped to be proactive in their own spiritual condition. Second, certain, built-in limitations require a change in how time is used in ministry. Third, ongoing work with these people especially calls for compassionate listening and addressing conflict in positive ways.

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

ADDRESSING REASONS FOR MEMBERS'  
NON-ATTENDANCE AT THE  
ELMHURST SEVENTH-DAY  
ADVENTIST CHURCH

A Project Document  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by

Glenn Paul Hill

June 2014

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Dr. Benjamin Schoun, my adviser, patiently and wisely provided corrective input which ultimately not only changed the document, but changed the way I am doing ministry. Dr. James J. North, Jr., the second reader, had an eye for details which improved the document. Doug Hamel, the head elder at our church, was constantly working with me as we tried to identify specific follow-up for the research and as we sought to make positive changes in our church.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE NEED FOR MINISTRY TO NON-ATTENDING MEMBERS AT ELMHURST SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

What happens when people no longer attend a church? Why do they leave? What might help them to come back? These questions prompted a formal investigation of what was going on in Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church (ESDA Church). Rather than guessing about what was happening or going by hearsay, a systematic approach to this challenge could bring hope for positive changes.

#### **Ministry Context**

ESDA Church had gone through a lot of change since it was founded by Italian immigrants in 1969. By the time I arrived in 2007, there were about 20 nationalities represented among the 200 members on the books. There were still Italians present, but these were actually descendants of the ones who had started the church. In fact, most of the descendants were no longer attending services at the church. They had been replaced by a wide variety of other people who had joined the church over the years.

The church building is located in Elmhurst, Illinois—a suburb west of Chicago. Elmhurst is a city that has many churches of various denominations. The United Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Churches have the strongest, visible presence in this

town. Our church building is located near several major highways, making it convenient for people to come from distant locations.

ESDA Church is a fairly traditional church. This is reflected in the style of the worship service and in the way people still refer to their pastor by title rather than by name. As with many churches, members at ESDA Church vary greatly in their personal involvement in the life of the church. Many participate in the various ministries of the church. Some are content to merely attend services without being personally involved. And quite a few others do not even attend worship services.

Over the years, ESDA Church experienced two different sides of church splits. There were a couple of occasions where ESDA Church went through a serious split over an issue that presented itself at the time. Many people either stopped attending church services, or moved to other Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) congregations. In addition, ESDA Church became the recipient of members from other churches that went through church splits.

In spite of past tensions, many people who remain are warm to those who attend. Old friendships are nurtured through various social events: both planned events and spontaneous events. New friendships are formed as members reach out to those who venture through the church doors.

### **The Problem of Non-Attending Members**

By 2010, when this project began, the Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church had 199 members (December 2009 clerk's records). Yet ongoing, direct observation indicated that 122 of these (61%) were attending the church service fewer than six times per year. Only 66 of the members (33%) were attending at least once a month—a fact



partially obscured by the routine presence of visitors. The underlying reasons for their regular absence remained unknown due to insufficient personal contact. As a result, it was not possible to define the kinds of meaningful ministry that would best serve the non-attending majority.

### **The Task**

The task of this project was to develop and implement a systematic method of contacting non-attending members to discover the reasons for their absence from church. A model to benefit non-attending members was then developed to address these reasons for non-attendance. The model is being implemented by the local church leaders at the completion of this project (a small pilot was initiated during the time of the project and outcomes were noted).

### **Delimitations**

This project is focused only on non-attending members of Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church. People in other churches are not considered. In addition, while work involves other people in the church, they are not the focus of the study. The project is a qualitative study. It does not attempt to include input from a large group of those who are not attending the church. Rather, it focuses on eight individuals who shed light on why they became disconnected from active involvement in the church.

### **The Project Process**

Theological reflection grows from the importance God places on seeking the lost. It gives attention to different ways God interacts with man and what this might suggest for work with people. Since it relates to non-attending members, the reflection looks at

corporate worship and why it is important. It notes the significance of a sense of belonging.

One section centers on biblical passages which describe what God does before He judges people or takes a specific action relative to their spiritual standing. These passages help to reveal principles which could apply to work with non-attending members.

The reflection includes the work God sends His representatives to do on His behalf and forms a basis for identifying several aspects of the task. It explores things which can be important in working with people. These things include personal preparation and a variety of details in interpersonal communication.

The literature review investigates why corporate worship is important. Then it deals with reasons people become inactive members, the process of visitation, and the implementation of listening skills and other abilities needed when relating to people who may perceive barriers between themselves and the church. It explores several factors which can be helpful in working with people who have become detached from the church.

Beyond the categories of non-attending members, this review looks at several ongoing considerations in working with people. It explores limitations of personal presence, and several skills that are helpful when facing backgrounds of brokenness. These skills include listening, and working with conflict. There is also attention given to personal preparation for the individuals who seek to reach out to non-attending members. In addition to current literature, the review includes certain older works which have served as classics in these areas.

An instrument involving open-ended questions was developed to discover specific reasons people no longer regularly attend our church. The development of this instrument involved significant feedback from the adviser and first reader to guide the nature of specific questions and their wording. Attention was given to details of the interview process and the nature of questions asked in an attempt to avoid skewing the results. The instrument was used by the pastor in face-to-face visits with non-attending members.

The main study is qualitative in nature. It is based on eight interviews with a selective sample of non-attending members. One goal of the sampling process is to insure that a sufficient variety exists in the kinds of people to be visited including, for example, divorcees, people with health issues, and adults who attended the church in their childhood. People who attend our church on rare occasions and those who have never attended since my arrival are included. No attempt is made to quantify numbers of people in each category.

The church leadership group evaluated the reasons stated for non-attendance and recommended specific ways to minister to the various kinds of people. Small pilot experiments were initiated to respond to needs of a few categories of non-attending church members. Outcomes are reported in the last two chapters.

The intervention focused on getting people to take a proactive approach, listening, and conflict resolution. It sought to address limitations of the Dunbar Effect. It led to the formation of mini prayer groups. In addition, it dealt with the personal church involvement of attending members. It also necessitated creating a system for tracking the attendance of individual members.

## **Definition of Terms**

Different writers have different things in mind when they refer to *non-attending members*. For the purpose of this project, it refers to people who attend ESDA Church fewer times than once per month. All of those interviewed were attending fewer times than once per year, either at the time of the interview, or at some time in the past. This made them more extreme examples of the kind of person under consideration.

*Remove from membership*, is a term that refers to a specific form of church discipline within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. When a person is formally recognized as belonging to a local congregation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he is said to be a member of that church. He can transfer his membership from one church to another.

If, however, he no longer believes or practices the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he can lose this formal membership. Such can only happen through a formally called meeting of the local congregation in which a vote is taken to determine his membership status. If this vote removes his name from the membership list, the process is described as *removing a person from membership*.

## **Summary**

A full study of how to reach out to non-attending members goes beyond the scope of this project. And yet this project seeks to establish specific steps that can make a positive difference in the lives of people who are no longer actively participating in the life of ESDA Church. The chapters which follow attempt to make this journey a reality.

Chapter 2 explores the theological foundation for this kind of ministry. It looks at why church attendance is important. It also seeks specific information on what is needed

by those who reach out to non-attending members. Chapter 3 is a review of literature related to this kind of work. It lays out the kinds of reasons people no longer attend church. It also addresses potential ways to improve work with non-attending members.

Chapter 4 describes an intervention which is created for ESDA Church. This intervention includes elements that focus on the non-attending members themselves. It also looks at what is needed by the ones seeking to reach these non-attending members. Chapter 5 is a narrative of the journey. It shares the process of implementing the intervention. And it addresses modifications which were required in the process.

Chapter 6 looks back at what was learned from the intervention. It shares what had been missing, and looks at specific steps that are intended to address these missing elements. Though this is not the final word on interacting with non-attending members, it serves as a platform for positive change in the life of ESDA Church.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON MINISTERING TO NON-ATTENDING CHURCH MEMBERS

Probably every church that has existed for more than a few years has non-attending members. Some of these people show up in church from time to time. Others never darken the door, though their names remain on the books. With so much time needed to serve the ones who do come and to reach out to people who do not know Christ, it can seem like a waste of time to reach out to non-attending members. But it is an important ministry.

The Bible does not describe a comprehensive plan for ministry to non-attending church members. But it contains stories, injunctions, and advice on numerous aspects of this matter. One thing is clear. Lost people matter to God, whether they are inside or outside of the church.

In addition, though we each stand before God as individuals, we experience Him differently in corporate worship. But what should be done for those who no longer attend? Some insight into this process can be found in the way God interacted with people before judging them. Beyond that lies a lot of counsel on the preparation needed for any person who seeks to do this work. And there is specific information on how to

interact with people in order to avoid driving them further away and in order to help them be more open to responding positively to ministry on their behalf.

### **Seeking the Lost**

Luke shares three stories that Jesus told about seeking the lost (Luke 15:1-32). The lost sheep (also in Matthew 18:10-14), the lost coin, and the lost son have various differences, but they all have two things in common. Someone is seeking the lost. And there is a great celebration when the one that was lost is restored to his place. The sheep and the coin needed someone else to do all of the work in order to be restored. The sheep and the boy knew they were lost. Only the boy was able to return to the one who was seeking him.

These stories build on previous biblical passages. Ezekiel 34:1-10 calls spiritual leaders shepherds. It describes how these shepherds are supposed to seek the scattered sheep. When they don't do their work, God tells how He will have to do the searching (verse 11). Jeremiah 13:20 asks the haunting question, "Where is the flock that was given to you?" And before this, the command is given, "Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and to attend to your herds" (Prov 27:23).

God doesn't want anyone to be lost (2 Pet 3:9). That is why Jesus came to our world. He came to seek and save those who are lost (Luke 19:10; 1 Tim 1:15). After predicting judgments that would come to Israel, God tells of their return and says that they will be called "Sought Out" (Isa 62:12).

God's workers have this same interest in the lost. Paul's heart's desire for Israel was their salvation (Rom 10:1). Peter tells us that judgment will "begin at the house of God" (1 Pet 4:17). He goes on to tell how it is worse to know God and leave than to

never know Him (2 Pet 2:20-22). This would seem to indicate that people who once knew God should be an important focus for us in the work of evangelism since their situation is dangerous. In this vein, James indicates that a person who helps someone turn from sin will save that person from death (James 5:20).

### Creation

God's creation of our world is recorded in two different ways in the book of Genesis. I believe Moses recorded the story in two different ways to give a more complete understanding of several things which seem to have been functioning at the same time. In the first account (Gen 1:1-2:4a) God is shown in a more distant or transcendent way. He is called אֱלֹהִים (Elohim). Each of the things He does can be done from a distance (verbs include such things as *say, speak, see, divide*, et cetera). This seems to emphasize the power of God. He is both distant and mighty.

But the picture is different in the second account of creation (Gen 2:4b-25). Here the focus moves toward the personal level. God is called יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים (Yahweh Elohim). This is the covenant name as is seen in its numerous uses in the book of Deuteronomy. In most cases, the verbs used here are close and personal (verbs include such concepts as *form, plant, build, cause to grow, breathe*, et cetera).

### Related Experiences

As in creation, God relates to people in a distant, all-powerful way while also relating to individuals in a close and personal way. For example, God spoke in words like thunder to the people of Israel (Exod 20:1, 18, 19). The Lord spoke more personally with Moses (Exod 20:22; 25:1; 30:17). In a similar manner, God's representatives related to



people in a public way (more distant) and in a personal way. We see, for example, Elijah speaking to the crowd on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20-40). He related in a more personal way to Elisha (2 Kgs 2:1-10).

Paul's work reflected this. He "taught publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). Jesus not only addressed the multitudes (Matt 5:1, 2), He also met one-on-one as He did with Nicodemus (John 3:1, 2). He sometimes made house calls. Examples include calling on Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31) and Jairus' daughter (5:21-24, 35-43). When the stakes were high, a personal visit could make a difference. In a similar way, reaching out to non-attending members requires personal contact.

In addition to personal contact, I believe that people may be better prepared to stay strong spiritually when they experience the fullness of God in His immanence and in His transcendence. In my observation, it seems that people find greater strength to resist temptation when both aspects of divinity are in mind. God's transcendence calls for our submission. His immanence leads us to sense His personal interest in the details of our lives.

### **Corporate Experience**

The church is the body of Christ (Col 1:24). Though we are individuals, we are each a part of His body (Rom 12:5; Eph 5:30). Alone, we are incomplete (1 Cor 12:12-27). Paul shows that the Trinity works through the church. Jesus gives the church people who minister as one body (Eph 4:7-16). The Holy Spirit gives various gifts, or abilities, to different people in the church (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:7-11). And God appoints these people their work "in the church" (1 Cor 12:28-31). We need each other to be complete.

There is greater strength as a group. A single strand of cord is fairly easily broken. A “threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:9-12). Our combined strengths far surpass what any one person can accomplish on his or her own.

It can be tempting to point out faults in the group and use this as an excuse to only worship alone. In the book of Revelation, the first major section is directed at seven churches (Rev 1:20-3:22). These churches are seen as the recipients of God’s messages. Six of these churches have problems. The first church, Ephesus, has lost its first love (Rev 2:4). The second church, Smyrna, includes “those who say they are Jews and are not” (Rev 2:9). The third church, Pergamos, includes people who hold false doctrine (Rev 2:14, 15).

The fourth church, Thyatira, includes people involved in sexual immorality and idolatry (Rev 2:20-23). The fifth church, Sardis, has a name that it is alive, but it is dead (Rev 3:1). The seventh church, Laodicea, is a lukewarm church (Rev 3:15, 16). It also contains people who think they are rich, but who are actually poor (Rev 3:17, 18). Though these churches, and the ones we attend, include people with various problems and issues, God still seeks to work through them.

### Corporate Identity

On many occasions the actions of God to man or the response of man to God is seen to include corporate identity. Terms like *we* and *us* are used for the people interacting with God (Deut 5:3; 6:21-23; Pss 21:13; 122:1; Heb 1:1, 2). Paul writes to churches as a group (2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1, 2). He tells believers in Corinth, “You (plural) are the temple of God” (1 Cor 3:16). And he uses plural verbs when he tells believers in Ephesus to put on the whole armor of God (Eph 6:10-20).

Peter states that believers are “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9). Zephaniah looks forward to the day when God rejoices over Jerusalem (Zeph 3:16, 17). The objective pronouns in Zephaniah are singular. The collection of people is seen as a single entity. To be part of the action, I need to be part of the group.

This corporate identity includes the concept of corporate accountability. What is done by one person in the group impacts the whole group. For example, Israel was defeated in battle because of the hidden sin of one man, Achan (Josh 7:1-26). Fear of a similar outcome led to a speedy response when some people in Israel appeared to be moving away from God (Josh 22:10-20).

Jesus acknowledged corporate accountability when He pronounced woes on the scribes and Pharisees. He told about people who were killed centuries earlier and He called them people “whom *you* murdered” (Matthew 23:31-36). Daniel seemed to assume corporate accountability as he prayed to God about the sins of his people. In his corporate confession, he prayed as a representative of his people saying, “*we* have sinned and committed iniquity, *we* have done wickedly and rebelled” (Dan 9:5).

These diverse statements and experiences seem to point to a sometimes overlooked fact. God intends for His people to share a corporate experience. We need each other.

### Corporate Worship

Isaiah was allowed to view worship in heaven (Isa 6:1-9). This worship emphasized God’s holiness (Isa 6:1-3). Isaiah felt his own unworthiness (Isa 6:5). During this worship, he was cleansed from sin (Isa 6:6, 7). Then he was called for service (Isa

6:8) and sent to serve (Isa 6:9). Though he was the only human mentioned, he encountered corporate worship with heavenly beings.

When tempted by Satan, Jesus noted that true worship must have God as its focus (Matt 4:8-10). He told the Samaritan woman that God wants people to worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23, 24). Since these aspects of worship can be experienced while alone with God, it may be tempting to think that worship is only something I do as an individual in the privacy of my own home. Such private worship is important. Jesus stated that we should pray in private (Matt 6:5, 6) and fast in private (Matt 6:16-18). But as the Bible so often indicates, that is only one side of the story.

There is also a place for corporate worship. Jesus described a process of resolving differences between people. Right after that description He said, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20). It would seem that this promise of His presence would also apply, by extension, to worship.

The book of Hebrews says this of corporate worship: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves, as the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25). We need corporate worship more as we get closer to the day Jesus comes in the clouds.

As the two ways God acted in the creation account, worship is also meant to help us experience God’s distant power and His personal closeness. We are told in Psalm 111:1 to praise the LORD in the small group (בסוד ישרים) and in the assembly (ועדה). A literal translation of these terms (Holladay, 1988) indicates that סוד is *a secret or circle of confidants*. ישרים refers to *the upright* (plural). ועדה is *an assemblage, or gathering*. Therefore, we are called to worship God in the small group, and in the congregation.

Early believers worshiped in the temple and in houses (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Aquila and Priscilla had a church in their house (1 Cor 16:19).

There are numerous references to corporate worship. Wise men came to worship Jesus together (Matt 2:1, 2). As a child, Jesus sought time in the temple (Luke 2:41-50). As an adult, He worshiped in the synagogue (Luke 13:10). In fact, it was His custom to worship in the synagogue each Sabbath (Luke 4:16, 17). Paul spoke at a regular synagogue service (Acts 13:14-41). Worship is also described as happening in a group (Pss 26:12; 29:1, 2; 52:9; 105:1). Sometimes this is indicated by plural verbs in the text (2 Chr 7:14; Ps 95:6).

Paul and John indicate that the church as a whole is the bride of Christ. He longs for the marriage (Eph 5:25-27; 2 Cor 11:2-4; Rev 19:7-9; 21:2, 9, 10). Centuries earlier, Solomon wrote, in the book of Canticles, about the intensity of desire and intimacy between husband and wife. Taking these passages together, it would seem to indicate that, in a corporate context, we experience a special dimension of worship which is not available when we only worship as individuals.

The book of Revelation repeatedly emphasizes corporate worship. In the letters to the churches, God addresses the group rather than individuals (Rev 1:20-3:22). Heavenly worship is described as a corporate experience (Rev 4:1-11; 5:4-14; 7:9-17; 11:15-18; 15:2-4). There is also a kind of false worship that is corporate (Rev 13:4-8, 12-15). But that does not lessen the impact of God calling His people to corporate worship (Rev 14:7, note the plural verbs). When it comes to worship, we need each other.

## Membership and Belonging

The whole idea of corporate identity and even corporate worship is dependent upon a sense of belonging. I don't just participate beside other people. I become part of their group. In a very real sense, they belong to me and I belong to them. Matthew and Luke each included a detailed genealogy in their gospel accounts (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). This may have been to show how Jesus belonged to the people of Israel. But Jesus' clearest sense of belonging came when He publically followed God's will in being baptized. It was then that He heard the voice from heaven declaring Him to be God's beloved Son (Matt 3:13-17).

After facing a time away from God, Israel received the assurance of belonging to God (Hos 2:23). In a thrilling statement by the sons of Korah, God registered His people as being born in Zion (Ps 87:1-6). This was another way of saying that they belonged to Him. In a similar statement, after sending out the 70 (or 72), Jesus told them to rejoice that their "names [were] written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Later, Jesus told a story about wicked vinedressers (Matt 21:33-46). The story showed that belonging to God's kingdom is based on choice and actions.

Paul showed another aspect of belonging by clearly identifying with his people, Israel (Rom 11:1, 2). Years earlier, he received a similar blessing when Ananias called him "brother Saul" (Acts 9:17). At that time, when others rejected Paul, this small cue from Ananias likely helped to foster his sense of belonging.

But belonging to the group is not guaranteed to be permanent. In Jesus' day, some people guarded their words, fearing they could be removed from membership (John 9:18-23). Though they were facing a harsh, misapplication of God's word, the idea was based

on truth. Paul indicated that book membership was not enough in his classic statement, “They are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Rom 9:6).

While Jesus socialized with sinners (Matt 9:9-13), Paul wrote not to fellowship with a believer who is actively involved in certain sins (1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Thess 3:14). Such a person was to be taken away from the group (1 Cor 5:2). In another letter, Paul may have been referring to the same man when he indicated that church discipline was “not to be too severe” (2 Cor 2:5-11). It is intended to lead a person back to regular fellowship one day.

Jesus indicated specific steps that were to be used in the process of such discipline (Matt 18:15-17). Starting with a one-on-one conversation, the idea seems to be to keep the circle as small as possible. Others are not brought into the conversation unless it becomes necessary. And even then, it is just to establish what has been said, not to gain power over another person (Matt 18:16).

Beyond church discipline, there are other possible reasons to formally separate from a group of believers. Paul and Barnabas separated after a heated disagreement (Acts 15:37-41). Though this had nothing to do with membership in a local congregation, it did send them to minister in different directions along with different assistants. Perhaps, in a similar way, it is occasionally appropriate to move membership to another congregation (of the same denomination) when things are too tense in the current church.

Proverbs 27:10 says, “Better is a neighbor nearby than a brother far away.” This statement was not intended to refer to church membership. And yet, it shares a principle that probably should be applied to church membership. Rather than leaving membership

in a church that is far away, a person should join a local congregation and become a meaningful part of the life of that church—where possible.

### **Judgment**

How should a pastor relate to members who no longer attend church? Though the Bible does not directly address this precise situation, it shares principles that would seem to apply. One often overlooked area which shares such principles is the area of divine judgment. Many biblical passages state that God judges (Pss 9:4, 5, 7, 8, 16; 10:5; 50:4-6; 51:4; 58:11; 67:4; 76:7-9; 82:1; 96:10, 13; 98:9; 135:14; Eccl 3:17; 11:9; 12:14; Isa 2:4; 3:13, 14; 5:16; 33:22; 66:16; Jer 11:20; et cetera).

God's judgment is not only about His people. It includes surrounding nations (Amos 1; 2, et cetera). There are many calls for God to judge (Pss 5:10; 7:6-8; 9:19; 10:12-15; 17:1, 2; 26:1, 2; 28:4; 35:1-8, 24; 43:1; 82:8; 94:2; 119:84; Lam 3:59). Jesus told how God's people ask for justice before He judges (Luke 18:7, 8).

In fact, God's people are called to judge (1 Cor 6:2, 3; Rev 20:4). The judgment mentioned in these passages is not about church membership. But it does show that God invites his people into a kind of judgment. Jesus' story about the unforgiving servant shows that how we judge others determines how we are judged (Matt 18:21-35). It is interesting that He tells this story after explaining how church discipline should be done (Matt 18:15-17). Rather than making assumptions about others, it is important to follow a specific approach to see what should be done.



## Investigate

Several classic passages in scripture show *how* God judges. These include His judgment of Adam and Eve (Gen 3), His judgment of Cain (Gen 4), His judgment of the antediluvian world (Gen 6-8), His judgment of Pharaoh (Exod 3-12), His judgment of Israel (Num 11), His judgment of Aaron and Miriam (Num 12), and His judgment of rebellion in Israel (Num 14-16).

First, God saw the problem (Gen 6:5) or looked into the problem (Gen 6:12). He came down to see what was happening at the tower of Babel (Gen 11:5). He came to personally investigate the situation before judging Sodom (Gen 18:20, 21). In contrast to God's way, we sometimes see people judging without first investigating the situation (e.g. Gen 38:24). In Ezekiel 9, God only executed judgment when the investigation was complete. Before judging Edom, God heard what they had said (Ezek 35:10-15).

The way God worked in these experiences of judgment sets an example for dealing with problems. It is not His pattern to deal with issues without including the people involved. The first step in addressing a problem is investigating what is happening. This includes taking time to see and hear the person involved.

## Inquire

After Adam and Eve sinned, God asked them specific, open-ended questions (Gen 3:9-13). They made excuses and each passed the blame on to another. It seems that fear leads to avoidance. God addressed them as individuals. After Cain brought an incomplete offering, and again after he killed his brother, God asked him specific, open-ended questions (Gen 4:6, 7, 9). God also cited evidence of the problem (Gen 4:10). After

Abimelech took Abraham's wife, God gave him the opportunity to speak before executing judgment (Gen 20:4, 5). This also helped to influence the outcome.

Some of God's questions look like questions that could be used with other people. In dealing with Jonah, God asked, "Is it right for you to be angry" (Jonah 4:4, 9)? Before healing a blind man, Jesus asked, "What do you want Me to do for you" (Luke 18:41)? And before healing another man, Jesus asked if he wanted to be well (John 5:6).

These diverse interactions between God and man show that God values our input. The second step in addressing a problem is to ask specific questions. It is helpful if at least some of these questions are open-ended. This gives an opportunity for the person to share what is happening in her life.

### Present Options

God didn't just investigate and ask questions, when He judged His people. He also offered choices. Before entering the promised land, Israel was given a picture of blessings that would follow obedience and curses that would follow disobedience (Lev 26). Some of Moses' last words to the people brought them to a conscious choice (Deut 30:19, 20). They could choose life or death. Their choice would determine the outcome they would receive. After David's sin in numbering the people, God offered him a choice in outcomes (2 Sam 24:11-14).

God appeared to Solomon three times (1 Kgs 3:4-14; 9:1-9; 11:9-13). In the first appearance, God told Solomon he could ask for anything he wanted. In the second appearing, Solomon was shown the outcomes of two different directions of life. In both of these appearances, God offered him choices. In the third appearance, God announced that Solomon would lose the kingdom. This was a result of his prior choices.

The illustration of the potter that God gave Jeremiah showed that Israel could influence the outcome of judgment (Jer 18:1-11). And not long before the destruction of Judah, Jeremiah revealed the choices available to the king, along with the consequences for each choice (Jer 22:1-9).

God showed Ezekiel that personal choice determines outcomes (Ezek 33:12-20). Jesus said that He “will reward each according to his works” (Matt 16:27). Even though we are saved “by grace . . . through faith” (Eph 2:8, 9), our choices matter. The decisions we make determine how God will work in us or on us.

These varied examples show that it is not enough to discover what people are experiencing in life. They need to be drawn into the process. They need to exercise choice. The third step in addressing a problem is to present the options. This includes noting the different outcomes that follow any choices that will be made.

#### Rebuke, Warn, Correct

In working with matters of the soul, we cannot afford to be totally detached from the people with whom we work. Eternal interests are at stake. There is a place for seeking to influence the outcome. Sin separates people from God (Isa 59:2). God does not just let nature take its course. He rebukes and chastens the ones He loves (Rev 3:19). We see this at work throughout scripture.

God warned Cain about sin (Gen 4:7). Unfortunately, Cain did not heed the warning (Gen 4:8). Before destroying the world with a flood, God warned Noah, His prophet (Gen 6:13). He sent angels to warn Lot before destroying Sodom (Gen 19:1, 10, 12, 13). Lot, in turn, warned his family about the coming destruction (Gen 19:14). God warned Abimelech in time for him to change his course of action (Gen 20:3). There is a

pattern of God sending warnings, often through prophets, before enacting punishment (2 Kgs 17:5-23; 2 Chr 36:15, 16).

Though Paul valued choice, he also sought to influence the outcome during times of decision. In his words to Philemon, Paul made strong appeals for a desired outcome (Phlm 9-22). In addition, he persuaded Onesimus (the escaped slave) to return to Philemon (Phlm 12-16). And in a similar, but more generalized way, he appealed to Christians to live like Christians. He asked them to “walk worthy” (Eph 4:1; 1 Thess 2:11, 12).

The work of warning others is a delicate one. It is important to avoid hypocritical criticism (Matt 7:1-5). “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Prov 27:6). This verse points out two important aspects of warning people. First, it requires faithfulness. Flattery is more comfortable to give than warning. Second, it is better received when coming from a friend.

Peter was willing to challenge the error of a convert (Acts 8:13-24). But this also worked the other way for Peter. Paul challenged Peter on how he acted under peer pressure (Gal 2:11-14). Paul noted that there is a time to sharply rebuke people (Titus 1:13). But correction should be done with humility (2 Tim 2:25). When correcting a man, we are not to “count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thess 3:15).

Correction must be given with an attitude of respect. Paul gave counsel to talk to older men and women as to a father or mother, and to speak to younger women or men as to sisters or brothers (1 Tim 5:1, 2). In giving correction, patience is needed (1 Thess 5:14). On the other side of the matter, there is wisdom in hearing and responding to

correction (Prov 12:1; 13:18). On one occasion, David praised Abigail when she gently corrected him (1 Sam 25:32, 33). Unfortunately, such an attitude is unusual.

These diverse stories and statements show that it is not enough to find out what is happening or even to share options. There is also a need to influence the outcome. The fourth step in addressing a problem involves making appeals for positive change. The way this is done is significant.

And so, the way God judges people reveals at least four steps in addressing a problem. First, we need to investigate before acting on what we have heard. This involves finding actual facts rather than parroting opinions. Then we should inquire, giving the person an opportunity to share his perspective. This includes asking questions. After that, it is important to share options, giving an opportunity for the individual to make a positive choice. Finally, we can appeal to the person to move in a positive direction.

### **Preparation**

Applying the four steps requires some significant preparation. The needed preparation is in two areas. First, there is a general preparation of the individual who is reaching out. Second, there are some specific tools that can make a positive difference in interactions with people (addressed in a following section). Ecclesiastes 10:10 says, “If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but wisdom brings success.” Rather than wasting time with words and actions that are counterproductive, time spent in preparation will be more than repaid in better interactions with people.

## Leaders and Example

Leadership is significant in working with people. Moses spoke to Aaron after the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:3-18). His words show that there is a higher standard expected of leadership. Sometimes people are led astray by religious leaders (e.g. 1 Kgs 12:25-33). In order to avoid this, Jesus personally chose leaders (the twelve apostles) to represent Him in a special way (Matt 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). He prayed before choosing them (Luke 6:12).

Later, leadership in the church was chosen through fasting and prayer (Acts 13:1-4). Paul notes that church leaders are given to equip others for ministry (Eph 4:11, 12). Peter states that they should “shepherd the flock of God” (1 Pet 5:2). Both Paul and Peter emphasize that leaders should be examples to others (1 Tim 4:12; 1 Pet 5:3). It is evident that being a leader is a serious responsibility. It makes personal preparation even more necessary.

## Attitude and Thought

Being an example to others is not something that can be pasted on the outside. It needs to come naturally from within. In order to act appropriately toward others, I need the internal attitude which leads in such a direction. When God sent Samuel to condemn Saul, he cared deeply for the person under condemnation (1 Sam 15:11, 35). Even when an enemy falls, it should bring us no joy (Prov 24:17). And we are not to hate someone in our heart (Lev 19:17). Such internal hatred would probably be perceived by the other person even though attempts were made to hide the feeling. We are not to think evil of others (Zech 8:17). Rather “let each esteem others better than himself” (Phil 2:3).

When friends came to comfort Job, they caused him much grief. He wished they could put themselves in his shoes (Job 16:4, 5). He expressed this longing. But some people may keep such thoughts inside. Only God knows the heart (1 Sam 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39). Our only hope for getting past this barrier is to ask God for wisdom (Jas 1:5).

Though there is a place for anger (Eph 4:26), it is wise to control our emotions (Prov 25:28). We need God's love in our hearts (Lev 19:18, Prov 10:12; Gal 5:6; 1 Pet 4:8). In addition, Paul counsels us to meditate on positive things (Phil 4:8) and to be content (Phil 4:11; 1 Tim 6:6). The good news is that we don't have to make this happen on our own. God promises to keep us in peace (Isa 26:3) and to guide us (Prov 3:5, 6) when we trust in Him. He gives us the strength we need (Isa 40:31).

Each of these comments or commands shows that attitude is significant when working with others. We need to be right inside so that we can relate to others in positive ways.

### Prayer

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of preparation for the leader comes through prayer. The sons of Korah prayed each day—morning and night (Ps 88:1, 9, 13). Daniel prayed three times each day (Dan 6:10, 13). Paul prayed night and day (1 Thess 3:10; 2 Tim 1:3).

Jesus prayed in the early morning (Mark 1:35) and sometimes spent the night in prayer (Luke 6:12). Luke notes that Jesus prayed before significant events in His life and as a matter of routine (Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12, 13; 9:18, 29; 10:21; 11:1; 22:32, 40-43). Jesus prayed alone before working in public (Mark 1:35) and alone after stressful

ministry (Mark 6:45, 46). These people considered prayer to be a crucial part of their ministry.

People in Bible times prayed for a variety of matters. Paul recommends making our requests known to God in prayer (Phil 4:6). James says to pray for the sick (Jas 5:13-18). John prayed for Gaius' health (3 John 2). Abraham interceded for Sodom (Gen 18:22-33) and Moses interceded for Israel (Exod 32:11-13, 30-32; Num 14:11-25). Hezekiah prayed for people who were unprepared for worship (2 Chr 30:13-20). We need prayer for our own spiritual health. It is also very important for a leader to pray for his people. In fact, Samuel stated that it is a sin for the leader to stop praying for God's people (1 Sam 12:23).

Paul wrote a lot about prayer. He noted that the prayers of believers empowered his ministry (2 Cor 1:11). He told Timothy that people should pray for everyone (1 Tim 2:1). He specifically noted that there should be prayer for people in authority, including government leaders (1 Tim 2:2). He asked others to pray for him (1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1; Eph 6:18, 19). And he had a special prayer ministry for his people. He mentioned them in prayer (Rom 1:9; Eph 1:15, 16; 1 Thess 1:2).

Paul told people he was always praying for them (Phil 1:4; 2 Thess 1:11; Phlm 4). He prayed that the Colossians would know what is right and do what is right (Col 1:9, 10). He clearly recognized that prayer empowers ministry. In fact, it appears that he considered prayer to be absolutely essential.

The way we pray is important. Paul tells us to pray earnestly (Col 4:2). Peter says to "be serious and watchful in your prayers" (1 Pet 4:7). Jesus taught that if we want to



get results, we need to believe when we pray (Matt 21:22; Mark 11:24). Thankfully, we don't have to figure this out on our own.

Jesus promises that God will give the Holy Spirit if we ask (Luke 11:13). And the Holy Spirit takes our prayers, with all their shortcomings, and presents them to God in an acceptable way (Rom 8:26, 27). When we receive the Holy Spirit, He teaches us truth and helps us remember it (John 14:26). He is the one who brings conviction (John 16:7-11). It is not our work to convict others.

### **Interacting With People**

A number of abilities or skills can help prepare us to interact with people. We need special care in this work. Paul told the Colossians to “walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time” (Col 4:5). But this is not just for work with outsiders. When Jesus sent the twelve disciples to work with insiders (Matt 10:5, 6), He told them to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matt 10:16). Earlier, He had explained that we should treat others as we want to be treated (Matt 7:12).

One way to do this is to honor people (1 Pet 2:17). This has to do with respect. Moses taught respect for age (Lev 19:32). David even showed respect for one who was trying to harm him (1 Sam 24; 26). On the flip side, it is important to avoid showing partiality when we seek to honor others (Acts 10:34; James 2:1-9). Jesus' teaching on Sabbath observance showed another way to express respect. He saw the burdens created by certain human restrictions added to God's law. He put people above human policy (Mark 2:23-3:6).

Yet another way to show respect is to refer to a person by her name. It helps to create a personal connection, rather than just getting down to business. Jesus often called

people by name. Examples of His doing this include Peter (Matt 17:25), Martha (Luke 10:41), and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5). After His resurrection, Jesus' specific mention of Peter (Mark 16:7) must have given the contrite apostle a growing sense of acceptance. Cultivating these various ways of showing honor or respect can help establish a willingness for further interaction.

Working with people can be challenging. But Mordecai's warning to Esther shows that avoiding a difficult visit will not prevent problems from arising (Esth 4:13, 14). When a personal visit is not possible, a letter can sometimes get through to the individual. Jeremiah (Jer 29:1-32) and even Elijah (2 Chr 21:12) sent letters. And the New Testament epistles are examples of letters to believers. An additional advantage of a letter is that it remains available to reread whereas spoken words are only available once.

Working with people can bring us face-to-face with individuals exhibiting rough character traits. It can be tempting to become harsh and overbearing. Paul told the Ephesians to use kindness and forgiveness with each other (Eph 4:32). He exercised gentleness in his work with the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:7). And he told the Christians in Rome to "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21).

Interacting with people brings us into contact with their pain. Like Jabez, we can pray that God will help us not to cause pain (1 Chr 4:10). When people are in pain, like Job, they may remember glory days (Job 29). Or, like Herod, they may turn on the messenger when he points out painful truth (Matt 14:1-12). One source of pain is sin, since it takes away peace (Isa 48:22; 57:21). Even godly people, like Peter, may act in uncharacteristic ways when under extreme stress (Mark 14:66-72). Recognizing the roots of personal pain can help in dealing with its effects in people's lives.

Seemingly insignificant details can have a marked impact on outcomes. For example, coming to visit a person too often makes him not want to see you (Prov 25:17). And even good words or actions are rejected when done in an irritating manner, or at the wrong time (Prov 27:14). Among other things, working with people requires skill or work in four significant areas: listening, communication, accountability, and help on the journey.

### Listening

Perhaps the most important skill needed in approaching people is the ability to really listen. In a classic passage, Solomon asked God to give him a listening heart (לִשְׁמָע; Holladay, 1988) so that he could judge Israel (1 Kgs 3:9). In fact, it is foolish and shameful to “[answer] a matter” before listening (Prov 18:13). James counseled believers to be “swift to hear, [but] slow to speak” (Jas 1:19).

Listening is important if we really want to understand another person. Each individual naturally believes that his way is the right way (Prov 12:15; 21:2). And, as happened with the lawyer who came to Jesus, there is a tendency toward self-justification (Luke 10:29). People need the chance to speak. God let Abimelech speak when he was being judged (Gen 20:4, 5). Like Elihu, when a person has no chance to share his view, he may feel like he could burst (Job 32:1, 2). Job’s experience shows how suffering people want to be heard. They do not want lectures (Job 13:5, 6, 13).

On the other hand, some people may be reluctant to share what is deep inside. It may require special skill to draw it out (Prov 20:5). In fact, some things are only known if God reveals them (Matt 10:25-27; Deut 29:29). When people do speak, Jesus indicates that their words come from what is in their hearts (Matt 12:34; Luke 6:45). For us as

humans who listen carefully, words are one of the only windows we have into what a person is thinking.

After sharing that secrets will one day be revealed, Jesus cautioned, “Take heed *how* you hear” (Luke 8:18). We are not to believe everything we hear (Prov 14:15). What people say often comes with a particular slant. In addition, their words may not even express their own ideas. One English idiom apparently comes from the Bible account of Joab causing a woman to speak for him. Scripture declares that he “put the words in her mouth” (2 Sam 14:3). The same may be true of people’s actions. God told Jeremiah that such actions may come from their own heart, or they may have been taught by their parents (Jer 9:14).

Listening includes emotion. Paul tells us to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). In the context of a safe, listening ear, people need the opportunity to confess their sins. This provides the way for them to receive healing prayer (James 5:16). Such healing can only result from a committed Christian being available with the ministry of listening.

### Communication

Listening, though important, is only one side of communication. There is also a need to convey a message to the person who has been sharing. The way this happens is significant. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov 25:11). Job acknowledged, “How forceful are right words” (Job 6:25). Many little factors determine whether or not our words will be “right words” or “a word fitly spoken.”

We are to avoid hasty words (Prov 29:20) and a “multitude of words” (Prov 10:19; see also 17:27; and Eccl 5:2, 3). To help with this, we can claim the promise God

gave Moses, “I will be with your mouth” (Ex 4:12). Jesus explained how this works today as we represent Him before others. He promised that the Holy Spirit will teach us what to say (Luke 12:11, 12). As a result, God pleads with men through us (2 Cor 5:20).

We don’t have to possess all the answers. When Moses did not know the answer to a question, he asked for time to get guidance from God (Num 9:6-8). And there is no set path to take in sharing truth. Philip started where the eunuch was in teaching truth (Acts 8:34, 35). In his message in a synagogue, Paul started with common ground, then continued to new information (Acts 13:16-41).

In an unusual story of healing one blind man, Jesus performed a partial miracle, followed by complete healing (Mark 8:22-26). He may have done this to build faith for greater results. Long before this, Jacob told his brother why he needed to travel separately. He wanted to “lead on slowly” (Gen 33:14). Even receiving the promised land came piece by piece as God drove out the inhabitants bit by bit (Ex 23:29, 30).

These examples show that it can be helpful to avoid moving too far too fast when working with people. Jesus would not share more than His disciples could bear (John 16:12). He also cautioned us not to share precious truth with the spiritually unprepared (Matt 7:6).

When Jesus spoke, it was with authority (Matt 7:28, 29; Mark 1:22). He didn’t just state opinions. He told us not to brag about ourselves (Matt 6:1-4). Centuries earlier, Daniel followed this concept. He gave God credit for revealing truth (Dan 2:27, 28) and for protecting him (Dan 6:21, 22). One way we can do this on a regular basis is to talk about what God has done (Ps 77:12). This helps to build confidence.

Attitude can be conveyed with words. For example, Paul expressed confidence that Philemon (Phlm 21) and the Thessalonians (2 Thess 3:4) would do what was right. Such confidence, when expressed, can help to motivate others to do right. On the flip side, it is helpful to avoid causing strife (Prov 3:30; 20:3). Paul counseled others not to quarrel (2 Tim 2:24) and to avoid disputes (Rom 14:1; 2 Tim 2:23; Titus 3:9).

We are not to provoke people to anger (Eph 6:4). One way to defuse anger is with “a soft answer” (Prov 15:1). But even soft words are not enough if they are empty. When Gideon stirred up the wrath of people in his town, his father used logical reasoning to avert the violence that was threatened (Judg 6:28-32).

Job’s response to his friends’ words shows that we should avoid making a person feel stupid when sharing wisdom (Job 12:2, 3). And we can see, from the damaging exchange between David and Michal, that sarcasm brings a negative reaction (2 Sam 6:20-23). As James would later note, we should not grumble against each other (Jas 5:9).

Jesus had previously stated that we should also avoid name calling (Matt 5:22). But hurtful comments need to be avoided, even when the person is not present. We are to avoid spreading slander (Prov 10:18) and speaking evil about others (Titus 3:2; Jas 4:11). In keeping with this principle, we see Jesus standing up for Mary when Simon criticized her (Mark 14:3-9).

Confidentiality is important. It can be tempting to think that we are only sharing personal information with one other person. What we say in private, however, may be made public (Luke 12:2, 3). Breaking confidence harms relationships (Prov 17:9). To be faithful in reaching out to others requires us to keep confidences (Prov 11:13).

We are to avoid deception, or lying (Prov 6:16, 17, 19; 12:22; 13:5; 14:5; Zeph 3:13; Col 3:9). David's deception at Nob led to the death of most of the priests (1 Sam 21; 22). This is just one example of how deception creates more problems than it solves. Paul warns against another kind of deception. He tells of people who profess to know God but their actions deny Him (Titus 1:16). As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Paul personally avoided a softer kind of deception—flattering words (1 Thess 2:5). Flattery takes a kernel of truth and misrepresents its purpose.

In a similar way, we are to avoid telling a lie and then saying it was only a joke (Prov 26:18, 19). “Foolish talking” and “course jesting” have no place in our conversation (Eph 5:4). In fact, there should be no “corrupt word[s]” in our conversation. Rather, we are to build people up by what we say (Eph 4:29).

We are to speak the truth (Zech 8:16). But it is to be done in love (Eph 4:15). Paul spoke the truth even when it was uncomfortable (Gal 4:16). Jesus was willing to discuss embarrassing information with the woman at the well (John 4:16-18). Following this example, Paul was willing to address matters of human sexuality (1 Cor 7:1-40). One kind of truth telling is to make promises and keep them (Ps 76:11). We should be careful what we promise. Jephthah's vow stands as a warning against making rash promises (Judg 11:29-39).

Sometimes, in working with others, we face unfamiliar culture. Ruth left an example of how to deal with this. When she faced an unfamiliar culture, she followed coaching from a respected person in that culture (Ruth 3:1-5). On the other hand, it is often necessary to share unfamiliar things with another person. In dealing with this,

Samuel used illustrations based on things on location (1 Sam 15:27-29). God had Jeremiah use visible illustrations to get his point across (Jer 13:1-14; 19:1-13).

After giving the ten commandments, Moses gave 42 judgments (Ex 21:1-23:12) to the people of Israel. These were specific examples of how to apply the commandments. It can be helpful to share specific ways to apply God's word to everyday life. Stories are another way to share specific examples of applying truth. Jesus taught with questions and stories (Luke 10:25-37). On occasion, Jesus would make a passing comment which would be remembered later when it was needed (John 2:19-22).

As people share their personal journeys, it can be helpful to give them permission to be open with God, even to disagree with Him. Habakkuk's interaction with God shows we can ask God troubling questions as long as it is done in an attitude of faith (Hab 1:1-2:1). In walking down this delicate path, more than an intellectual discourse is needed. We need to follow the example of Joseph when he talked to his brothers after revealing his identity to them. Moses states that he spoke to their hearts (וידבר על־לבם; Gen 50:19-21; Holladay, 1988).

The preceding examples highlight a variety of small details that have an effect on communication. Sometimes positive, little details are not even noticed—unless they are missing. In addition, a number of small issues can create serious difficulty through their cumulative impact.

### Accountability

Another aspect of working with people is the matter of accountability. This functions in several ways. On the one side, it can involve helping the other person to recognize his accountability. In a culture that seeks to blame others, this can be a delicate



task. When Paul called the Jews in Rome to accountability, he appealed to a known standard—the law (Rom 2:17-29). When Samuel called Saul to accountability, Saul attempted to justify himself (1 Sam 15:13-21). Samuel then stated God’s perspective on the matter (1 Sam 15:22, 23).

On the other side, accountability rests on God’s representative. When God sends a warning, if the messenger does not give the warning, he bears responsibility for the outcome (Ezek 3:16-21; 33:1-11). This accountability for a leader is not only in how she relates to God. It also involves the leader relating to others. It often includes giving some kind of report. When Jesus sent out the twelve apostles, He had them give a report of their work (Mark 6:30). Paul and Barnabas gave reports of their mission work (Acts 14:27; 15:2-4).

In addition, a sense of accountability before God influences the way in which a leader works. Paul notes that in doing God’s work, things should “be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40). Though this comment is actually part of instructions on speaking in tongues, the basic principle would also apply to interactions between leaders and their people. Elsewhere, he challenged people to do good “especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal 6:10). This indicates that it is good for us to focus on believers, not just on evangelizing outsiders.

The matter of accountability indicates that a leader should not seek a minimum standard for himself. In His comments about marriage and divorce, Jesus revealed the opposite. He showed that sometimes what appears to be permission is merely a means to limit harm while God expects an even higher standard (Matt 19:1-9). In a similar way, accountability may cause us to let go of our rights at times. In the matter of paying the

temple tax, Jesus did what could not be required of Him in order to keep peace (Matt 17:24-27).

### Help on the Journey

Interacting with people should not leave them feeling abandoned on their spiritual journey. Jesus told a story about God bringing us the word. This story used the illustration of a man planting seed. In the story, or parable, seed that fell on different kinds of soil represented God's word reaching different kinds of people (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23). Some slipped away when things got tough (seed on rocky soil). Some were squeezed out by cares of the world (seed on soil with weeds). But their destinies did not have to be hopeless.

People need support. Paul indicated that spiritual people have the job of restoring those who are overtaken by sin (Gal 6:1). This is to be done with a spirit of gentleness. We are to bear with each other (Col 3:13) and bear each other's burdens (Gal 6:2). This can be needed for a variety of reasons. For example, when people begin to follow God, things often get worse for them. This happened when Israel was preparing to leave Egypt (Exod 5:1-21). And in times of distress, it can seem like God is unfair or that He has turned on you. Job certainly felt this way (Job 19:1-20).

People may need coaching to move in a different direction. They may be focused on the negative. Paul indicated that we are to "put away bitterness" (Eph 4:31). This is very hard to do. Outside help is often required. Elsewhere, there is a warning against the root of bitterness which causes trouble (Heb 12:15). If such a root is in a man's life, it is unlikely that he will be able to remove it alone.

Moses warned people not to carry grudges or to seek revenge (Lev 19:18). In fact, throughout scripture, we are told that it is not our job to avenge. That is God's job (Deut 32:35; Ps 94:1, 2; Heb 10:30, 31; Rev 16:4-7; 18:20; 19:2). This is more easily said than done. Recognizing this challenge, God set up a way for a priest to mediate when a husband accused his wife of unfaithfulness (Num 5:11-31). The need for mediation like this did not end after Christ lived among us.

Jesus taught people to seek reconciliation when there were problems (Matt 5:24, 25). Paul went so far as to say that God gives a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). Paul exercised this ministry in the situation with Onesimus (Phlm 12-16). As a part of such work, Paul asked believers in Philippi to "be of the same mind" (Phil 3:16). Two of these believers seem to have been involved in an ongoing dispute. Paul urged them by name to "be of the same mind in the Lord" (Phil 4:2).

There is one, interesting example of giving help in the journey. When Israel was settling in the promised land, the two and a half tribes east of the river built a large altar (Josh 22:10). Their actions were badly misunderstood by the others (Josh 22:11, 12). What happened next is an example worth following.

Representatives were sent to the group that seemed to be causing the trouble. These representatives explained their specific concerns (Josh 22:13-20). They gave a chance for the others to explain their motives (Josh 22:21-29). They reflected their corrected understanding to the ones they met (Josh 22:30, 31). Then they returned to report to the main group (Josh 22:32, 33). These same steps can help in defusing difficult matters between people.

## **A Biblical Perspective on the Specific Interview Process**

Based on the biblical passages surveyed above, the following picture of church attendance emerges. Lost people matter to God. They should also matter to us. God calls us to seek those who are lost. This is not limited to people who were never part of the group. It includes those who have been a part of the group.

God relates to us as a being Who is all-powerful and distant. He also relates to us as One who is close and personal. True worship takes in both aspects of who God is. We worship in the larger group, and in smaller groups or as individuals. There is something lost when either aspect is left out. For some people, meeting with the group seems unnecessary. This denies part of how God seeks to relate to us.

Part of who we are is related to the group to which we belong. The biblical concept of corporate identity is often overlooked by people who emphasize individualism. We need to worship together on a regular basis. In fact, God chooses to meet with His people when they gather together. To avoid this experience is to miss something God intends for His people.

Being a part of the group can lead to a sense of belonging. This includes more than book membership. It also involves a kind of attitude. It results from being meaningfully connected with fellow believers. When people drift from regular, corporate worship, they lose something in their spiritual life. They may not be aware of what they are missing.

The Bible indirectly addresses how to reach out to these individuals. The sections which describe God judging people reveal a basic process that can be helpful for pastors.

God's judgment involved at least four aspects. He investigated what was happening. He inquired. He presented options. And He rebuked, warned, or corrected the people.

In a similar way, we are not to jump to conclusions. We are first to investigate what is happening. This should lead to inquiry, or asking questions. But it does not end here. There is a place for presenting options to people. These options may help to bring issues into focus. Where necessary, warnings can be included. People may not have considered the direction their choices will take them.

This work has risks. One of the risks is that the person reaching out will come with the wrong attitude. He needs to take time for personal preparation before seeking to help others. This includes ensuring that his attitudes and thoughts are right. For example, he needs to have an internal desire to reconnect people to "the body of Christ." And he definitely must spend significant time in prayer.

The very process of seeking people can unintentionally drive them away. There is a need to avoid certain specific behaviors which would communicate wrong messages to the person who has stopped attending services. Interacting with these people requires really listening to them and doing it in a way that lets them know they have been heard. It also involves communicating in ways that will actually make sense to the individuals involved.

We have personal accountability in the process. At the same time, we must always honor the choice of these people. But we do not have to remain uninvolved in the process. There is a place to make personal appeals for specific outcomes. In addition, people sometimes find themselves in positions where they cannot make needed adjustments on their own. They may need help in their journey.

Working with a non-attending member goes beyond finding what prevents the person from being meaningfully connected to the church. It seeks to create a path back to fellowship. It communicates a sense of belonging. It provides tools to address specific areas of brokenness. Such tools can also assist in preventing a future drift from active involvement in the life of the church.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW ON MATTERS RELATING TO DEFINING MINISTRY TO BENEFIT NON-ATTENDING CHURCH MEMBERS

Why do people stop attending church? What can be done to win them back? Like the theological reflections of the previous chapter, this third chapter begins with a look at the meaning and significance of the corporate experience. It also ends by looking at the needed preparation of the person reaching out and the skills which are necessary for interacting with people who no longer attend church. The central sections are different.

In the Bible, some insights were discovered by seeing what happened in the context of God's judgment. In contemporary literature, these insights are contained in discussions of why people stop attending church. These thoughts are considered through a look at various categories of non-attending members. The heart of this chapter is a section investigating factors that influence a process to draw members back.

Though there is a look at current writings on this matter, a number of authors from the past have offered angles on the topic which are not well represented in more current literature. Some of their insights are sprinkled through the comments which follow. In addition, some significant studies of this matter cast a long shadow on the subject. Men like Fordyce Detamore, Fred Cornforth, Tim Lale, Mark Finley, Roger

Dudley and Gerhard Knutson have provided invaluable knowledge through their research or personal interaction with non-attending members.

Over several decades, people realized that there is a lot of misunderstanding about members not attending church. Attendance problems can be concealed by such things as a full sanctuary that has no room for all to attend (Christensen, 1961, p. 8). Sometimes, church leaders do not want to know why people do not attend (Duin, 2008, p. 123). Often, people give opinions for why attendance is down. But these opinions can be inaccurate (Gill, 2003, p. 2).

Every church is “only one generation away from extinction” (Dudley, 2000, p. 120; Gane, 2010, p. 13). It stands to reason that keeping people in the church should be seen as important as evangelizing them in the first place” (N. Brown, 2011, p. 9; Burrill, 2009, p. 29; Cress, 2005, p. 131; Wright, 1970, p. 42). Yet we live in a time when “most people no longer attend church weekly” (Burrill, 2009, p. 15). “Only about 50 percent of all [Seventh-day Adventist] members attend weekly worship services” (Cress, 2010, p. 74). Another 25 to 30% do not attend even once a year (Kellner, 2009, p. 17).

Richardson specializes in reaching out to non-attending Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs). He estimates there are about one million such SDAs in North America. About 350,000 no longer have church membership. Another 650,000 do not even come to church once a month (Richardson, 2012a). Richardson’s assistant, Rittenour, notes that there are more non-attending SDAs than attending ones (Rittenour, 2012). Yet these non-attending members still have a significant influence on the local congregation and they communicate to the community (Richardson, 2012a).



There are different perspectives on the spiritual position of non-attending members. Thomas sees non-attending members as being part of the Kingdom of God (2003, p. 143). In contrast, an opinion poll of Seventh-day Adventists in the South Pacific Division showed that at least two thirds considered church attendance as related to salvation (South Pacific Division, 2010). Based on insights from the previous chapter of this project, corporate worship is an important and necessary part of Christian experience. To miss it is to move further from God.

Often, there is an emphasis on getting a greater number of people to attend church rather than focusing on why a particular person is not attending (Christensen, 1961, pp. 71-117; Gill, 2003; Hyles, 1958; Macnair, 2009, p. 15; Rainer, 1999; Schaller, 1988; Columbia Union Conference, 2011, April and June). In this vein, some see reaching non-attending members to be a waste of time, saying it is better to seek new converts (Searcy & Henson, 2007, p. 100) or to plant new churches (Wagner, 1989, pp. 168, 169).

Others sought to reclaim non-attending members as part of their life passion (Cress, 2010; Detamore, 1965/1993; Dudley, 2000; Duin, 2008; Finley, 1994; Richardson, 2005, 2012a, 2012b; Rittenour, 2012). Schoun notes that the world Seventh-day Adventist Church has currently structured activities to “highlight nurture and retention [of members]” (Schoun, 2012, p. 27). So why is church attendance important?

### **The Need for Corporate Worship**

What a difference a few decades can make. Christensen (1961, p. 25) and Wagner (1989, p. 23) state that being a Christian is something that happens in community. Rainer (1999, p. 11) notes that New Testament Christians became active members of local churches.

Years later, Barna overstates his case by saying that the Bible does not require us to worship God in a church meeting (2005, p. 114). Barna's point is that we are called to *be* the church rather than to *attend* a church (2005, p. 129). And he does believe that "a spiritually healthy local church will always have a valid and valuable role" in God's plan (2005, p. 36). But he sees this role to be optional since other forms of Christian community can replace it (Barna, 2005, pp. 61, 94, 112, 113).

Why should a person attend church? We need each other (Martin, 2008, p. 29). One important reason for corporate worship is that in such worship, God meets with His people in a different way than when they worship alone (Beckham, 1995, p. 142; Foster, 1998, p. 164). In addition, when God works, He does His work through His people in community (Beckham, 1995, p. 135; Lucas, 2008; p. 91; Self, 2012, p. 11).

Regular church attendance helps us to grow spiritually (Hoyt, 2007, pp. 2, 29; Mallory, 2001, pp. 67, 68; Martin, 1992, pp. 79, 84; Wright, 2010, p. 27). It brings the blessing of being in a "family of believers" (Deming, 2008, p. 40; K. Farnsworth & Farnsworth, 2005, p. 46). Such a family provides acceptance (Christensen, 1961, p. 37; Dudley, 2000, p. 147; Kidder, 2011, p. 144). It also enables the believer to find weaknesses to weed out (Robinson, 2012, p. 9). In addition, it brings moral responsibilities (Bosch, 1991, p. 117) and the opportunity to learn new spiritual truths (Robinson, 2012, p. 9). And this spiritual family helps provide strength, support, encouragement, and healing (Hawkins, 2001, p. 17; Long, 1997, p. 172; Wilson, 2011, pp. 9, 10; Wright, 2010, p. 31).

Human contact is one of the important benefits of church attendance (Duin, 2008, p. 55). God created people to live in community (Gibbs, 2000, p. 233; Hawkins, 2001, p.

7). God Himself lives in community as taught by the doctrine of the Trinity (Grenz, 1993, p. 188; Long, 1997, p. 84; McNeal, 2003, pp. 82, 83). LaMountain cites studies showing that active involvement in a church can lead to greater health and happiness (2011, p. 4).

Corporate worship rehearses our relationship with God (Grenz, 1993, p. 55; Vann, 2011, p. 15). As such, corporate worship grows from our private, individual time with Him (Burrill, 2004, p. 95; Hudgins, 2012, pp. 15, 16). It provides a context to bring God praise (Kidder, 2011, 140). Such worship can provide the chance to hear God's call (Long, 1997, p. 51). It also prepares people to minister to others (Gemmell, 2012, p. 21; Kidder, 2011, p. 140).

In short, these various reasons for corporate worship can be summarized into three categories. First, we need such worship because God expects us to approach Him in this manner. Second, such worship causes us to grow spiritually in a variety of significant ways. Third, such worship also has a positive impact on emotional and even physical health.

### Belonging

People have a natural need for a sense of belonging (Heard, 2010, pp. 158-160; Long, 1997, p. 82; Ripley, 2007, pp. 37, 38). The sense of this need is heightened by multiple alienations (Hunter, 1992, p. 49). Thomas says that believing is belonging (2003, p. 14). He sees two kinds of belonging. Some people "belong by participation" and others "belong by association" (2003, p. 88). Non-attending members are among those who belong by association.

Turner has a very different perspective. He sees believing and belonging as not being synonymous (1987, p. 49). Ripley builds in this direction by stating that people

need to belong before they will believe (2007, pp. 36, 37, 70). Halfhill concurs with Ripley, and gives biblical examples of Jesus helping people belong before they could believe (2012, pp. 10, 11). It would seem that to fully belong, a person needs to believe. But believing is only possible in the context of belonging, even if this belonging is not complete.

A sense of belonging can be revealed by subtle cues. People who sense they belong refer to other church members as *we* or *us*, whereas those who do not sense such belonging refer to other members as *they* or *them* (Schoun, 2012, p. 28). To help foster this sense of belonging, it is important to know people by name (Duin, 2008, p. 104). In addition, the church does not really belong to a person until he or she invests personal time (Burrill, 2009, p. 82). It would seem that consciously implementing these subtle actions could help to draw people into the circle.

### Fragmentation and Compartmentalization

A person can address issues through an integrated approach. Or he can isolate different aspects and work on them separately (Swenson, 1992, pp. 47, 48). This is a kind of compartmentalization. Such compartmentalization in life can result in religious faith becoming marginalized (Gibbs, 2000, p. 22). Even church life can encourage compartmentalization (p. 232).

Too much choice can lead to fragmentation (Long, 1997, p. 51). Some non-attending members feel fragmented and spiritually disconnected (Dudley, 2000, p. 98). Fragmented lives or families lead people to use compartmentalization (Kidder, 2011, p. 72; Mittelberg, 2000, p. 46). And so it appears that corporate worship and a sense of belonging stand in contrast to fragmentation. Perhaps they serve as its antidote.

## Typical Factors Behind Non-attendance

There is no single cause for people to stop attending church (Dudley, 2000, p. 214; Martin, 1992, p. 86). In all fairness, Dudley's major research in young people dropping out of church did not primarily address the issue of non-attending members. It focused on factors leading people to no longer be members (Dudley, 2000, p. 90).

People who are currently attending church sometimes comment on why others are not attending. It is interesting to note that reasons for non-attendance cited by people attending church do not match the reasons cited by those who are not attending church (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 5). It is challenging to sort through the actual reasons for not attending (Hudgins, 2012, p. 17). In fact, non-attending members will often mention things that bother them about the church but these things are not necessarily "the real, underlying cause for non-attendance" (Murrow, 2005, pp. 3, 113, 114).

Sometimes, the non-attending member is not clearly aware of the underlying reasons for his action. These can be based on perceptions rather than fact. But "perception is reality for the perceiver" (Gane, 2010, p. 16). Additionally, "most reasons for leaving church are not objectively logical but are subjectively meaningful" (Rittenour, 16 March 2012). If we care about people, we will want to know why they are not attending church (Mallory, 2001, p. 75). And learning what has taken them away will help us "want to reach back to them" (Richardson, 2012a).

## The Dropout Process

There tends to be a basic process involved in a person becoming a non-attending member. It begins with some kind of event that causes stress or anxiety. This is followed by attempts, often subtle, for these individuals to reach out to people in the church—

especially to reach out to leaders. When people do not reach back, the person feels upset by the lack of response. This leads to decreased involvement and decreased attendance.

When there is still no response, the person resigns from positions. Then there is a waiting period of six to eight weeks. If there is still no contact, the person invests his time, money, and talents somewhere else (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 120; Richardson, 2012a). Unfortunately, we often think the person needs a little space to think. But he really wants to be noticed and desires contact (Richardson, 2012a).

### **Categories of Non-attending Church Members**

To address an issue, it is often helpful to identify major categories of complaints (Wrenn, Kotler, & Shawchuck, 2010, p. 234). Perceptions need to be tested with reality checks (Boers, 1999, p. 127). There is a need to make sure we are not “losing members for the wrong reasons” (Mallory, 2001, p. 68). In looking at non-attending members, the most basic division is between two kinds: “those who are difficult to reclaim and those who are easier to reclaim” (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 15). In the following sections, a number of basic kinds of factors for non-attendance are addressed.

#### **Four Personalities of Members**

Richardson observes that there are four basic kinds of people in the church. He calls them four personalities (2012a). He describes how these different personalities relate to challenges in the church.

The *persevering* will come no matter what happens. The *artist* seeks to bring beauty to the church. When trouble comes, she slips away and waits for things to settle down. She plans to come back, but could be out for a long time. The *promoter* tries to get

people to do various things. When there are problems, he backs away. The *questioner* tries to demonstrate meaning in ways that are relevant. But this can cause frustration in others. When she notices that she makes people uncomfortable, she slips away (2012a).

### Relationships

“Christianity is by nature relational” (Duin, 2008, p. 50). It is based on love for God, neighbor, and self (Prime, 2009, pp. 26, 27). “The church must be where people are loved” (Kidder, 2011, p. 143). For many years, researchers noted that most people who stop attending church do so for relational reasons, not because of doctrine (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 5; Dudley, 2000, p. 99; Gane, 2010, p. 56; Richardson, 2012a; Rittenour, 2012).

Relationships have to do with connections. Strangely, being more connected electronically often leaves us more disconnected on a personal basis (Sweet, 2000, p. 115; Wrenn et al., 2010, p. 379). The lack of connection feels even worse when surrounded by people—causing a special kind of loneliness (Clark, 2011, p. 26; Dudley, 2000, p. 54; Duin, 2008, p. 50; Lien, 2012, p. 4; Mallory, 2001, p. 70).

People feel a lack of connection when they have no chance for their stories to be heard (Hammond, 2001, p. 88). When people feel they do not belong, they stop attending (Burrill, 2009, p. 42; Kellner, 2009, p. 17; Lucas, 2008, p. 44; Martin, 1992, p. 87; Ripley, 2007, pp. 69, 70; Schaller, 1988, p. 21; Turner, 1987, p. 123). This sometimes happens when newcomers arrive with different cultures (Wells, Giese, & Klassen, 2005, pp. 23-25). Or it can happen when an itinerant preacher builds himself up rather than connecting new believers with local church leaders (Cress, 2005, p. 67).

Another relationship issue has to do with interpersonal conflict. People often stop attending after conflict with another member, or a church leader (Cress, 2010, p. 74; Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 6; Schoun, 2012, 28; Turner, 1987, pp. 19, 37, 38). Sometimes, this is a matter of protecting turf (Richardson, 2012b, p. 17; Ripley, 2007, p. 74). At times, it is due to various kinds of abuse (Hammond, 2001, pp. 39-43) including sexual abuse (Gane, 2010, p. 27; Hammond, 2001, pp. 38, 126). When individuals have been hurt by people in the church, they tend to generalize this hurt as coming from the church (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 15, 16).

#### Doctrine and Lifestyle

When people stop attending church, they often still consider themselves to be Seventh-day Adventist (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 6; Kellner, 2009, p. 17; Rittenour, 2012). They may still believe many of the basic teachings (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 6, 7, 39; Dudley, 2000, p. 100; Rittenour, 2012). They often keep observing the Sabbath (Kellner, 2009, p. 18).

As noted above, many writers have emphasized that people tend to stop attending church because of relational reasons rather than doctrinal reasons. A few writers note that doctrine has become less important to Christians than it once was (Barna, 2001, p. 39; Gibbs, 2000, p. 162; Heard, 2010, p. 123). Nash cites a new study which reveals a different picture for SDAs. This study shows that the primary reason that SDAs stop attending church is no longer relational. It is primarily related to doctrine (2013, p. 18).

In my own formal interviews with non-attending members, only two people indicated doctrinal reasons for non-attendance. In informal conversations with other non-



attending members, the picture was much different. Many more revealed doctrinal reasons for disconnecting.

This 2011 study was conducted by Lisa Goolsby. Of the 600 former members invited to participate, 190 responded (Nash, 2013, p. 18). In response to this new information, Monte Sahlin notes that the relational issues of the past are not as acute as they were. But these issues are still present (Nash, 2013, p. 20). He states that the shift toward doctrinal reasons for departure have come in response to evangelical critiques of SDA doctrine.

People still leave the SDA church due to relational issues. But these relational issues are often the result of how other church members treat them as they are wrestling with doctrinal matters (Nash, 2013, p. 19). Others leave the church because they want to maintain integrity and they can no longer support a system that goes against their new belief structure (Dudley, 2008, p. 14; Nash, 2013, p. 19). Sometimes, it is less a matter of integrity, and more a product of the natural questioning which young people experience as they begin to assert their independence from parents (Dudley, 2000, pp. 197, 219; Gane, 2010, pp. 15, 16; Richardson, 2012a).

People need the opportunity to personally wrestle with their beliefs (Dudley, 2000, pp. 115, 178, 220; Gane, 2010, p. 76; Hammond, 2001, p. 118; Kotter, 1996, pp. 99, 100; Long, 1997, p. 193; Lucas, 2008, p. 48; Rittenour, 2012; Wagner, 1989, p. 95). They need to feel accepted, even when we do not condone their behavior (Dudley, 2000, p. 118; Long, 1997, p. 169; Lucas, 2008, pp. 67, 113, 140; Malphurs, 1998, p. 355; Richardson, 2012b, p. 17). This comes as a part of a grace orientation (Dudley, 2000, pp.

59, 144). People need to know they are wanted (Lale & Habada, 1998, pp. 35-42; Nash, 2013, p. 19).

Leaving over doctrine can happen when a person is struggling with addiction (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 20; Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 7; Lale & Habada, 1998, pp. 27-34) or sexual issues (Dudley, 2000, pp. 65, 66; Duin, 2008, p. 35; Long, 1997, p. 168), or is in some other way not living up to what the Bible requires (Liversidge, 2009, p. 200; Paulien, 2000, p. 65). The judgmental response of other members can cause her to stop attending (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 41; Dudley, 2000, pp. 3, 61, 64; Heard, 2010, p. 126; Liversidge, 2009, p. 37).

The moving away from SDA doctrine can be the result of incomplete work when the person was evangelized (Burrill, 2009, pp. 76, 77, 102; Cress, 2005, p. 134). Or it can come as “right wing” groups pull members to something that is seen as an improvement over SDA doctrine (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 72; Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 20; Lale & Habada, 1998, pp. 111-122). It can sometimes be in response to seeing the hypocritical behavior of others in the church (Dudley, 2000, p. 61; Duin, 2008, pp. 27, 28; Gane, 2010, p. 16).

A related matter is a lack of participation. People long to participate (Gibbs, 2000, p. 154; Grenz, 1993, p. 169). At the same time, churches often do not provide sufficient participation (Duin, 2008, p. 51). People feel left out (Knutson, 1979, p. 5). This can lead them to stop attending (Beaumont, 2011, pp. 171, 172; Boers, 1999, p. 23; Mallory, 2001, p. 71; Rittenour, 2012). On the flip side, when a person chooses to be uninvolved, it can be an indication that he or she is on the way out (Boers, 1999, p. 125; Gane, 2010, p. 15).

Members may stop attending church when there are differences over vision or values (Duin, 2008, p. 133; McNeal, 2000, p. 156). Sometimes those who are the most immature end up dictating church direction (Beckham, 1995, p. 45). Churches can become preoccupied with the past (Stephens, 1989, p. 109). This can happen when a church is planted and “takes on the characteristics of the generation that planted it.” Later generations do not feel at home with the original traditions (Burrill, 2004, pp. 32, 33). When this leads to decline, people express different views on why such decline is happening. There is no real study about the matter, only voiced opinions (pp. 47, 48).

Some people consider themselves to be spiritual without church attendance being part of the picture (Barna, 2005, pp. 2-8, 61, 94, 112, 113; Cornforth & Lale, 1995, pp. 77-81; Dudley, 2000, pp. 42, 43, 48; Duin, 2008, p. 112; Hudgins, 2012, p. 15; Kidder, 2011, p. 67; McNeal, 2003, p. 18; Turner, 1987, p. 24).

On the other hand, people may stop attending when they lack a real connection with God (Brown, Pursey, Goodfellow, Jochum, Koopmann, & Tranel, 2005, pp. 19, 20; Christensen, 1961, p. 45; Dudley, 2000, p. 117; Martin, L., 1992, pp. 79, 80). This can involve a process of secularization (Parker, 1971, p. 45; Paulien, 2000, p. 63). Unfortunately, the church itself can become more secular (Barna, 2001, pp. 81, 82; Hunter, 1992, pp. 24, 32; Richardson, 24 July 2012).

Our society has shifted to where people are very focused on their own individual needs. There is a kind of consumerism in their approach to matters of the church. This can affect attendance (Barna, 2005, p. 62; Long, 1997, p. 97; Rainer, 1999, pp. 27, 130; Sjogren, Ping, & Pollock, 2004, p. 184; Turner, 1987, pp. 44-49). Sometimes the concern

is expressed as a lack of relevance for church in their lives (Daniels, 2010; Dudley, 2000, pp. 22, 62; Gane, 2010, p. 23). Actually, there is no perfect church (Miles, 2009, p. 20).

### Difficulties or Stress

Difficulties or stress can lead to people not attending church. This could involve trauma, even if it is indirect (Hammond, 2001, pp. 55-62). On the other hand, such things sometimes point people back to church, as happened after the 911 terrorist attacks. But those post-trauma returns can also be short-lived (Duin, 2008, p. 13). Difficulties can also be of a more local nature, like crime in the neighborhood, parking issues, or even an aging membership (Martin, 1992, p. 5; Ripley, 2007, pp. 26, 27). They can involve insufficient seating in the sanctuary or lack of space in Sabbath School departments (Ripley, 2007, pp. 27-31).

All organizations go through a kind of life cycle. This resembles the life cycle of a person, moving from birth to growth, then decline, and eventually death (Nelson & Appel, 2000, pp. 49, 50). This life cycle can often explain the decline in attendance. A church must go through an intentional renewal process to move away from demise (p. 50).

Difficulties can involve the perceived cost for attending services. What will have to be given up in order to be present? Work? Social life (Wrenn et al., 2010, p. 371)? Some people are overwhelmed with life (Richardson, 2012a). Others are weak and fearful. These are difficult to win back (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 28). The poor sometimes feel overwhelmed by their financial difficulties (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 37, 38). Former literature evangelists and teachers have sometimes stopped attending after facing struggles and discouragement (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 21, 22).

Some leave as a result of their struggle with pain that is ignored (Boers, 1999, p. 89; Cornforth & Lale, 1995, pp. 27-29; Cress, 2010, p. 74; Duin, 2008, p. 49). If they cannot grieve in the church, they grieve out of the church (Hammond, 2001, p. 119). And it is not enough to provide positive things. Swenson explains that “if the negatives are sufficiently dangerous, they cannot be offset by the positives, no matter how beneficial the positives are” (1992, pp. 51, 52). Though he was addressing another matter, this principle can be seen at work among non-attending members.

One kind of difficulty is distance. Some people are like nomads—always on the move (Turner, 1987, pp. 44-49). Relocation is disruptive and often results in people not attending church (Burrill, 2009, p. 85; Lucas, 2008, p. 46). Membership transfers are a high drop-out time (Rittenour, 2012). In some rare cases, a church disbands while someone is away. His membership gets lost in the shuffle (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 37). In occasional situations, a person is only “distant” by a lack of transportation. This individual may merely need a ride to church (Duin, 2008, pp. 9, 10).

Medical issues create another kind of difficulty. Some people are too sick to attend (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 39). They often need ministry conducted in their homes (Cress, 2005, p. 101). Mental illness can cause people to be detached from the church (Hammond, 2001, pp. 69-73).

Sometimes hobbies, habits, or work take so much time they limit a person’s church attendance (Omri, 2011, p. 147). Schedules fill up and people become too busy for church (Arrais, 2011, p. 71; Detamore, 1965/1993, 30; Dudley, 2000, p. 65; Hunter, 1992, p. 70). “Trying to choose everything ends up being a choice for nothing” (Tabb, 2004, p. 37). Exhaustion becomes a limiting factor (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 67). The

medical profession is especially at risk for busyness crowding out church attendance (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 17, 18). Farmers also face such issues on a seasonal basis (Yackel-Juleen, 2002, p. 73).

The early years of raising children are especially busy, and thus impact church attendance (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 24, 25). And a publically recognized person cannot have vacation and attend a local church. He will be worked (Paulien, 2000, p. 64). People under pressure sometimes get out of the habit of attending church (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 66).

Loneliness is one of the most common human feelings (Knutson, 1979, p. 11). Singles often struggle with church attendance (Cress, 2005, p. 109; Duin, 2008, p. 23). There is very little ministry for singles (Duin, 2008, pp. 83-86). They may leave the church when they see people do not care about their desire to be married (pp. 90-94). They often feel troubled that “they didn’t have anyone to go to church with” (Dudley, 2000, pp. 62, 63).

Still another kind of difficulty can come from family or friends. Some people leave the church when urged to do so by others (Boers, 1999, p. 23). Or sometimes, a person stops attending because her spouse does not attend (Detamore 1965/1993, p. 23; Parker, 1971, p. 24), or her parents do not attend (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 21, 38, 39; Dudley, 2000, p. 71). In a different way, when family lets us down, there is greater pressure “for the church to meet our unmet needs” (Boers, 1999, p. 22). Such an expectation may go unrealized.

## **Factors Influencing the Process of Working With Non-attending Members**

Many details can be a part of a person's decision to be a non-attending member. But what might be needed to reach back? A variety of factors influence the process. Though some seem unrelated at first. They each have a role to play. A number of the references which follow are not addressing church attendance. However, the principles they reveal help to support reasons behind a process of needed change.

Often it is little things that can make a difference—positive or negative (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 46; Finley, 1994, p. 47; Kennedy, 2009, p. 117; Sjogren, Ping, & Pollock, 2004, p. 155). Rather than seeking to make big changes, aim for progress over time (Merrill & Merrill, 2003, p. 21; Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 119; Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002, pp. 99, 222, 230). Small changes, carefully applied, can make a big difference (Gladwell, 2000, pp. 146, 256, 257).

There is an impact on the ones who reach out to non-attending members. The work is difficult, consumes a lot of time, and requires patience (Hammond, 2001, pp. 147, 152, 157; Turner, 1987, p. 101). People doing this kind of work need support (Richardson, 2012a). This kind of work requires self-differentiation (Hawkins, 2001, pp. 39, 40; McNeal, 2000, p. 163). “Self-differentiation involves defining yourself while staying in touch with others. It means being responsive to others without becoming responsible for them” (Hawkins, 2001, p. 110; see also Boers, 1999, p. 48).

This kind of work is so challenging that it should not be the only focus or it will burn out the ones doing the visits (Rittenour, 2012). In the end, we cannot bring every non-attending member back (Lucas, 2008, p. 43). Building trust requires a lot of time (Cress, 2010, p. 76; Long, 1997, p. 53; Richardson, 2012a; Sjogren, et al., 2004, p. 68).

This cannot just be added to already busy schedules. Something will have to be given up in order to create time for this kind of ministry (Hyles, 1958, pp. 19, 21; McNeal, 2000, p. 59; Merrill & Merrill, 2003, pp. 68, 147; Swenson, 1992, p. 217; Vann, 2011, p. 9).

The person reaching out needs to take care of himself to prevent burn-out (Hybels & Mittelberg, 1994, p. 76). He needs to recognize his limitations (Covey, 1989, p. 277; Malphurs, 1998, p. 352; Rusaw & Swanson, 2004, p. 167). We need to protect others who join us in this ministry (McNeal, 2000, p. 85; Swenson, 1992, p. 81). As an illustration of this issue, the SDA *Church Manual* states that “the clerk should correspond frequently with absent members” (General Conference 2010, p. 168). But this involves too many people for one individual to handle. The work should be spread out.

#### Size and Limits

One factor that calls for greater consideration is the impact of size and limits. We are “overwhelmed by people clamoring for our attention” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 98). Eighty percent of the members lean on the working 20% (Beckham, 1995, p. 44). Why is it that congregations become uncomfortable when they grow past a certain size (Giese, 2002, p. 51)?

Things bog down as communication lines multiply. “The formula for group communication lines is  $N \times N - (N) = CL$ . ‘N’ stands for the number of persons and ‘CL’ represents communication lines.” (Beckham, 1995, p. 63). Using this formula, a group of three people has six communication lines. A group of 12 people has 132 communication lines. It obviously becomes very much more complicated to maintain additional lines of communication as a few more people are added to the group.



Robin Dunbar did research on group size and group limits (Beaumont, 2011, p. 25). He noticed that there are upper limits to what size a group can be and still function as that type of group. This became known as the Dunbar Effect (pp. 25, 26). For example, “150 is the maximum group size for meaningful human interaction. Beyond this, it is too complicated to connect with any degree of significance” (Gladwell, 2000, pp. 179, 180).

The Hutterites had noticed this concept years ago. As a result, they learned to split a community and start a new colony when the group reached 150 members (pp. 181, 182). Gore Associates adjusts for this principle. When one of their branches reaches 150 workers, it will divide (Gladwell, pp. 183-187). Congregations should take note of the Dunbar effect. When they cross the 150 member mark, it is a small change that has a major impact (pp. 182, 183).

Theodore Johnson “worked within the Dunbar Effect to name three basic building blocks in congregational life” (as cited in Beaumont, 2011, p. 26). He noted that the outer limits for group effectiveness are: 150 for a community, 75 for a family or clan, and 15 for a care and support group (p. 26). Actually, these are the outer limits. Things begin to break down before reaching these limits.

Beaumont describes how these groups work in a church (2011). The “sympathy group” consists of between nine and 25 individuals (p. 29). But for effective care and support, the limit is 12. The difference between 12 and 15 is painfully felt (p. 29). Others note these limitations. Things break down beyond the basic unit of five to fifteen (Beckham, 1995, p. 71). When churches are small, they function as single cells and have no room to accept new people (Hoyt, 2007, pp. 71, 72; Stephens, 1989, pp. 10, 11, 78).

Jesus regularly ministered directly to 12 people (Turner, 1987, p. 27). These principles have led to the formation of small groups for church growth.

The next size group is a family or clan. It has 25 to 75 individuals and is often intergenerational (Beaumont, 2011, p. 30). To actually function well, the “outer threshold limit” for a clan group is about 50 (p. 31). And if the group exceeds 75, it can no longer maintain itself as a clan (p. 32).

Between 50 and 150 people, the group functions as a community (p. 32). Such a group involves a broad group identity and gives its people a sense of belonging. But it cannot provide the care of the sympathy group (p. 32). When the size of a group increases beyond its upper threshold or decreases below its lower limit, things do not function well (pp. 33, 44). Burrill seems to recognize these groups when he talks about celebration happening in the larger group, a congregation being about 50 people, and cells being ten to twelve people (2009, p. 4).

Beckham observes that the creation story shows two sides of how God relates to us (1995, pp. 84-86). God is both transcendent (Genesis 1) and immanent (Genesis 2). Beckham describes what he calls a two-winged church. One wing represents the large group worship. The other wing represents small groups. There is a problem when either side is missing (1995, pp. 25, 26). Schoun notes that “the transition from membership to fellowship often begins with a simple invitation to participate in smaller circles in which people are more directly involved with others in study, sharing, ministry tasks, or leadership roles” (2012, p. 28).

As a result of the Dunbar Effect, it is apparent that problems with church attendance are partly related to group size. Something needs to be done to provide people

the chance to regularly experience each kind of group: care and support, family and clan, and community. It appears that the group most difficult to create and maintain is the care and support group.

### Connecting

A related concept involves connecting. Connectors build relationships between people (Beaumont, 2011, p. 180). And they know a lot of people (Gladwell, 2000, p. 38). The *kind* of people they know is significant (p. 46). For example, notice the difference in outcome between the ride of Paul Revere and the ride of William Dawes. They both rode through many towns. But few people were prepared as a result of William Dawes ride. Many were prepared by Paul Revere's ride. The difference was that Paul Revere was a connector (pp. 30-88). Connectors can bring together people from different worlds (p. 51).

It seems that it is not enough for people to slip into a sanctuary and sit through a service. In order to receive the blessing the church has to offer, people need to relate on the basis of both community, and sympathy group. They need one-on-one contact (Finzel, 1994, pp. 38, 49). There must be some way to connect each member with a few others on a regular basis. Perhaps this is one reason why the *SDA Minister's Handbook* states that the church should have "an intentional network of spiritual guardians for new members" (General Conference, 2009, pp. 119, 120). People need connections if they are going to stay involved.

## Pain and Suffering

One thing non-attending members have in common is pain (Turner, 1987, p.11). Rather than trying to change the church so they want to come back, it could be helpful to address the underlying cause—pain (Boers, 1999, p. 110). A fascinating insight on pain comes from the field of running. Fitzgerald notes that there is a difference between pain and suffering (2007, p. 156). Pain is the raw sensation of discomfort. Suffering “is a layer of emotional unpleasantness that emerges from the [individual’s] conscious reaction to pain” (p. 156). Two people with the same pain can experience different suffering.

He goes on to describe how to reduce suffering. This involves two main tasks. First, a person must learn to embrace the pain. Second, the person needs to practice suffering. This means to “habituate [the] brain to the specific aspects of pain so that it will not generate as much suffering from the same amount of pain” (pp. 157-159). He teaches a variety of specific tasks to help the runner become habituated to the pain.

When different church members face the same difficulties, they react differently. Some stay. Some go. It would seem that though they had the same pain, they experienced different suffering (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 185). This could be since “our perception of [a] stressor damages us more than the stressor itself” (Swenson, 1992, p. 65). There must be a way to do the same thing for church members that Fitzgerald does for runners. They could be taught to accept the pain. They could become habituated to various aspects of the pain so that they could remain in the church.

We could prepare people to have a positive experience even though there are difficulties or problems in the church (Miles, 2009, pp. 19-22). There are no wrinkle-free shirts. But some shirts can be wrinkle resistant (Steinbron, 1997, p. 102). We should be

able to train members to become dropout resistant. One step in this process could be to help people gain a sense of having control over their situations (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 89). And, where possible, we can take time to identify various sources of frustration so they can be addressed (Kennedy, 2009, p. 116).

### Proactive Approach

Much of what is discussed in reclaiming non-attending members has to do with making churches safe for their return (Arrais, 2007, p. 76; Burrill, 2009, p. 49; Christensen, 1961, pp. 37, 43; Dick & Miller, 2003, p. 19; Farnsworth, 2005, p. 29; Gane, 2010, p. 58; Lale & Habada, 1998, p. 160; Lucas, 2008, pp. 15, 16; Murrow, 2005, p. 148; Richardson in Lale & Habada, 1998, p. 8; Stephens, 1989, p. 113). An example of such an approach is spelled out in the *Natural Church Development* resources (Schwarz, 2000).

A related, yet different, program which is designed specifically for Seventh-day Adventists is provided by the *Center for Youth Evangelism*. The safety net that was created has been called, *Church of Refuge*. In order to be a *church of refuge*, a local congregation needs to adhere to specific core values (details are available at their web site: <http://www.cye.org/cor/>).

Each of these programs is built on the premise that the church must be made safe in order for people to attend. To become safe, a church may have to go through a variety of changes. When these changes are made, it is much easier for non-attending members to return to the church. But the church is made up of sinners. And as more non-attending members return, they will bring their problems. It seems that providing tools to deal with

pain would be at least as important—maybe even more important—than making other adjustments in the church.

Self-centered people are never satisfied (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, p. 45). In America, people blame everything and everyone but themselves (Gibbs, 2000, p. 62). Rather than seeking to cater to every want, it would be well to help people become proactive. “Proactivity is at the root of personal job satisfaction, organizational and societal success” (A. Merrill & Merrill, 2003, p. 65; see Covey, 1989, pp. 65-94).

We should help people to take proactive steps to safeguard their own church experience (Cassel, 2011, p. 6; Clark, 2011, pp. 20, 26; Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 35, 36; Dudley, M. G., 2008, p. 16; Dudley, R. 2000, pp. 90, 207; Hudgins, 2012, p. 17; Lane, 2010, pp. 28-30; Lemons, 2012, pp. 137-144; Lucas, 2008, p. 57; Martin, A., 2008, p. 29). Each individual should seek what she can give back rather than what she can receive (Hudgins, 2012, p. 15).

### Stages in Returning

The literature review yielded some information which is helpful to know, but which was not directly used as part of this project. For example, when non-attending members return to the church, they go through several stages. These overlap somewhat with Hunter’s six stages people experience when adopting Christianity (1992, p. 76). Rittenour identifies these stages as chaos, structure, cynicism, and maturity (2012). Hammond notes these same stages (using different labels) with a little different emphasis (2001, p. 92).

In the *chaos* stage, people face denial and distancing. This comes as a response to alienation and pain (Hammond, 2001, p. 92). In the *structure* stage, people are like

tourists. They observe without becoming personally involved (p. 94). In the *cynicism* stage, people begin to share their pain. It can be overwhelming to face the pain they expose (p. 98). The *maturity* stage brings a kind of determination and commitment (p. 100). Most non-attending members never make it to the final stage. In order to reach this stage, the other stages have to be experienced and their issues must be addressed (p. 102).

### Visitation

Pastoral visitation is essential for effective ministry (Arrais, 2011, pp. 69, 71, 76, 78; Cress, 2005, p. 74; Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 53, 65; Finley, 1994, p. 58). It is a misconception that visitation is an inefficient use of time (Arrais, 2011, p. 72). Fordyce Detamore saw visits as so crucial that he entered over 1500 homes each year (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 5). These were obviously short visits. Appointments should normally be scheduled (Arrais, 2011, p. 73; Cress, 2005, p. 93).

Visits show that we care (Arrais, 2011, p. 81). When a non-attending member has been gone for a while, a rule of thumb is that he needs about one visit for each year he has been gone (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 121; Turner, 1987, p. 101; Grey, as cited in Rittenour, 2012). “One of the most simple but effective ways to reach across is to visit those who are not attending anymore” (Schoun, 2012, p. 30). Though pastors should visit, non-attending members especially appreciate visits from church members (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 121; Cress, 2005, p. 94; 2010, p. 97; General Conference, 2009, p. 118; Rittenour, 2012).

Detamore used visits to invite people back to church (1965/1993, p. 50). Turner disagrees, saying that you should never invite non-attending members back. They will invite themselves back when they are ready (1987, p. 93). Though Turner’s idea avoids

being pushy, it would probably miss whole categories of people. A gentle nudge, given in a caring way, can help clarify direction.

On a practical note, if it is hard to schedule time to meet with a person, it can be helpful to meet that person at work, even if you help in the task at hand (Brown, et al., 2005, p. 156; Duin, 2008, p. 32; Wright, 1970, p. 43). Another practical concern has to do with a man visiting a woman. It is best not to visit alone in order to protect their reputations and to avoid temptation (Arrais, 2011, p. 82; Cress, 2005, pp. 66, 67, 93, 94). Duin disagrees, but offers no substitute safeguard (2008, p. 147).

### Expectations

People attend church with different expectations (Miles, 2009, p. 19). They may stop attending due to failed expectations (Steinbron, 1997, p. 32). But there is another side to that coin. “Churches tend to receive in commitment what they expect from . . . members” (Rainer, 1999, p. 106). In fact, churches that have the highest expectations of their members tend to have the fewest numbers become non-attending members (Rainer, 1999, p. 23; see also K. Farnsworth & Farnsworth, 2005, p. 20). They have found that membership means ministry (Rainer, 1999, p. 27). People tend to rise to the level of our expectations (Richardson, 2012a).

There are times when high expectations lead to church discipline. Sometimes people need to leave the church (Boers, 1999, pp. 89, 90; Knott, 2011, p. 7; Mallory, 2001, p. 75; Richardson, 2012a). Sometimes a person remains a believer but needs to join another congregation as a result of problems in the previous location (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 32).



At times, discipline has been applied in an improper way. It drives people away (Arrais, 2007, p. 88). When rightly applied, church discipline can promote church growth (Rittenour, 16 March 2012). It can lead a person to become right with God (Arrais, 2007, pp. 40, 41, 89). Discipline should not increase suffering (Arrais, 2007, p. 85). It should be done with love (p. 71). It requires the people involved to prepare themselves through “prayer and self-examination” (p. 40). The process should allow the disciplined individual to preserve his good name (p. 72).

When discipline results in a person being removed from membership, it can help the person to recognize the seriousness of his sin (Sande, 2006, p. 194). Others should seek to win this person back to Christ (p. 194). This requires some kind of future contact. Strangely, the *SDA Church Manual* states that no one should “keep a retired membership list” (General Conference, 2010, p. 55). It would seem that contact should be maintained, and this would necessitate at least basic contact information. Perhaps this note in the manual is intended to avoid stigmatizing people.

### **Personal Preparation**

In order to be truly effective, the person working with non-attending members needs special preparation. A person cannot give what she does not have (Wrenn et al., 2010, p. 222). Rather than always trying to produce results, a person must take time to “sharpen the saw” (Covey, 1989, pp. 285-307). God needs to be our highest priority (Blackaby & King, 1994, p. 30; Prime, 2009, p. 52). It is necessary to spend “a minimum of one hour a day in renewal of the physical, spiritual, and mental dimensions” (Covey, 1989, p. 304). In fact, a person needs “to maintain minimums of prayer, exercise, and

family time, almost as a legalistic regimen” in the face of significant change (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 190).

God and humanity should work together (Burrill, 2009, p. 47). And this is not just a piece of life. Spirituality needs to affect the whole life and the whole person (Kidder, 2011, p. 81). Life becomes an imitation of Christ (Grenz, 1993, p. 48). You trust God to work in you and through you (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, p. 66). You trust Jesus to guide you (Blackaby & King, 1994, p. 34).

### Prayer

At the heart of this is prayer. Prayer plays a crucial role in retaining members (Kidder, 2011, p. 68; Rainer, 1999, p. 25; Stele, 2012, p. 29). Prayer happens along with work (Foster, 1998, p. 45). We need to receive power from the Holy Spirit rather than just living by our own power (Kidder, 2011, p. 83). Prayer is part of the life (Arrais, 2011, p. 80; Foster, 1998, p. 45). We need to be intentional in our prayers (Malphurs, 1998, p. 217).

Intercessory prayer makes a difference in the lives of other people (Jules, Cassimy, & Kennedy, 2009, p. 177; Nixon, 2009, p. 75). We can benefit by prayer even though we do not know precisely how the process works (Finley, 1994, p. 81). Even when I do not see the results, I can know that prayer is not in vain (Hammond, 2001, p. 158). I need to experience the “constant presence of God” (Blackaby & King, 1994, p. 96).

## Attitude

The way a person sees something has a big impact on the results (Finley, 1994, p. 10; A. Merrill & Merrill, 2003, p. 132). We can see opportunities in problems (Arrais, 2007, p. 18). And the way we look at people helps to determine what they will become. We empower them when we trust them and see value in them (Bell, 2003, pp. 129, 130; A. Merrill & Merrill, 2003, p. 164). When we really care about people, we feel a sense of loss when they are absent (Schoun, 2012, p. 28). It is interesting to note that “no matter what [we are] doing on the outside, people respond primarily to how [we are] feeling about them on the inside” (Arbinger, 2010, p. 32). People can sense what we feel about them (p. 28).

Jesus saw people according to what they could become (Finley, 1994, p. 10). Other helpful attitudes are confidence (p. 10) and intentionality (Rainer, 1999, p. 80). We also need an open spirit for God to work through us (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 126). Attitudes and actions are on a two-way street. Attitudes affect actions and actions affect attitudes (Finley, 1994, p. 75). One attitude that we need is compassion for those who are missing (Mvundura, 2008, pp. 22, 23). We feel their pain (Jules et al., 2009, p. 171).

## Who we are

Who we are is more important than what we do (Ripley, 2007, pp. 34, 35, 52). What happens inside prepares what happens outside us (Covey, 1989, p. 43). This leads to the matter of example. There should be “no discrepancy between private and public life” (Bell, 2003, p. 84). In fact, “authenticity of character is of higher importance in spiritual ministry than expertise” (Williams, 2009, p. 130). We need to model what we

expect to see in others (Dudley, 2000, p. 169; Gane, 2010, p. 62; Kotter, 1996, p. 163; A. Merrill & Merrill, 2003, p. 241; Wrenn et al., 2010, p. 519).

But this example does not have to be a false perfection. It should rather be a determined direction, which allows for growth (Lucas, 2008, p. 141). Ministry often grows from personal struggles (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 8; Turner, 1987, p. 110).

### **Skills Needed for the Interview Process**

In order to approach non-attending members, a variety of skills and abilities can make a difference (Kibble, 2009, p. 59). Sometimes, people are left to learn skills as the needs arise (Williams, 2009, p. 127). One ability that is greatly needed for this work is patience (Hammond, 2001, p. 150). Another important ability is learning from failure (Bell, 2003, pp. 114, 115; Kotter, 1996, p. 180). For example, there will likely be times when attempts to listen to non-attending members will be misunderstood. Instead of bemoaning what went wrong, it can be possible to build on the knowledge of what to avoid.

Still another is the ability for self-examination (Kotter, 1996, p. 182; Lucas, 2008, p. 43). A related skill is the ability to reserve judgment (Nelson & Appel, 2000, p. 17). We need to respect the values of the people we serve (Bell, 2003, p. 103). We should also respect the people themselves (Arrais, 2007, p. 25; Dudley, 2000, p. 143; A. Merrill & Merrill, 2003, p. 77). Respect is something that no one notices until it is missing, then it is all that people can think about (Patterson et al., 2002, p. 79). We gain more respect for people when we more deeply understand them (Covey, 1989, p. 258).

## Conflict

People who leave over conflict may choose not to return. But many are waiting to be invited back (Cress, 2010, p. 57). The longer they are away, the more difficult it is to reclaim them (Gane, 2010, p. 53). They want to share their stories of pain (General Conference, 2009, p. 118; Rittenour, 2012). It helps when someone can listen with respect (Richardson, Nelson, & Rittenour, 1997, p. 36) and assure the person that she is loved (Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 31, 32). It can be helpful to learn what vocabulary to avoid so as not to needlessly trigger pain (Hammond, 2001, p. 128).

Conflict is a fact of life for leaders (Craig, 2009, p. 94; McNeal, 2000, p. 28). In dealing with conflict, empathy and confrontation need to build on each other (Boers, 1999, p. 66). Intercessory prayer (Jules et al., 2009, p. 176) and time with God's word (McNeal, 2000, p. 167) help to prepare a leader for conflict. Strangely, conflict can have a place in God's plans and can be used for His purposes (Poirier, 2006, p. 75).

Conflict skills are important since people with emotional issues can hold a church hostage (Boers, 1999, p. 18). Nelson and Appel believe that a divisive person should be sent away (2000, pp. 232-237). Boers sees it very differently. He says that this should be the exception rather than the rule (1999, p. 58). Most people have struggles (Duin, 2008, p. 179). Responding to this kind of need is part of our responsibility (Boers, 1999, p. 126). "True reconciliation is one of the most powerful of all human interactions" (Swenson, 1992, p. 113).

It can be helpful to have "exit interviews" with people who are leaving the church to seek reconciliation (Boers, 1999, p. 90). It is true that the comments of non-attending members can be biased and distorted. But they need a chance to explain things from their

perspective (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 34). We can seek to remove obstructions (p. 34). There is no use in arguing with them (pp. 17, 47). We should not try to solve their problems (p. 47).

Our argument culture creates polarization (Hawkins, 2001, p. 46). This is one of three basic responses to conflict: escape, peacemaking, or attack (Sande, 2006, p. 22). The peacemaking route brings the two parties together, sometimes with the involvement of a third party (Boers, 1999, p. 46; Craig, 2009, p. 94). A general principle to follow in addressing conflict is to keep the circle of people involved “as small as possible for as long as possible” (Sande, 2006, p. 186).

In peacemaking, we seek respectful ways of responding to difficult behavior (Boers, 1999, p. 66; McNeal, 2000, p. 161). The goal is mutual respect (Patterson et al., 2002, p. 79). It is possible to be completely honest while showing deep respect (p. 21). Conflict can be caused by people wrongly using their rights (Sande, 2006, p. 92). But underneath all conflict is some kind of desire (pp. 102, 103). “The presenting issue is not always the real issue” (McNeal, 2000, p. 160). People involved in conflict are often going through difficult life experiences (Boers, 1999, pp. 15, 16).

Conflict often arises when people feel they have little power (Boers, 1999, p. 23). We cannot control or change others (Boers, 1999, p. 122; Sande, 2006, p. 154). In fact, if another person does not want dialogue, it will not happen (Patterson et al., 2002, 229). But God can use us to help people see they have a problem and to address it (Sande, 2006, p. 154).

Steinke described the way we should approach people in difficulty. He said we should be “a nonanxious presence.” This is the capacity to respond appropriately and not

to react (as cited in Boers, 1999, p. 103). This kind of approach helps increase the tolerance of pain (p. 109). It can help to address the fear that is beneath much conflict (p. 104). Issues to avoid in conflict resolution include transference (pp. 33, 34), projection (p. 36), and triangling (pp. 47, 111). This requires differentiation (p. 94).

Knowing how to receive criticism well is helpful in defusing conflict (Boers, 1999, pp. 113-115). It is also important to create a sense of mutual purpose in working toward solutions (Patterson et al., 2002, p. 77). Covey said that the most important principle in interpersonal relations is, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” (Covey, 1989, p. 237). It helps to invite people to tell their stories and to share their facts (Patterson et al., 2002, p. 161). Instead of being defensive, ask questions (Lucas, 2008, p. 158).

Part of dealing with conflict involves apologies. We should apologize for what we realize we have done (Patterson et al., 2002, p. 84; Sande, 2006, p. 130). Even if the other person is more in the wrong, we can apologize for our part. Sometimes it is helpful to apologize on behalf of the church (Bell, 2003, p. 159; Gane, 2010, p. 55; Mallory, 2001, p. 74; Rittenour, 2012). Seven aspects of a confession (apology) include: address everyone involved; avoid words like *if*, *but*, and *maybe*; admit specifically what my part was; acknowledge the hurt; accept the consequences; alter my behavior; and ask for forgiveness (Sande, 2006, pp. 126-132).

In extending forgiveness, it is helpful to recognize what it is not. It is not amnesia, acquittal, an award, approval, or acquiescence (Miller & Jackson, 1985, p. 252). Rather, it is “an affirming acceptance of the person as distinguished from his or her actions” (p. 252).

When seeking to bring two sides together, a win/lose or lose/win solution leaves one person feeling harmed. The goal is to find or create a win/win outcome (Covey, 1989, pp. 204-234). Such cooperative negotiation involves a combination of love and wisdom (Sande, 2006, p. 227). In order to make this happen, Sande follows the acronym PAUSE: prepare, affirm relationships, understand interests, search for creative solutions, and evaluate (pp. 227, 228).

### Listening

Reaching out to non-attending members requires listening to their pain (General Conference, 2009, p. 118; Rittenour, 2012). “People long for honest conversation about things that really matter” (Knutson, 1979, pp. 32, 33; see also Jules et al., 2009, p. 172). This is especially true of non-attending members (Gane, 2010, p. 63; Hammond, 2001, p. 148; Martin, L., 1992, p. 86). The goal of listening is to establish a relationship (Knutson, 1979, p. 31).

Listening to a person shows her value and respect (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, pp. 31, 43). Empathy allows the listener to get inside another person’s frame of reference (Covey, 1989, p. 240; Turner, 1987, p. 64). This requires the listener to learn to listen without over-reacting (Hawkins, 2001, pp. 38-40) or arguing (Detamore, 1965/1993, p. 68; Dudley, M. G., 2001, p. 15). She seeks to keep an openness to being persuaded (Kotter, 1996, p. 180; Lucas, 2008, p. 117). She does not come “as an expert or a superior, but as [a person] who is concerned” (Knutson, 1979, p. 17).

One challenge to listening is that a person can think much faster than he can talk. When another person is talking, it is natural for the listener’s mind to wander (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, p. 75; Hawkins, 2001, pp. 38, 39; Sande, 2006, p. 166).



Though it is tempting to guess what the person will say, it is much wiser to actually listen (Arrais, 2011, p. 84; Mallory, 2001, p. 75). Listening builds safety and trust in a relationship (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, 31). Most people do not really listen with an intention to understand. They listen with the intention to reply (Covey, 1989, p. 239).

But the listener earns a right to be heard by actually listening to the other person (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, pp. 79, 80; Rittenour, 2012). Empathetic listening does not mean that you agree with another person. It means that you understand her (Covey, 1989, p. 240; Hawkins, 2001, pp. 38, 39). You understand the meaning, not just the words (Knutson, 1979, p. 19). It is very hard to listen when people dig up dirt about others (Richardson, 2012a; Rittenour, 2012).

We do not have to be highly trained to listen to people (Foster, 1998, p. 138). But it does require hard work (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, p. 35). It helps to maintain regular eye contact and to avoid negative body language which could be distracting (Gane, 2010, pp. 69, 70; Sande, 2006, p. 166). It includes being patient and genuine (Cornforth, 1995, p. 122). It means not interrupting or giving advice (Richardson et al., 1997, pp. 36, 37). It is helpful to face the speaker with arms and legs uncrossed (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, p. 74). It can also include summarizing what has been said (pp. 82, 84, 134).

At some point, the listener's reflection can help the speaker clarify his own thoughts (Turner, 1987, p. 65). And when people feel heard, it can bring healing (Hawkins, 2001, p. 42).

## Communication

There comes a time when we have earned the right to talk. When this happens, it can be helpful to communicate with people through their primary method of learning: visual, audio, or kinesthetic (Finley, 1994, pp. 53-56). To share vulnerability and illustrate a point, the speaker can share his own personal story (Richardson et al., 1997, p. 35). And there is the need to seek feedback (Gane, 2010, p. 70). Repetition or eliciting a response can help a person remember what is said (Gladwell, 2000, pp. 124-131).

“Inoculation theory” involves using “preemptive communication.” That is, when the speaker knows certain objections will arise, she can address these issues in her conversation (Lucas, 2008, p. 159; Wrenn et al., 2010, p. 429).

A large part of communication is the non-verbal portion. This part is more important than the verbal part (D. Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, p. 49; Gladwell, 2000, p. 79; Kennedy, 2009, p. 121). As an aspect of this, touch may not be appropriate in some situations. But where it is allowed, it communicates powerfully (Demmitt & Demmitt, 2003, p. 77; Rittenour, 2012).

It can cause a problem to say, “I know how you feel.” Each person’s situation is different and people feel violated by this sentence (Turner, 1987, p. 115). Another harmful word is *but*. It tends to cancel everything was said before it (Sande, 2006, p. 128). Instead, a person can look into the eyes of a non-attending member and say how much he cares and how much the church misses her (Gane, 2010, p. 55).

One absolutely crucial aspect of communication is confidentiality. We respect the other person by guarding his secrets (Arrais, 2007, p. 35, 74, 76; Cress, 2005, 58; Detamore, 1965/1993, pp. 24, 28, 73; Satelmajer, 2009, p. 156). This is true even when

not in his presence (Covey, 1989, p. 196). Instead of telling bad things about people, it is helpful to cultivate the habit of speaking praise (Cress, 2005, p. 7; Levine, 2002, p. 302).

These various aspects of communication may seem unrelated. And yet attention to these matters can help avoid creating unnecessary communication barriers. It would be a shame to listen well, and then communicate poorly.

### **Moving Toward an Intervention**

After looking at the various factors which are involved when interacting with non-attending members, the following picture emerges. Corporate worship is important for Christian life. If it is missing, my Christian experience is somehow incomplete. This worship involves the larger group context and the smaller group.

People stop attending church for a multitude of reasons. Where possible, it is helpful when outreach to these people can take into account their specific needs. But this is not practical in a smaller church setting. Instead, an overall approach should take into account the basic factors which are common to the needs of many or most of these people.

The intervention should avoid burning out members who are already burdened with many responsibilities. It should protect their time, and emotional energy. It should take into account the natural limitations of the Dunbar Effect, seeking to erase the relationship cracks into which people can fall. Each person needs to be drawn into some sort of smaller circle. In addition, the intervention should help people experience less suffering from the pain that comes to them. It should help them to take a proactive approach to their own connection with the church.

A significant part of the process involves dealing with conflict in a caring, proactive manner. It includes authentic listening that helps people to open up. This listening will address peoples' need to be heard. And the process includes a personal preparation for any individual involved in this kind of ministry. This preparation seeks to let God guide and empower any ministry that follows.

## CHAPTER 4

### DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A MINISTRY PROCESS FOR NON-ATTENDING CHURCH MEMBERS

What can be done about people who no longer, regularly attend worship services? The previous chapter of this project noted a variety of reasons behind this non-attendance. So many such reasons exist that it is impractical to create a path back for each specific kind of person who is no longer present. At the same time, there is a great need to minister to these people in meaningful ways. They need to be heard. Someone should listen to their stories.

It is fairly easy to listen to some of these people. They may only need a little nudge from someone who cares. Others require more cautious contact. They may be emotionally fragile. Or they may present a risk to the one who listens to them. And this kind of work is very time-consuming.

This project sought to address four different constituents of the church: the pastor, the leaders, attending members, and non-attending members. The four different constituents have overlapping needs and unique needs. One goal was to bring understanding between the different constituents. Another goal was to create a process to build people up, moving them forward in their spiritual experience.

Martin's Doctor of Ministry project looked into the matter of non-attending members. Following his study on the subject, he wrote a book for people with similar concerns (1992, pp. 83-96). His approach was to give a pre-test to selected individuals to discover what they understood about worship. Then he preached a series of sermons on worship, followed by a post-test to see how attitudes had changed. It seems that his method emphasizes working with attending members, seeking retention.

In contrast, this project emphasized work with non-attending members while still addressing some of the needs of those who attend. The intervention involved interviews with non-attending members. These interviews sought information and change. They provided a context for non-attending members to share concerns and desires. The interviews were also intended to be one step in a journey home.

In order to achieve these goals, a survey instrument was used. This instrument helped to create a similarity between interviews. It also served as a basic, prompt sheet to avoid missing certain key areas of concern. It was only one tool among several others. Perhaps two of the most significant tools were listening, and addressing conflict.

The intervention sought to create bridges for non-attending members to return. This involved attention to several aspects of church life. Part of the process included creating smaller circles for worship experiences. This took into account a method of fostering more interpersonal connections. Another aspect has to do with protecting those who reach out. In addition, the whole process sought to nurture relationships and to provide tools for a proactive approach to church membership.

## **Ministry Context**

Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church (ESDA Church) was formed in 1969 when the Italian SDA Church moved from Chicago to the suburbs. Services in the new location were conducted in English. The pastor who oversaw the process of this move was the last Italian pastor the congregation had. Over time, the makeup of the church shifted until it became a multiethnic congregation representing people from about twenty countries. By 2007, when I arrived to be the pastor of this church, almost no one spoke Italian.

Some came to see the mixed congregation to be a blessing. They viewed it as better able to serve the needs of a variety of people. Others longed for the glory days when the church was full of people. In the past, many of the members were related to each other. Even non-Italians who visited spoke of how they enjoyed the feeling of worshipping with one family.

Through the years, another change became a reality. More and more people who were listed as church members were no longer regularly attending services. Some of these would show up from time to time. Others stopped attending altogether. But this change was partially hidden by the fact that a number of regular visitors helped to fill the seats of missing members. People who took time to notice this shift were concerned about what was happening. But they expressed different opinions about what was the cause of people no longer attending services.

Membership hovered around the 200 mark during the last five years. At the same time, the average attendance was around 100. And yet, only about 60 to 70 members showed up for services at least once a month. The previous two chapters of this project

indicate that corporate worship is an important aspect of Christian experience. With so few people attending worship services on a regular basis, it became apparent that an intervention was needed.

### **Identifying Goals for the Interview Process**

There were four main goals for the interview itself. These four goals were creating a caring presence, receiving formal feedback, identifying problematic issues, and establishing a path toward proactively addressing these issues. These goals served as a driving force behind the shape of the instrument created for the interview.

#### **Creating a Caring Presence**

The literature review revealed that there are often relational problems associated with people not attending church. Even when they did not leave as a result of relational issues, their separation from the church leaves a relational gap. One significant goal of interviewing non-attending members is to show that we care. It is an attempt to reestablish a relationship (Cornforth & Lale, 1995, p. 121).

When a non-attending member begins to describe his journey, there is a kind of bonding that takes place. This naturally occurs when sharing something deeply personal. Even if this happens in a very limited way, there can be a positive connection between the one speaking and the one listening to him.

#### **Receiving Formal Feedback**

It is uncomfortable to hear what is not going well. As a result, it is natural to avoid listening to problems. And yet, people need a clear path for voicing concerns or complaints. On the receiving side, providing for an individual to give formal feedback



helps to eliminate blind spots. We can only know a problem if there is a way to find out it exists. On the giving side, a path for sharing formal feedback can be empowering. It can give the person with complaints a sense of control over her situation. In marketing terms, “listening to complaints boosts brand loyalty tremendously” (Wrenn et al., 2010, p. 174).

### Identifying Problematic Issues

Why are certain people no longer attending ESDA Church? There are a lot of opinions about the matter. The only way to really know what is behind such absences is to talk with the people who are no longer coming. One goal of personal interviews was to find out what kinds of things served as barriers to church attendance. Sometimes, it was possible to make simple adjustments to remove unnecessary barriers.

Some of these adjustments were made by those who were regularly involved in the life of the church. Others were made by the non-attending member. Either way, a proactive response to problematic matters was only possible after identifying the issues behind non-attendance.

### Establishing a Proactive Path

Information gathering is not enough. Even building positive relationships with non-attending members is only a part of the process. One clear goal of conducting the interview was to create a way to proactively address issues. The interview itself was a proactive measure. It could move a person from the realm of disappointment to the realm of understanding. The interviewer could serve as a kind of coach for the interviewee.

For example, if the interview revealed interpersonal conflict, it was sometimes helpful to schedule a coached setting for addressing the conflict. Rather than seeking to

attract people with external improvements, it was then possible to assist them in addressing underlying reasons for non-attendance. This made a chance to lead to the release of emotional baggage while creating a safe environment where this could take place.

### **Creating an Instrument to Identify Reasons for Non-attendance**

In order to better understand why people stop attending ESDA Church, eight formal interviews became part of the picture. These included a mix of young and old, male and female, currently non-attending members, and members who used to be non-attending members, but had begun (or even completed) a journey back into the church. Some of the non-attending members had been gone for a long time. Others were new at being away.

The interviews were conducted in as non-threatening a manner as possible. Some were in the home. Some were at the church or in a library. All of them touched base with the past (why the person left), the present, and the future. For the people who had returned (or were in the process of returning), there was further conversation about what influenced this return to church. Most of these visits were longer than one hour (sometimes much longer).

In addition to these interviews, a variety of people gave unsolicited explanations as to why they were no longer part of the church. These conversations came through impromptu interactions that were a part of regular ministry (funerals, hospital visits, in home visits, and “chance” meetings). Though not a part of formal interviews, these spontaneously shared insights brought helpful perspectives to the matter (Heard, 2010, pp. 84-89).

## The Survey Questions

There are ten questions on the survey instrument (see appendix). The survey is an attempt to generate qualitative data. Rather than restricting the possible outcomes in order to include more people and investigate statistical data, open-ended questions are used. This is intended to provide the opportunity to discover outcomes which were not previously considered by the interviewer. Where responses appeared to hint at additional information, follow-up questions or comments encouraged further discussion. The questions are as follows:

*Question 1: How did you become a member of Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church? When?* This question seeks to distinguish between those who grew up in the church and those who came from another background. Converts and people who transferred into the church may have had a different experience than those who grew up with these people.

*Question 2: How would you describe your current relationship to this church?* This question attempts to distinguish between those who believe they are church members and those who no longer consider themselves to be a part of the church. It may reveal hostility toward the organization, or toward some of its members. Or it may show that there is a longing to be connected while not participating in any visible way.

*Question 3: What are some memories of events and people at Elmhurst Church that stand out in your mind?* This question builds on question 2. If there are hostilities, they may be explained here. If there was a warm relationship, it will likely come up. This is where the conversation tends to bring support for what was stated in question 2.

*Question 4: If you could make some changes to this church, what would they be?*

This question seeks an opportunity to learn from mistakes. There may be something that should change. There may be some unintended barriers that could be removed. Or there may be people who have become obstructive to Christian experience. In addition, there may be some things that could be done to improve how we function as a church. Not every change is based on a mistake. Sometimes it is possible to improve a good thing.

*Question 5: What are some things about Elmhurst Church which should not change?* Some people feel threatened by changes they see. They wish to recapture the past. This question gives an opportunity to notice things that should be preserved (or should have been preserved). This question also helps to highlight what the interviewee sees as some of the strengths of the church—things that should be maintained.

*Question 6: How would you like to be involved in the church?* This question is two sided. Some people do not do anything to help. They only criticize. Certain answers to this question may reveal the nature of the interviewee's non-attendance. On the other side, some people would love to be involved, but have no chance to do so. Their answers to this question may provide information that can lead to their future involvement. Or their answers may even highlight a needed ministry which does not currently exist.

*Question 7: How could Elmhurst Church serve you best?* The answer to this question may point out a kind of consumerism. Or it may reveal a kind of ministry that is missing. On the other hand, it could provide a chance for the interviewee to express a need that the church is ready to address. In such a case, needs and opportunities can be connected.

*Question 8: Where are you currently attending worship services most of the time?*

This question seeks to distinguish between those who are not connected with any congregation, and those who have reinvested their time, talent, and treasure elsewhere. If the interviewee is not connected anywhere else, there is a chance to actively seek to bring her back to ESDA Church. If she is involved with another SDA congregation, it may be helpful to discuss a membership transfer. Or it may be a sign that there is an underlying problem that needs to be addressed.

*Question 9: What might stand in the way of your attending our church on a regular basis?* This question builds on question 8. If there is no barrier to returning, a simple invitation could bring the person back. On the other hand, if a problem exists, there might be a need for follow-up ministry. Perhaps there is interpersonal conflict involved. There may be hurt feelings. There may be a doctrinal issue that causes the interviewee to no longer consider himself to be SDA. This question also builds a basis for a follow-up comment on returning if the barrier can be removed.

*Question 10: What contact has there been between Elmhurst Church and you?*

This question can reveal the difference between people who are connected while not attending and those who are completely disconnected (or at some point in between). It is possible that the interviewee is not attending because she has no relationships with people inside the church. In such a case, building these relationships is essential. Or it is possible that there are numerous connections, but the interviewee has chosen not to attend for other reasons.

## **Creating Bridges for Potential Ministry**

The process of creating bridges for ministry required interacting with each of the four constituents previously mentioned (the pastor, leaders, attending members, and non-attending members). Each constituent had something to receive and something to give. The movement toward change tended to go from left to right in the list. For example, as leaders began implementing changes, they reached out to encourage these same changes in attending members. Eventually, these changes began to reach the non-attending members.

The preparatory interaction for the pastor was with God and family. In order to be available to minister to people, there was a heart-work that was needed. This involved daily time with God in prayer and in His word. The prayer time included intercession for the other constituents. This daily experience helped to create the needed attitude adjustment for working with people. Details of the application are shared in the next chapter (along with other aspects of preparatory work).

The initial intervention involved the other three constituents (leaders, attending members, and non-attending members). It could be considered to be the bridge building part of the process. This initial intervention included three main tasks: protecting attending members, visitation, as well as listening and communication. After this aspect, there was a need for follow-up work. Such work involved addressing potential causes of non-attendance (discussed in a following section).

### **Protecting Attending Members**

Some people are actively involved in the ministry of the church. Others seem content to idly observe work being done without their involvement. And still others may

wish to be involved, but somehow are left out of the action. One kind of intervention seeks to draw more people into active involvement. While this can make a positive difference, there is a risk on the other side.

Even casual observation reveals one challenging aspect of human nature. When an appeal for help is made to a group of people, they respond in different ways. Some are not moved to action. But others sense a burden to make a positive difference. Among these people are individuals who are already working hard. And some of these are overcommitted. They work harder and harder until they feel burned out. At that point, they are left with several unpleasant options.

They may have to cut back what they do. Or they may give up all their responsibilities and take some time off. In severe cases, they may even stop attending church. Their sudden shift in participation (or cessation of participation) leaves a ministry gap which may or may not be filled by others. And it often leaves these people with a nagging sense of guilt.

The intervention to reach non-attending members aimed to avoid squeezing more work out of overcommitted people. It was intended to protect them. They need the sense of fulfillment that comes with being involved. But they should only care for part of what is happening. To avoid adding to the burden of these people, three protective aspects were built into the intervention. These included creating margin in time, number of tasks, and trips to the church.

It can be tempting to address change through a series of seminars for leaders and interested members. But this requires another time commitment beyond what happens in

a typical week. And it could involve additional trips to the church. Some of the most involved people live a significant distance from the church.

As an alternative to this front door approach was a kind of side door method that may have seemed like nothing was happening. Existing meetings were repurposed for making adjustments. For example, elders' meetings and board meetings included sections dealing with sharing a picture of what was missing and a process that could address the issues. In addition, face-to-face encounters with various constituents had an added dimension. Rather than merely greeting each other and sharing news, pieces of the plan were shared informally in an attempt to draw people in from the side rather than pushing them in through the front door.

Along with these methods of sharing ideas came a kind of informal modeling of a different path. For example, rather than telling a greeter to get the names of visitors, the pastor can demonstrate this. As the visitor enters, the pastor greets him by name and leads him to the greeter. The greeter may wonder how the pastor knows this man's name. Immediately after the man steps away, there is a chance to state briefly what a difference it makes to the visitor if he hears his name upon entering the church.

This can be followed by a very short comment on how to discover names and remember them. Or these comments can be omitted and another path can accomplish the purpose. For example, as a repeat visitor is approaching the church door, the pastor can casually mention her name to the greeter and step back. The greeter will typically step forward and greet the visitor by name. This gentle reminder empowers the greeter to make the visitor feel more at home in the church. As the greeter notices the result of this method, he may be inclined to make it a habit.



Another aspect of protecting members involved the work of the nominating committee. As church positions were being assigned, it was important to look at the big picture. Who were the ones that were typically given a heavy burden of positions? Was there anyone else who could cover some of these positions? Could any of these positions be omitted for a year? Rather than burning out the most hardworking people, we sought to protect them so that they would enjoy a long and productive life of service.

### Visitation

Visitation actually took several different forms. It was directed at the last three constituent groups (leaders, attending members, and non-attending members). It was important to create a clear system to address the need to connect with each of these constituents. For example, the pastor could spend all of his time reaching people who were potential members (giving Bible studies, or other kinds of evangelistic contact). But this would have left a gap with those who were already members.

It was possible to use opportunistic meetings as a part of this work. Such meetings took place when a person came to a church fellowship lunch or lingered in the lobby after a service. The pastor was able to engage that individual in meaningful conversation about what was currently happening in her life. At times, this brief conversation led to a follow-up, in-home visit. Or it sometimes included a moment to step aside from the main crowd and to pray with her.

While these mini meetings were useful, they did not replace in-home visits. In the home, it was possible to have meaningful, significant interaction. When an in-home visit was not practical, a neutral meeting place was arranged, such as a library or other location that provided audio privacy but not visual seclusion. This was especially helpful

when there was a need for a one-on-one visit where the one visiting was of a different gender than the one being visited.

There were three kinds of one-on-one visits that were part of the intervention. Other visits also took place, but were not necessarily related to the intervention. The first kind of visit was a leadership visit. This was where the pastor spent time with each key leader to share the vision of what could be done to strengthen the church. It involved sharing what was wrong and what could be done to address it in positive ways. It included sharing the basic pieces of the intervention.

The second kind of visit involved attending members. Its purpose was to strengthen their connection with God and to give them tools to be connected with other members. Some of these visits were done by the pastor. Others were done by church leaders. As time goes on, members can visit members so they can encourage each other in their Christian journey. Church elders can share a coordinating role so that such visitation will become more readily available for more people.

The third kind of visit involved non-attending members. The most formal way this took place was with the interviews that were part of this project. This involved the pastor taking notes while systematically working through the ten questions in the survey instrument. At such times, it was possible to hear the concerns and interests of the non-attending member. There was also a chance to discover what kind of follow-up ministry was needed.

A less formal way this happened was when the pastor or church leader took some time for personal interaction with a non-attending member. This often happened at a neutral event, such as a birthday party or funeral. Or it took place during an in-home visit,

but without the use of the survey instrument. There were times when the survey instrument would have seemed obstructive. On the other hand, for some visits, the instrument seemed to help remove certain barriers. It provided a natural entry into that kind of conversation.

During my interviews with non-attending members, it became more and more evident that direct work with these people can be exhausting. Listening to stories of pain and hearing statements of frustration can take a toll on the listener. This kind of work has to be limited to relatively controlled doses. As a result, it may not be best to expect lay people to put much initial effort in this direction.

As a relationship between the non-attending member and the pastor begins to grow, the pastor can serve as a connector between this person, and some of the attending members. From that point on, these attending members become a crucial part of a possible journey home. This can help take the burden off the pastor. As more and more attending members follow up contacts initiated by the pastor, they naturally care more and more about the people they are seeking to reach. Friendships form. And the church begins to feel more like a family.

And so the visitation itself served as a significant part of the intervention. It provided a path for connecting with the different constituents. It also provided information about what was going on behind the scenes. Insights gained through such visits helped move conversation away from speculation and into discovery.

### Listening and Communication

Listening and communication were at the core of the intervention. The whole idea was to give people the chance to be heard. They seemed more willing to share when they

knew something about the person with whom they were sharing. The insights gained through the theological reflection and literature survey provided a foundation for *how* to listen.

At the same time, the intervention involved multiple contact points for the different constituents. Some of these included ongoing, intermittent contact. For example over the years, each person received a birthday card with a personal, hand-written note from the pastor. In addition, a general, e-mail newsletter kept people in touch with things that were happening across the district.

On a more personal level, there were intentional, personal interactions with people who attended the church. This sometimes took the shape of a conversation in the lobby. Though extremely informal, this established a personal connection beyond greetings. It sometimes called for deeper listening. At times, it even was necessary to step into another room to hear about an individual's spiritual journey, or various aspects of life that currently involved difficulty.

Listening to leaders required carving out regular time to keep coordinated in efforts. As a kind of minimum, this necessitated a face-to-face meeting with the head elder each month. This allowed for personal bonding. In addition, it helped to avoid duplicating efforts in the ministry. It also gave the chance for the pastor and head elder to support each other in the specific challenges of the moment.

One of the more challenging contexts for applying the gift of listening was in the presence of non-attending members. During the formal interview or in an informal visit, the role of listening was extremely important. A significant amount of time was invested in this part of the intervention. Every attempt was made to be fully present with the non-

attending member. Body language, reflective comments, and follow-up questions helped to establish that the words being shared were important and needed to be heard.

Some people are quickly ready to share their experiences. Others are reticent to tell their stories. In such cases, body language, reflective comments, and other such tools may not be sufficient to help a person open up his story. One additional tool can be self-disclosure. In the course of interviewing people, I discovered that self-disclosure often helped to break down barriers. As people heard some of my own challenges, they became more willing to talk about theirs.

Protecting attending members, visitation, along with listening and communication were intentional steps to create bridges for potential ministry. They served as a kind of first phase in a two-part process. The second phase sought to address potential causes of people not attending church. It worked with information gained through the initial, bridge-building phase. It sought to equip non-attending members for their journey back into participation.

### **Addressing Potential Causes of Non-attendance**

The previous chapter suggested a path to help non-attending members experience less suffering in the face of pain. Church attendance is not intended to be a kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest. It is meant to help people cope with life and to personally experience the presence of God. It is supposed to provide growth. Rather than leaving people to figure out a path on their own, it seems important to provide help on the journey. This help involves three things: coaching a proactive approach, managing conflict, and creating needed connections.

## Coaching a Proactive Approach

Three of the questions on the survey instrument lean toward a proactive approach toward church membership (questions 4-6). While the questions seek information, they also provide an opportunity to segue into discussions concerning follow-up ministry. It may be preferable to schedule another visit to discuss such follow-up. Or it may be possible to schedule the follow-up ministry at the end of the interview.

For example, the interview may reveal interpersonal conflict. Rather than bemoaning broken relationships, the interviewer can point to a proactive approach. In this case, it could involve a coached meeting with the other person involved in the conflict. Or the interview may reveal another issue that prevents attending church services. It may be possible to shift from the interview itself to exploring possible ways to address the underlying problems.

This may require seeking further information. Does the person need transportation? Who might be able to help? Does he struggle with lifestyle issues (such as using alcohol, tobacco, or recreational drugs)? It may be necessary to locate support for dealing with addictions. Does she see no hope of returning to this particular congregation? Perhaps it is time to help her find a congregation where she can fit in. Are family members interfering with regular attendance? It may be helpful to share ways of being respectful while choosing a different path than they prefer.

The bottom line is a difference in perspective. The interview does not only provide an opportunity to vent frustrations. It also explores ways to address the issues that it reveals. This should not make the concerns appear insignificant or trite. But at the same time it should create a sense of hope. It should bring the interviewee to a point

where he can see the possibility for positive change. It should leave him with a desire to be personally involved in finding solutions to his problems.

### Managing Conflict

Conflict can become a dividing force between people who would otherwise appreciate each other. At times, it is an underlying cause for a person becoming a non-attending member. A lot of other reasons for non-attendance are easier to manage than conflict. As a result, conflict often generates win/lose, lose/win, or even lose/lose scenarios. One or both parties see the situation as impossible to resolve. And so no proactive steps are taken to address the conflict or the issues that generated it.

This is why managing conflict was one of the significant aspects of this project. This kind of work can provide direct and indirect relief. Direct relief comes to the parties that have the issue between them. Indirect relief comes to other people who are affected by the conflict, but who are not personally involved.

For example, a woman could have two friends who are on opposite sides of a conflict. Though she cares about each of them, she has the delicate task of interacting with them separately. She realizes that it does not work well to interact with them together. When peace comes between these individuals, she finds indirect relief.

The work of managing conflict brings no guarantees for positive outcomes. But it provides an opportunity for such outcomes to be created. Realistically, the process may still end with no satisfactory outcome. Or it could result in reducing tensions without completely eliminating them. Ideally, it establishes a basis for continuing growth. Such growth results from deepening respect and appreciation between the parties involved. And it does not disregard the issues that came between them in the first place.

The typical path for seeking to manage conflict requires at least three meetings. If the conflict is significant, these meetings all include face-to-face contact. If the conflict is more minor, one or both of the preliminary meetings could take place through phone contact.

The first two meetings involve separately discussing the matter with each party. The intention is to establish a willingness to proactively seek a solution to the issue or issues at hand. In each of these meetings, the coach (usually the pastor) expresses confidence that such a process can improve the situation. He shares what the process will look like. He expresses his appreciation for each of the individuals involved. He affirms their personal significance and shares how this part of the intervention can positively impact the future.

While acknowledging the difficulties, he shows that these difficulties are not as great as the ones generated by a lack of proactive work. Without this honesty, one or both parties may feel misled while experiencing the painful parts of the process. Such a feeling could cause a premature cessation of the intervention.

The third meeting involves a coached session with both parties speaking to each other face-to-face. If there is significant pain involved, this session can take a few hours. The meeting starts with a little informal chat to reduce the tension. Then the coach reiterates the purpose for the meeting and the process that will be used.

A few guidelines are shared to ensure that the process includes personal respect while still honestly addressing the issue or issues at hand. Each person is given an opportunity to explore the facts as seen from his perspective. The coach models reflective questions to help verify some level of understanding. If one party has harmed the other,



an apology will be needed. Perhaps in the past, such apologies have not been real apologies (as discussed in the previous chapter of the project). If needed, the coach can help to ensure that any apologies given will be genuine apologies that will be perceived as such by the other party.

In addition, the coach can guide the other party to extend forgiveness. It may be the case that both parties will be sharing apologies and extending forgiveness. The meeting closes with prayer and handshakes or hugs (according to what is acceptable to both parties). If needed, an additional session is scheduled. This is more likely when multiple issues are involved. In such situations, it may be helpful to work through a few issues per session. It may be easier to move forward after a basic process has been established.

When respect and honesty are combined, the results can be powerful. Hope begins to grow. People see each other differently. There is a decreased need for self-justification. And, in the days following such a loving confrontation, additional applications of the conversation can become evident. Though it is only one aspect of the total intervention, managing conflict is significant. It can be a powerful, proactive tool in working with non-attending members.

### Creating Needed Connections

In the end, regular attendance is all about connections. Sitting through worship services without any interpersonal connections is unsatisfying. It lacks sufficient pull to keep a person regularly involved in the life of the church. As noted in the theological reflection and in the literature review, there is a need for people to connect with others in

worship. This need for the more personal side of worship has often been addressed by small groups.

In a suburban context, most members commute to church. Many of them live a significant distance from the church. The ones who live near each other often lack the affinity that could pull them together on a weekly basis. Though people need this personal connection, it is not universally available. Some people experience it. Others are left without fitting in any circles.

The Dunbar Effect dictates that people cannot meaningfully interact in the larger group context. There is a need for smaller groups if people are to be connected. And yet these groups have not been available to many people as a result of distance, hectic schedules, or other factors creating various forms of alienation. Some people have the small group experience. They meet on Sabbath afternoon or at the midweek prayer service. Many others have been missing this.

As an attempt to address the need for the personal side of worship, one part of this project's intervention sought to connect people in a different way. This involved creating prayer partners for a specified period of time—for example, one quarter. Each person was asked to donate one of her personal connection slots to someone in the church family. This involved a specific commitment. These people shared with each other and prayed with each other once each week. This typically required at least ten or twenty minutes of interaction.

They met face-to-face, when they could arrange it. Or they met by phone. The point is that personal connection time in God's presence is absolutely crucial to Christian growth. It helps to make the difference between being an observer and being a

participant. As these prayer partners met, week-by-week, a connection formed between them. What began as something that felt unnatural and awkward progressed into something meaningful and cherished.

The process of implementation did not have to be stilted or forced. It grew from two directions. The secondary, and least motivating direction took place in the large group. The need was expressed in a worship service. An appeal was made for people to find such prayer partners and to commit to a weekly meeting for the duration of the quarter. Some people only thought about it. Others actually put it into effect.

The primary, and more motivating direction, involved working more directly with leadership. Each leader was encouraged to experiment with this process, or to at least consider doing such. The experiment lasted for one quarter. The idea was to reach out and meaningfully connect with each other and with God. This happened once each week. As time went on, it began to feel more natural.

After one quarter, people had a chance to recommit to worship together in the same way. Or, once they became more accustomed to the process, they could step out into new territory. The groups could be formed again with new combinations. Each person who already experienced this kind of interpersonal time with God could move on to create the same experience with a new partner. And so the process could slowly spread through the church.

It was a bit like peeling an onion. This process worked through one layer at a time. It started with the leaders. Then it moved on to the people with whom they connected. After a while, it moved on to people who were not previously connected. And in the process, transformation began to take place.

In this kind of work, there is no need to seek perfection. The whole process can be seen as a kind of practice. I practice with you and you practice with me. When we feel more confident, we each practice with someone else. Though there are still rough edges, a gradual shift takes place. People are moved from the outer edge of the larger group into the center of a small group. They become part of the life of the congregation.

### **Summary**

There is no absolute, cure-all, one-size-fits-all approach to reach out to non-attending members. And yet it is possible to make improvements that have a positive impact on a wide variety of individuals. This project sought to work through a specific process to create a caring presence for non-attending members. It provided opportunities to receive formal feedback from a few of these people. One purpose was to identify problematic issues and to establish a path to proactively address these issues.

One specific tool utilized in the project was a survey instrument that was used in formal interviews with non-attending members. The instrument helped to provide some consistency in the interviews with different people. It utilized a series of open-ended questions in order to allow unexpected insights to be shared.

The intervention was intended to involve four constituents: the pastor, leaders, attending members, and non-attending members. Each constituent was involved with the ones that followed. The pastor worked with all three groups. The leaders worked with the next two groups. Attending members reached out to non-attending members.

This intervention did not emphasize protecting non-attending members from attending members (though this is a part of the process). Rather, it emphasized a process intended to empower non-attending members to address the issues leading to their non-

attendance. And it sought to protect attending members from becoming overburdened as a result of being overly involved.

To accomplish this, a kind of indirect path was used to transmit information. Rather than utilizing seminars for training, coaching or modeling was used. And people were invited to practice new concepts rather than facing the pressure of absolute, long-term commitments.

The intervention involved creating bridges to non-attending members, and following this up by addressing potential causes for non-attendance. Visitation was at the heart of the intervention. This included formal and informal visits. These visits were designed to emphasize listening. The presupposition was that people needed to be heard before they could return.

The follow-up portion of the intervention attempted to bring a proactive approach to addressing the problems that were revealed. This included some rather specific coaching for non-attending members. One significant part of this involved coached sessions to address interpersonal conflict. For others, it was more of a problem-solving process that sought to draw the non-attending member to find ways of personally addressing the issues.

One aspect of the intervention was intended to strengthen attending members and to eventually include non-attending members as part of a path back home. This was through a process of intentionally creating very small circles for contact. These circles were sometimes as small as two people meeting each week for prayer and personal sharing. The creation of these small circles helped to erase the gap which currently holds people apart from existing circles.

In order for this to function on a long-term basis, work is needed beyond the scope of this project. At some point, a very specific method is needed to administer these groups. Some kind of oversight system should be designed to monitor who is involved and who is being missed. This system would need to be simple enough to continue without burdening its leaders. At the same time, it should supply information at regular intervals. Perhaps it would involve monthly or quarterly reporting of what is happening.

It is possible that some members of the congregation may be able to become coaches for this kind of intervention. If this would happen, the work of reaching out could benefit a lot more people. Once again, this would call for some kind of oversight. When interacting with non-attending members, each person would then ask two questions. Is this person someone who could be helped by someone less experienced than I am? Or does he require ministry from someone with more experience than I have?

Though this project does not ensure that every non-attending member will be reengaged with her church, it does provide a path to make a positive difference. The process involves intentionally addressing the issues at hand. It creates a way for people to be heard. It offers hope for needed changes. And it supplies opportunities for non-attending members to be proactively involved in the intervention.

## CHAPTER 5

### NARRATIVE OF THE MINISTRY IMPLEMENTATION

The previous chapter proposed an intervention for ESDA Church. This intervention involved face-to-face interviews with current or past, non-attending members. It also suggested a need to establish and maintain an ongoing prayer network that would connect people with each other in simple, small-group worship on a weekly basis. The process was less than straightforward. It involved a number of corrective adjustments along the way. And it required the consideration of additional elements.

Implementation started with the preparation of key players (pastor, elders, and the board). Some things needed to change in order to set the stage for interacting with non-attending members. This was followed by a response to the findings of the research. Various skills were discovered, and then practiced before applying them directly with non-attending members.

After this, there were various early attempts to interact with non-attending members in positive ways. These included specific contact and the application of some of the skills that had been practiced on attending members. As time went on, it became apparent that certain adjustments were needed. A variety of challenges required new approaches to old issues. This included tweaking some things we were doing. And it required completely changing other things.

Initial change came from two directions. In the first place, there had been a complete change of this DMin project direction due to my moving from religious education to district pastoral ministry (in July 2007). After deciding to understand why certain members were no longer attending ESDA Church (February 2010), I began speaking with the local elders to determine what approach might be appropriate in this context (March 2010). Elders' meetings through the last half of the year explored a variety of possible approaches.

The second direction had to do with the process itself. Often, the work of reaching out to non-attending members emphasizes changing the church so that it is better prepared to receive them when they return. While it is important to provide a safe place for people to worship God together, we are all sinners and we tend to hurt each other. Focused study and thinking about positive interactions with non-attending members brought to light an unanticipated need. People often could use help in becoming more durable church members. Addressing this need would require creating different kinds of opportunities than previously existed.

Implementation of change can be a delicate task. People tend to resist the unfamiliar. And busy people are not ready to commit significant time to untested ideas. I came to believe that any change should give people a chance to observe before making significant commitments. It seemed to help if there were opportunities to experience certain aspects of the intervention before asking people to accept the whole package.

### **Preliminary Preparations**

In the course of seeking to connect with non-attending members, I took stock of my own health. I needed a variety of interventions in the areas of physical and spiritual



health. I needed to address certain family issues. And I needed a better method of managing time. By the summer of 2010, I was aggressively addressing each of these areas. Initially, some of the greatest improvements came in the area of physical health.

### Personal Change

This category had slipped over time. In what was probably a kind of mid-life crisis, I realized my physical health was not where it belonged. I had just completed several months of physical therapy for injuries incurred in 2009. I wanted to continue being able to participate in vigorous activities with my children and to have more stamina for work. And so I became almost fanatical in turning my life around in this area.

In the process of dramatically increasing exercise intensity, I shifted focus somewhat. I pushed beyond basic fitness into competitive athletics. This provided opportunities for personal interaction with a whole new kind of person. As an amateur athlete, I had recurring access to unchurched people. New friendships were formed. And new understanding began to grow from these unfamiliar relationships.

In July 2012, I came to the stark realization that my biggest difficulty in the area of spiritual health was the result of poor time management. I would need to learn how to manage time better if I wanted a more consistent experience with God. No matter what else got done, I needed to create daily, protected time with Him. Though this was already happening in meaningful ways, it was sometimes being crowded out on especially busy days.

This called for a total reworking of how I lived my life. While family was gone on vacation, I took stock of where I stood with God. It was a time I had set aside to work on the dissertation. But first, I studied where my time management problems were. I learned

better methods of dealing with time. This included learning how to consciously let go of certain important things in order to have time for even more important matters.

I also sought a different path for my personal walk with God. This involved concentrated prayer and time in the word. I love Bible study. But I lacked in the area of devotional study. Bringing this into my own experience helped change my life. It also gave me first-hand experience that could help in working with others.

### Change for Leadership

As a natural outgrowth, I shared these same concepts in elders' meetings and in sermons at church. I gave very specific examples of how to grow in personal health (spiritually and physically). Others helped to create momentum in this direction. The church was already propelled forward by assisting in evangelistic meetings with Mark Finley in 2010. This was strongly intensified when we sponsored literature evangelists in our area in the summer of 2012.

We preceded this summer with 40 days of prayer (in the spring). Then we had a year of following up on the interests generated by the work of the literature evangelists. As a result, new leaders became involved in reaching out to the community. This strengthened their personal connection with our church. And through these people, others were encouraged to become involved.

ESDA Church has its nominating committee once every two years. The last two such sessions (2010 and 2012) had an additional emphasis on protecting volunteers from being over utilized. This was especially true of the 2012 nominating committee. By the time the group met to decide on people filling various positions, it had become clear that burnout was an issue affecting some of our members. We realized we had a responsibility

to safeguard people from overwork. We also needed to provide opportunities for more people to be personally involved.

In a small, or mid-sized church, there can be a lack of specific, coordinated effort on the part of leaders. People may end up working independently. To some extent, this was happening in ESDA Church. In order to avoid this, I began to have formal, one-on-one meetings with our head elder (starting in July 2012). These happened once a month (in addition to informal contacts throughout the month). As a result of these meetings, there was less duplication of effort and more unity in the way we ministered to the congregation.

From the beginning of my time with ESDA Church, board meetings included corporate worship. This sometimes involved sharing a thought from a Bible passage. At other times, we studied a book that emphasized soul-winning. Almost every time the board met, we would break up into groups of two and pray about specific people, and the needs of our church. This helped to bond board members with each other. And it put us in a stance that was submissive to God's leading.

### **Response to Initial Findings**

In order to get a grip on what the Bible had to say, I read the entire Bible with a particular focus (May 2011 through February 2012). I searched for what the Bible had to say that could be related to reaching out to non-attending members. This was followed by a similar search through contemporary literature. Along the way, I wanted to establish what would become part of an interview process. In addition, I looked for what kinds of intervention might address needs exposed by the study.

## Testing Concepts

But I did not wait for the formal intervention. Instead, I sought to practice various aspects of what the reading brought to light. This included a variety of skills and methods which were underdeveloped in my experience. I tried to find ways to help people know they were being heard. I applied different pieces of the process on different people.

At times, this was very informal. I noticed how people responded when I asked certain questions. I paid attention to the kinds of reactions that came from certain words or phrases. I observed the kinds of things that served as triggers or hot buttons when experiencing interpersonal conflict.

And there were many occasions that required the skills revealed in the reading. Even though the formal interviews had not yet begun, I became repeatedly involved in the process of conflict resolution (discussed more in a following section). There were also people who volunteered information about why they no longer attended our church.

In addition, there was reflection on previous conversations with non-attending members. They kept appearing at funerals, social events, or surprise encounters. For example, one unexpected contact with a non-attending member happened when she phoned me on behalf of a local organization. Her telemarketing attempt suddenly put her in contact with the new pastor in the district.

## Sharing the Concepts

This kind of practice was extended to other church leaders. For example, at an elders' meeting, there was coaching on visitation (May 2011). At one point, some new members expressed concerns about a cross that was used at the front of our church. It had suddenly appeared as a decoration during the Easter season. It raised concerns for some

that we were moving in a spiritually inappropriate direction. The situation was explained to the new members, but it didn't stop there.

Rather than just interacting with individuals, we brought this matter to the board (May 2011). The board took a careful look at the use of symbols. It came to the conclusion that the cross was a symbol that was technically neutral. It could have either a positive or negative affect on various people. But it had become a stumbling block to a few people. As a result, the board voted not to use the cross as a decoration the following spring. This was not a vote to define all future decorating. It was just for the next spring. It became a practice for addressing issues between members.

#### Formal Training for Members

There were also various opportunities for church members to experience personal growth. When Mark Finley came to Chicago area in 2010, his arrival was preceded with many training events. After he had come and gone, more training was offered. Vicki Griffin presented a seminar on health (March 2011). Bruce and Dorothy Hayward brought a relationship seminar to the church (April 2011). Ben Maxson taught on discipleship (September 2011).

While the literature evangelists were working in Elmhurst area, members received training from the newly appointed Bible worker trainer, Bill Hartsook (August 2012). This was followed up by personal coaching from Bill Hartsook over the next year (September 2012 through June 2013). Over the course of that year, more and more members became personally involved in the process.

## Background Work

In the background, elders were involved in meetings that had a direct effect on the attendance of church members. At one point in time, this involved finding a positive way to handle a person with a church position who was involved in compromise. The goal was to avoid leaving reason for bringing disgrace to the cause of God while at the same time seeking to help the person in the position of compromise (date withheld for privacy reasons).

Elders were thrust into uncomfortable and unfamiliar territory in handling another kind of matter. Two people who were regularly attending services began to become the cause of others not feeling safe while attending ESDA Church. In each case, our church members were interacting in winsome ways with individuals who were not appreciated by the average person. But things began to degenerate as each individual had his own risky agenda.

One of them began to make advances on women in the church. The other one brought teachings that went against SDA doctrine. This became an issue when he began actively proselytizing guests and members. In an environment where we try to win people to God through winning them to us, it is strange to ask people to leave. But this became necessary.

Even this painful process provided opportunity for positive change. Each of the individuals received personal care. There were direct, respectful interactions that explained the issues at hand. In each case, the individual was given opportunity to change. The man who made sexual advances was kept on a short leash for a few weeks, but ultimately couldn't live within boundaries. He was asked to leave.

The individual who was proselytizing was included in discussion with the elders. He helped to create a path for worshiping among us. But he eventually realized that he could not keep quiet. He met with the elders again to explain why he would need to share his personal understanding with others. The elders explained exactly how this was creating difficulty for weaker members in our congregation. In the end, a mutual agreement was reached, and this individual could no longer worship with us.

This was a painful process for the church. It was also necessary in order to protect others who were coming. We came to see that certain people create a sense of threat. This sense of threat causes others to feel unsafe, and can become a reason they stop attending services. Outreach to these two individuals would have to take place away from the church building. At the same time, the process of interacting with these two individuals became practice in handling conflict. Such practice was a valuable training for work with non-attending members.

### Word of Caution

The encounters we had with these two, disruptive individuals highlighted a needed caution. Here were two people who wanted to regularly attend our church. Yet we had to ask them not to come. Our difficult experiences with them could be repeated by reactivating similar individuals who were not currently attending our church.

Some people who have been hurt by conflict can be drawn back to regular church attendance when their concerns are addressed appropriately. But there are others who cannot be reached through these means. In his classic book on this matter, Haugk calls such people antagonists (1988). He notes that “in most cases, antagonists do not respond positively to attempts at reconciliation” (p. 129).

Haugk gives specific instruction on how to handle antagonists in the church. He shares ways to limit the damage they can cause. In considering the process he describes, it becomes evident that we should keep our eyes open. It would probably be better not to bring an antagonist back to regular church attendance. The same caveat could apply to a variety of individuals who tend to habitually generate conflict. It may also apply to people who would introduce fanaticism to the congregation.

It may be helpful to determine if conflict is fueled by ego. Such knowledge could influence actions taken by the church. At the same time, great caution is needed to avoid labeling people as antagonists or fanatics when they may merely be hurting.

#### Proposal for Change in Software

In the meantime, a little detail appeared to limit ongoing interaction with a certain kind of person who was not attending church. When a person stopped attending but remained a member of the church, his name would be included in regularly generated lists. This included address lists and birthday lists. Since I write a birthday card for each member, these non-attending members were receiving this light touch once a year. But if a person was removed from membership, her name would no longer appear in these lists. I wanted to have a way to facilitate reaching out to this small group of people who used to attend ESDA church.

The clerk software is viewable for pastors. This is the source of my contact information for people. The list is maintained at a web site, eAdventist.net. I wrote to the people at eAdventist and asked for them to make one change. I requested that people in the “removed” category could be included in the automatically generated list of birthdays (July 2013). Brian Ford responded to this request. He explained that this information can



be found by searching for it manually on the site (and then generating a list for people who have been “removed”).

I realized that we had come to a barrier. The system is set up so that many things are possible to generate if you want to take time to work with the spreadsheets. But these things are not easily available through the automatically generated lists. The system is set up well for maintaining information. It also works well for the normal routine. But it is not so convenient for things that are off the beaten path. It seems that there is more interest in making the data serve basic maintenance functions rather than reclaiming functions of the church.

#### Input From Leaders

In addition to various kinds of practice, church leaders began to consider ways to address retaining members. The board of elders and the church board looked at different aspects of what this might include. I sought to approach matters in a way that gave time to think and consider outcomes. For example, at the elders’ meeting (October 2012), elders were told what was coming the following month. Two main suggestions would be considered. One was finding ways to record attendance. The other involved creating regular contact with non-attending members.

The board meeting (October 2012) began to look at what kind of groups of people we should target for specific ministry. At the next elders’ meeting, I shared that my personal emphasis was going to be two kinds of people: visitors, and non-attending members (November 2012). I asked the elders to discover what two kinds of people should become the focus of our church. We realized that individuals could have a bit

different focus. But the main direction of the church would need to be limited to one or two areas.

At the next board meeting (December 2012), we used a segmenting exercise to seek areas of emphasis for the church. We nominated an individual to take attendance each Sabbath. She later declined. Another person was asked, and accepted the position (January 2013). Over the next few months, she tried to keep up. But personal health issues and other concerns limited the extent to which this record keeping was applied.

The next step was to describe the Dunbar effect and discuss what it can mean for our church. This was presented to the elders and the church board (April 2013). I appealed to the elders, and later to the board members, to form small prayer groups. This could be as small as groups of two people. It could be as simple as a weekly phone call where they prayed with each other over the phone. The consensus was to experiment with this for one quarter (through June 2013).

These various discussions and experiments serve as the backdrop for the intervention which is described in the next section.

### **Early Attempts to Address What is Missing**

As noted above, there was a constant, background practice of a variety of methods that could help us connect with non-attending members. But a formal approach involved interviewing non-attending members and seeking to address issues that came to light in the interviews.

From almost the beginning of my work with ESDA Church, I had sent birthday cards to people on their birthdays. This was made possible by two retired ladies who alternated months in assisting me. They purchased birthday cards and wrote names and

addresses on the envelopes. I wrote personal notes in each card and signed these cards. Then, the ladies would watch the calendar and mail these cards to people on their birthdays. This included attending members, non-attending members, and people who were not members. The only requirement for receiving a card was that we had contact information and knew the birthdays.

Over the years, some of the recipients commented on the effect created by these recurring personal notes. It was one way of connecting with people who had lost touch. It was also a way of affirming people in writing. Not too many people took time to respond. When they did respond, the feedback was mostly positive. The few comments that were not positive tended to involve budget concerns. Overall, though this work was time-demanding, it seemed to be worth the time, effort, and cost.

### Interviews

When it came time to schedule interviews, it was often challenging to find a time and place for meeting the person to be interviewed. Some interviews were easily scheduled. Others seemed to be dreaded. Certain individuals repeatedly dodged such experiences. Still others seemed fine with the concept, but struggled to create time for an interview to take place.

In the end, the eight interviews were scattered in time and place (May 2012 [2], June 2012 [3], July 2012 [2], December 2012 [an incomplete extra one], and June 2013). The interviews involved three women and five men. Six of these were people who were no longer attending. Two had been non-attending members in the past, but had returned. In regard to age, one was elderly, three were young adults, and four were middle aged.

The interview included questions about what should change in ESDA Church and what should stay the same. Each of the people interviewed shared positive things that should stay the same. Most also shared things that should change. Three revealed some kind of hostility that was involved. Several shared personal challenges that had led to non-attendance.

In addition, there was one partial interview with a person who was on her way out of our church. Rather than using the survey sheet, she merely shared what her specific concerns were. In the end, she decided to remain connected with us and even hold a number of ministry roles in the church.

#### Findings From the Interviews

These personal interviews supported findings from the theological reflections and the survey of the literature. They also highlighted several key needs. Four of these key needs were attendance, Christian lifestyle, the need to be heard, and conflict management. This called for ESDA Church to develop ways to see who had stopped attending services. Members sometimes needed support in matters of Christian lifestyle (dealing with destructive habits and finding practical resources for following Jesus). They also needed to ESDA Church to provide specific ways to let people voice concerns and deal with conflict.

The interviews did more than reveal these needs. They confirmed the concept that an intervention should include three main tasks: protecting attending members, visitation, as well as listening and communication. There is also a need for follow-up work. Such work involves addressing potential causes of non-attendance.

All three of these tasks come together in applying conflict resolution. They also are addressed by providing opportunities for interpersonal contact through small group worship services. In fact, ESDA elders had wrestled with the concept of providing small groups (also known as growth groups) for our congregation (in March 2009). But we came to the realization that people are separated geographically. And those who live near each other do not share natural affinities. In the end, we recognized that we needed small groups, but we would have to discover a different way to offer what they would provide.

### **Adjustments Required by new Challenges**

Implementation of the intervention involved the formal interviews as well as a church response to issues raised by these interviews and by the study that preceded them (theological reflection and literature review). But it soon became necessary to make adjustments to the intervention itself.

For one thing, there was slow leadership buy-in. And this may have been a good thing. ESDA Church tends to be fairly conservative. Change does not happen quickly. While this can be frustrating, it can also be a blessing. The slow, cautious approach to proposed changes helps to prevent rushing into a direction that would lead to frustration and disappointment. I came to realize that this was behind a reluctance to offer small groups on an ongoing basis.

### **Another Kind of Small Group**

Ever since an elders' meeting in March 2009, we kept trying to find a way to provide what small groups should provide. For the elders, this seemed to be more of a background consideration. One elder led a small group on Sabbath afternoons. But this

was not a growth group. It tended to focus on doctrine, or interesting topics. Our church needed a way to involve more people in what small groups had to offer.

Then, the literature review offered a breakthrough with a look at the Dunbar Effect. I came to realize that the best way to reach more people was to focus on fewer people. I decided to do with small groups what Joseph Kidder did with mentoring (Kidder, 2011, pp. 50, 51). I looked for one person, and created a mini prayer group. This group consisted of only two people. Since it was the first group, I was one of the people and our head elder was the other one.

We met once a week to read the Bible together and to pray for each other. We made a commitment for this to happen during the summer quarter (July through September 2013). Since we had dramatically changing personal and professional schedules, we normally met by telephone. This often involved one of us calling the other from a vehicle parked on the side of the road. Occasionally, we adjusted the time or day of the week. But we met every week. One time, we were able to meet face-to-face.

In the process, I discovered several significant things. Though this was not anything like a normal small group meeting, it did provide many of the same benefits of a traditional small group. We had fellowship. We experienced corporate worship in a very personal way. We provided each other with a safe place to seek spiritual help. We shared personal concerns and praise for answered prayer. Over time, we became more and more open with each other. And the experience helped to bond us as brothers in Christ.

Neither one of us was a novice in the faith. Each of us was serious about his own spiritual condition. At the same time, this was more than practice for something to share with others. It filled a personal, spiritual need. It also became a confirmation of a method

that would be easily transferable. What we did with each other would be easy to do with other people in the months to follow.

### Benefits of Mini Prayer Groups

There were three things that I really liked about the mini prayer group. First, it was very sustainable. Since there were only two schedules to match, it could continue even during the most chaotic weeks. Even when one or the other was on vacation, we were able to worship over the telephone. One reason it was sustainable was due to the flexibility. When we had a little more time, we could dig in a little more deeply. When we were under more pressure, we could meet more briefly.

Second, it went beyond theory into actual practice. We each were able to quickly recognize this advantage. Rather than telling someone to read the Bible and pray, this gave the chance to model such practices. The process of experiencing this on a weekly basis for three months could help establish a habit. Rather than making people feel guilty for what was not happening, this actually demonstrated one way to have a personal devotional life.

Third, this method was so simple that it could easily spread through people who did not have much experience in the faith. After a quarter or two of practicing this with a more experienced person, it would be possible for an individual to reach out to someone else who was not involved in small groups. In this way, it could grow slowly, but steadily over time. This could make it less like a flash in the pan, and more like plodding along toward a goal.

This experiment was also meant to address a different challenge. ESDA Church has two prayer coordinators. In the past (2010-2012) they had brought a variety of prayer

events to our church. But each had work challenges which crowded out time to prepare and lead in a strong prayer ministry. The mini prayer groups became a way to compensate for the lack of larger prayer events (2012-2013). Though such events can happen again one day, there is another prayer initiative that is concurrently happening.

### Listening

The other major thrust of the intervention had to do with listening to people. This was expressed through the formal interviews and through coaching conflict resolution. In addition, there were numerous, opportunistic listening experiences. These were often connected with various services. At funerals, people shared more than their grief over the loss of a loved one. After worship services at church, people often pulled me aside to express a concern or to share a personal difficulty.

These became opportunities to extend the gift of listening. But they also provided informal settings to coach a process of proactively addressing conflict in order to resolve it. On some occasions, this led to meeting again in a more formal setting. For example, after one funeral (October 2011), family members agreed to come together and address long-standing differences and hostilities. We met at the church for seven hours. All I did was to coach the process of sharing pain in a respectful manner.

As people opened up to each other, understanding began to come. There were apologies made, and forgiveness was extended. And the whole process formed a bond between a non-attending member and the church of her past. She began attending services again and became active in a number of ministries.

This process of handling conflict in a positive way was a key part of interacting with one challenging visitor. As mentioned above, the elders and pastor met personally



with the individual who was proselytizing members and visitors (November 2011). He shared what was on his heart. We shared our concerns. In the end, we were able to come to a kind of understanding. We agreed to disagree on theology. We affirmed our love for each other. And we were able to set up real boundaries (which included his ceasing to be physically present in our church building).

We found this process to be very long and tedious. At the same time, we found it to be a lot more peaceful than a harsh confrontation. And it did not ignore the problem at hand. It also became a kind of training for elders. It provided a pattern for dealing with differences in a positive way.

#### Personal Experience

This process took a very personal turn in October 2012. I came to realize that a certain couple in our church had deep misgivings about my ministry. Though it was very painful to hear about it, the good thing was that they didn't go around talking about me behind my back. They requested a meeting with me.

Here was a rather dramatic change in process. I was trying to learn and apply principles of conflict management. I was seeking to model this for others. But now, I needed the process for myself. I could not be the coach and a person on one side of the conflict.

And so I reached out to our head elder. He was perceived by both sides as being neutral. He had the best interests of the church at heart. He cared about the other couple. And he cared about me. It was an extremely hectic week, and there seemed to be no time to meet. But we carved out time for this much-needed intervention. We met at the church after a wedding.

Before getting into the actual discussion, I shared a basic process that could facilitate understanding. They agreed to the process, and we began seeking to resolve the difficulty. They were able to share honestly and earnestly what was on their hearts. I practiced reflective listening and sought to really hear them. They were respectful and forthright.

In the end, I was also able to share where I was coming from. Each side had a misperception of the other. And these misperceptions were removed by the work of the Holy Spirit, and by a careful reaching out to each other through the process of coached, conflict management. I discovered that a willing, Spirit-filled Christian could serve as coach even without receiving specific training in conflict management.

#### Modification to Interview Process

There was one significant change to the interview process that came up over time. I realized that it wasn't enough to know why people left. I wanted to know why some came back. As a result, two of the eight interviews were conducted with people who had stopped attending ESDA Church, but who later returned (these interviews were conducted in June and July 2012). As a result of these interviews, there was an increased sense that people need coaching on how to handle brokenness. This seemed even more important than changing the church to receive them back.

#### Other Change

Two other changes deeply impacted ESDA Church as we were seeking to understand and minister to non-attending members. The first one had to do with my work assignment. The second was the result of what took place in a neighboring church.

I had been working as communication director for the Illinois Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This was on a part-time basis. I never could keep up with all that should be done by a communication director while also serving as pastor of ESDA Church. The Conference was finally able to hire a full-time communication director. Before she took up her new role, I was assigned to be the pastor of Naperville Seventh-day Adventist Church (August 2012). This provided more time to work on the project during the day. It also created more pressure for evenings since evenings tend to work best for meetings and visitation.

This came to a sudden end when the Conference created a new district (effective September 2013) and hired a pastor from another state. Once again, I was able to focus more time on ESDA Church. And this adjustment came just in time to deal with the second drastic change. We were suddenly thrown into something that was rather like a church merger.

#### Large Influx of New Members

There was a strong conflict among key leaders in a neighboring, ethnic church. In the background, many of these people had the ongoing, nagging sense that they should not be in an ethnic church. They felt that they should worship in an English-speaking context since they were living in the United States of America. Their children didn't fully understand the language of the ethnic church. Many of them struggled with worship services in their second language (which was the first language of their parents).

I had helped with preaching in that ethnic church a few years earlier. At that time, the church functioned without any pastor for a couple of years. They had three formal worship services each weekend (Friday night, Sabbath morning, and Sabbath afternoon).

I helped with services that did not conflict with ESDA Church worship times. As a result of our earlier connections, these people came to visit ESDA Church when they felt they could no longer remain in their own church.

As they came, I sought to understand what was going on. I spoke with the people who were visiting ESDA Church (April and May 2013). I also spoke with the pastor of the neighboring church. He presented a different picture than the people visiting ESDA Church. After listening to two sides of these stories, I came to the conclusion that, among other things, these people had not actually heard each other. I offered to help these visitors build a bridge back to the home church. They all declined.

In some ways, their previous pastor hated to see them go. But he also felt that it was not possible for them to continue being a part of his church. This was due to the effects of the conflict.

In each case, when an individual did not want help building a bridge to the home church, we welcomed the person to join ESDA Church. None of this was done in isolation. Since a group of people joining us would impact the whole congregation, I kept our leaders involved in the process of making the adjustments needed along the way. The matter was brought to the elders' meeting and to the board meeting (May 2013). Leaders all agreed that we should extend our hospitality to these displaced worshippers. We also decided to keep an eye on the process. We wanted to be careful not to import conflict to our own place.

As these people began to worship with us on a more regular basis, we got better acquainted. We realized that this was the chance to avoid losing a whole group of people who might otherwise leave the SDA Church. In fact, some of them confided that they

seriously considered doing such a thing. But strong, proactive measures helped to prevent this.

I saw my role as including three main tasks in this process of integrating incoming people. First, I sought to personally interact with each one of them. I spent extra time with the ones who seemed to be leaders among them. Second, I communicated constantly with ESDA Church leaders. I wanted to make sure that we were together on whatever happened in the process. Third, I tried to anticipate and avoid the kind of fallout that follows such a large group being superimposed upon another group (we had up to 50 of these people visiting our church on any given Sabbath).

As time continued, these people began to transfer their membership to ESDA Church. Our members welcomed them with open arms. And then challenges followed. The process of including new people in the various ministries of our church caused some people to become uncomfortable (August and September 2013). New talent was helpful. But there was some turf guarding that followed. We realized that we could end up losing some of our members the same way the neighboring church was losing some of theirs.

As a result, there was a lot more work to do in ensuring that ESDA Church members would not be unintentionally pushed aside by fresh talent. And there was work to do in helping the newcomers to be meaningfully integrated into the life of our church.

And so ESDA Church has been going through a process of implementing the findings of this project. A part of this process has been well thought out. Another part of the process has required making needed adjustments which could not be anticipated. I am thankful for the previous learning which helped ESDA Church cope with an emergency that is also an incredible opportunity. We have more to learn as we keep applying the

implementation. At the same time, we are already being blessed by the preliminary benefits it is bringing.

## CHAPTER 6

### EVALUATION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The different phases of working on this project brought different things to light. The theological reflections highlighted specific needs to be addressed. First and foremost, this required conscious effort to grow spiritually, both personally and corporately. The Bible revealed the need for a sense of belonging. It modeled a practice of working with people who were at risk.

This practice included seeking their input, often using open-ended questions. It involved presenting options to people. And it showed ways of seeking to influence the choices people would make when considering the options. In addition, the Bible showed a variety of specific matters that could positively or negatively affect the way people would perceive the individuals who sought to reach out to them.

The literature review affirmed the need for corporate worship. It showed a wide variety of reasons people stop attending church. This provided a background perspective with which to compare comments from non-attending members of ESDA Church.

One very helpful contribution of the literature review was a collection of matters that could influence the process of working with non-attending members. Some of these matters were unexpected. The whole area of size and limits, and the Dunbar Effect

brought a change of direction in the project. It revealed a need to connect people in meaningful ways, on a recurring basis. It became a launching pad for mini prayer groups.

Another clear need introduced by the literature was the concept of pain and suffering. This led to a much greater emphasis on helping people respond proactively to damaging relationships and experiences. This stands somewhat in contrast to a number of approaches that emphasize providing a safe environment in the church. Though work in that direction is also important, it may have been overrated. People can be empowered to deal with problems which are almost certain to come.

The literature pointed out several skills needed for working with non-attending members. The two skills that were most emphasized were listening skills, and dealing with conflict. Rather than avoiding conflict, there is a path to work with it and grow through it. These two skills, while being some of the most challenging to master, are also some of the most effective in changing outcomes.

In looking back at the formal interviews and the opportunistic conversations, there are a number of things to learn from. These relate both to the process itself, and to attempts at providing meaningful responses to needs revealed by the literature and by the interviews.

### **Evaluation of the Interview Process**

The Interviews themselves were too limited in number to draw general conclusions for the wider North American context. At the same time, these interviews provided real windows into the thinking of people who stopped attending Elmhurst SDA Church. The process appeared to come across as non-threatening. People freely shared



what was on their minds. For some, it appeared that the chance to share these thoughts brought an expectation that their concerns would somehow be addressed.

The very discipline of conducting these formal interviews also changed the nature of other conversations I had with people. The informal, off-the-record conversations became opportunities to discover what was going on in the lives of these people. Rather than guessing why they were not attending services, I began to ask for their perspectives. I started to implement a pattern of asking people what they wished could be different and what they would like to keep the same.

#### General Effects of Interviews

The interviews themselves were a kind of intervention for people who experienced times of non-attendance at ESDA Church. But the intervention did not stop there. Most of the people interviewed seemed genuinely glad to share their perspectives on the issues at hand. Just talking about the matter seemed to provide a measure of relief to some who were burdened by past, negative experiences.

At the same time, the interviews also brought up the need for follow-up action. This sometimes involved problem solving. At times, it called for further meetings to deal with interpersonal conflict. And it occasionally provided an opportunity to create interpersonal connections that could help build toward renewed involvement with the church.

People who were part of the formal interviews, and some who were part of the informal interviews began to reconnect. There was considerable variation in this regard. Some came on rare occasions (after not attending at all). Others began to take a personal interest in reaching out to people who were still not attending regularly. Still others began

to request a variety of personal interventions as they saw hope in dealing with matters that had influenced them to stay away.

### Specific Outcomes for Interviewees

More specifically, this is how things turned out for the eight people involved in the formal interviews plus one who went through a partial interview. One who was interviewed for perspective had already come back years ago. Following the interview, he became more intentional in reaching out to non-attending members.

Two interviewees were involved in compromising lifestyle issues. One attends ESDA Church on rare occasions. He vacillates between seeking positive change and returning to the things which pull him away. The other one, though friendly when we meet, has suspended church involvement.

One interviewee struggled with an emotional condition which made attendance painful. She loves the people of the church. She finally managed to break through this barrier to attend on a rare occasion.

Five individuals named interpersonal conflict as a reason for disengagement. One began to prepare for departure, but chose to stay active in the end. One lived a great distance from the church. He and one other interviewee have transferred membership to other SDA congregations. Another person had left the church years ago but has begun attending fairly often. She also ministers to people in need.

The fifth one has a complicated relationship with the church. He clearly expresses specific frustrations, but has warm relationships with some of the members. He went through a serious church hunt which took him to 50 other churches. He has come to

believe there is no perfect church. He is intermittently involved in the life of ESDA Church.

### **Conclusions on What is Happening**

The formal interviews and the many informal conversations that took place during the time this project was underway created a kind of composite picture of why some people no longer attended our church. The reasons were widely diverse. In a few cases, there was a fairly abrupt separation from the church. These tended to be related to a personal crisis or to a direct interpersonal conflict.

In other cases, there was a kind of drifting away. This was sometimes related to changing circumstances (moving some distance from the church, graduating from school, et cetera). For others, it had to do with a shift away from certain beliefs or SDA lifestyle practices. As the person no longer resembled what Seventh-day Adventists represent, he tended to drift away. On the bright side, these people could begin attending again before they changed their lifestyle (due to the love they received from people in the church).

To summarize, there are seven basic issues that were uncovered in the course of working on this project. (Recommendations to address these issues are in the following section.)

#### **Seven Basic Issues**

First, the matter of people not attending ESDA Church could be seen as a call to change the nature of the church in order to make it seem more attractive to them. But this consumeristic approach merely heaps frustration on those who are currently, actively involved in the church. And it doesn't adequately prepare non-attending members to return.

Second, most non-attending members sense a need to be heard. There is often a feeling that no one is really listening. At times, this feeling is perpetuated even when someone is listening due to unintentional signals from the listener that he is not actually listening.

Third, people who have become disconnected from ESDA Church often lack the tools needed to help them return. The same brokenness which was part of their journey out of the church can prevent them from returning. Or it can make a return short-lived. One significant need for many of those who no longer attend is help in dealing with conflict.

Fourth, insufficient connectedness between people contributes to movement away from attending ESDA Church. The Dunbar Effect strongly limits interpersonal closeness. Without intentional intervention, this is a serious issue for the future of the church. Though traditional small groups could help some individuals, certain local barriers have prevented such groups from flourishing.

Fifth, prayer needs to become a living reality in the life of the church—on a personal level and on a corporate level. The corporate prayer life of the church includes prayer meeting (each Wednesday evening), the public prayer during the Sabbath worship service, and a telephone prayer chain. Something more is needed so that people can experience prayer in small groups.

Sixth, personal involvement in the life of the church is a recurring issue related to attendance. Some people express an unfulfilled desire to participate. Others feel overwhelmed by the many responsibilities that they bear.

Seventh, there is a need for an ongoing, simple yet effective method of tracking who is attending ESDA Church on a regular basis. It is not possible to reach out to non-attending members unless they can be specifically identified. Software and equipment for digitally tracking attendance do not seem cost effective for a church this size. Asking one person to use a complete list for tracking attendance each Sabbath turned out to be an overwhelming challenge.

In addition to these seven issues is a loosely related matter. The large influx of people from a neighboring church has created the need for immediate, significant intervention. As mentioned above, insights gained from this project helped prepare our church to address the needs of people who could otherwise slip away from attending an SDA Church.

Such an influx of people creates a number of challenging shifts in the makeup of the existing church. And these shifts generate various kinds of conflict and inconveniences. Behind the scenes, there has to be ongoing support for those who were here before the arrival of these new members. Thankfully, these people also brought new opportunities.

### **Recommendations on Addressing Challenges**

I have come to firmly believe that the path back into regular church attendance resembles the path to avoid drifting away from such attendance. Though there is no one-size-fits-all remedy, there are several, significant factors which make a big difference in the outcome.

## Proactive Approach

First, for people to be consistently attending services, they need to be personally involved in making or keeping the experience positive. This requires a proactive approach. They need to own the process. We can give them tools that help make this happen. These tools are things that we help them to make as a part of their own experience so that they can be resistant to the tendency to drift away from regular attendance.

In addition to these tools, there are things we can do for these people that help them to stay connected, or become reconnected. But it is important for them to proactively participate in the process. For example, they need to be consistently connected with God. We can take time to explain and to model a personal connection with Jesus. Yet this will only be effective in the long run if they begin to personally put it into effect in their own lives. I have come to believe that the mini prayer groups are one of the most effective ways to make this happen on a deep level.

## Listening

Second, a deeply significant thing we can do for these people is listening. These people need to be heard. They need to *feel* that they were heard, in addition to actually being heard. This requires taking significant time to listen to them. It involves learning how to listen in ways that let them sense they are being heard.

## Conflict Resolution

Third, since many of the factors behind non-attendance are related to conflict, it becomes very important to deal with conflict in a positive way. This often involves a path

of mediation. When someone feels that she has been wronged, she may need a third party involved to help her address the issues with the offending party. This can help in providing a safe environment to seek positive change. Even where positive outcomes do not follow, there is still a sense of support that is a precious gift in a time of need.

There was an odd discovery related to this matter. One person identified a particular individual as the reason he returned to the church while another person identified the same individual as the reason she left the church. And this was no isolated case. The same situation was expressed by others. In pondering the meaning behind the observations it became evident that in each case, interpersonal conflict was behind the individual leaving.

#### Consciously Work Within the Dunbar Effect

Fourth, people may need help in addressing the basic limitations of the Dunbar Effect. There seems to be a tendency for certain people to become overextended in relationships. While it can be positive to maintain numerous, casual relationships, a few, solid, deep, relationships make a world of difference in staying meaningfully connected.

As an example of this, I have made an interesting adjustment in how I use my time with other people. Rather than letting people have my attention on a first come, first served basis, I now seek to intentionally arrange who is a part of each kind of circle receiving my time. Ten to twelve receive my ongoing, focused attention. Another twenty to fifty receive recurring, but less constant interaction. And there is an intermittent, light touch for the larger group.

## Prayer

Fifth, prayer needs to become a stronger aspect of who we are as a church. It seems best for this to move concurrently in several directions. The mini prayer groups hold a lot of promise. At the same time, prayer meeting can be strengthened by leading it like a small group. In addition, several more general things can increase awareness for the need for growing in the area of personal and corporate prayer. This can include personal conversations, comments in sermons, and little messages in the church bulletin.

## Personal Involvement

Sixth, people need to be actively involved in the life of the church. But some people require help in the area of personal involvement. For overly committed people, this may call for helping them to focus more deeply on a few areas of personal involvement rather than becoming spread so thin they cannot do well at any one task. For people who are not involved, this may require creating opportunities for ongoing, personal involvement. The nominating committee provides one resource for helping people with these opposite needs.

## Track Attendance

Seventh, for ESDA Church to consistently help people with regular attendance, there is a matter to be handled behind the scenes. There needs to be some kind of consistent system for tracking attendance. While still floundering with this one, we are actively experimenting with different ways to make it work. It is a necessary and underdeveloped part of the larger picture. The method which holds the most promise so far is a two-step approach.



Elders, plus a few other capable people, have divided the actively attending members into bite-sized groups. Each elder has a list of about eight to ten families to track. He keeps this little list with him each Sabbath (it can be tucked inside his Bible). If one of his people is missing, he can put a little mark on his list. If this happens two weeks in a row, the person receives a phone call. If the person continues to be absent, the pastor is notified. This provides an opportunity to catch people who might be disconnecting from the church.

After this step becomes firmly established, a few more people can be recruited for this task. Each elder can give one or two families from his list to a new attendance tracking assistant. In their place, each elder can add one or two families of people who are non-attending members. Every so often (perhaps a couple times a month) this person will receive contact from the elder assigned to him (phone call, e-mail, text message, letter, et cetera). Two or three times a year, the elders can rotate who is reaching out to whom.

#### Additional Considerations

In addition to the seven recommendations growing from this project, there are three areas that call for further attention.

First, the changes initiated by this project cannot stand as a static record of where we have been. Follow up requires an ongoing process of listening and intervening in other ways. More interviews are needed. Though not a part of this project, such interviews can shed light on further changes that may be needed.

Second, there is still work to be done with existing software that is in use by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. eAdventist.net is a powerful resource

for maintaining information about members and visitors. There is still a need to adjust the software in ways that will allow better interactions with former members who have been removed from membership. The current arrangement encourages the church to forget about such people. But some of them could be reclaimed.

Third, more study needs to be given to the personal involvement of formerly, non-attending members. As they return to active attendance, they can become key connectors with others who are still on the outside. These people have a personal understanding of what led to their non-involvement in the past. They can help create bridges for those who are currently non-attending members.

In conclusion, the project generated personal growth—for a number of members and for me. It also created a greater emphasis on seeking to reconnect with non-attending members. It led to the formation of mini prayer groups. And it brought about more intentional interventions in areas of interpersonal conflict. It has prompted us to systematically track who is present and who is missing each Sabbath. And it caused me to make an adjustment in how I allocate time spent with people.

In addition, as these adjustments have been made, God has blessed us with non-attending members who are beginning to be a more active part of our church. These returning members include people we had not yet begun to reach in any intentional way. Perhaps God sent them to us again as we were better prepared to receive them. This has become a journey for us, and for them. Maybe some of our greatest human resources are yet to be discovered as God sends them to once again be an active part of our church family.

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (24 April 2012 version, Glenn Paul Hill)

1. How did you become a member of Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church? When?
2. How would you describe your current relationship to this church?
3. What are some memories of events and people at Elmhurst Church that stand out in your mind?
4. If you could make some changes to this church, what would they be?
5. What are some things about Elmhurst Church which should not change?
6. How would you like to be involved in the church?
7. How could Elmhurst Church serve you best?
8. Where are you currently attending worship services most of the time?
9. What might stand in the way of your attending our church on a regular basis?
10. What contact has there been between Elmhurst Church and you?

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