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# A Qualitative Analysis of Discipleship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Responses to a Global and Regional Survey

## Introduction

In 2014 the South Pacific Division<sup>1</sup> (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church commissioned a research team from Avondale College of Higher Education to investigate the nature of discipleship. The aim of the research project was twofold: to provide an objective description of a Seventh-day Adventist disciple of Jesus, and to provide a criterion/criteria by which the attainment of discipleship may be measured and shared in the context of the Adventist Church's mission. This paper reports on stage one of the project in which international and national church leaders were interviewed regarding their understanding of discipleship as articulated and applied at division, union, conference, and local levels. This qualitative data was then analyzed for common themes, areas for development, and contributions towards a description of a Seventh-day Adventist disciple. Five key findings emerged from stage one and are reported below, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in the Church's understandings of and approaches to discipleship.

## Project Rationale

At the turn of the 21st century, the global SDA Church was yet to corporately articulate a philosophy and theology of ministry that clearly states how disciples are to be made. Furthermore, the church had not yet communicated how the discipleship process works in a global context. To remedy these deficiencies, the General Conference of the SDA Church launched an initiative to prioritize discipleship at local and conference levels (see Conserving "Membership Gains" in General Conference Executive Committee 2007). As noted by Hankinson (2012), this appeal was shared with presidents at the SPD President's Council, who were asked

to consider what was needed for implementation at conference and local levels. The Division President's summation at the time was: "to not make disciples is to not fulfil the gospel commission" (Hankinson 2012:1). As a result, a number of initiatives have evolved around the SPD seeking to implement discipleship programs.

It is of interest that while *discipleship* is a major focus to Adventists in view of the Great Commission of Matthew 28, the plethora of literature concerning discipleship emanates from Evangelical scholarship other than Adventist scholarship. While several SDA entity websites contain various discipleship programs, content, and seminars, there remains an apparent deficiency in Adventist scholarly research regarding the same. Russell Burrill has spearheaded SDA scholarly work on the theme of discipleship. In the introductory comments in his book, *How to Grow an Adventist Church* (2009), Burrill acknowledges the "vast amount of material that has been written about church growth" (v) from numerous Christian sources but then laments the ongoing inability to contextualize this literature within a Seventh-day Adventist framework. Burrill provides a serious discussion of discipleship within an Adventist context and calls for his church to develop and implement a holistic strategy:

We do a very good job of getting people onto the membership roles and retaining them in the pew. However, discipleship . . . is deeper than agreeing to twenty-eight cognitive truths and then sitting in a pew for the rest of one's life. It is a radical commitment of the whole life to the radical Jesus. Jesus' definition of disciple must form the basis for any discipleship plan your church develops. (2009:102)

The twenty-eight points is a reference to the beliefs of the church and highlights the cognitive focus of believers in the SDA Church (Damsteeg 2011). Burrill therefore appeals to the church to become more engaged in pursuing Jesus Christ in every area of life and ministry and for local churches to develop discipleship plans.

## Materials and Methods

This study implemented a mixed methodological approach; as stated, this article will only report on the qualitative methodology. Qualitative data was used in order to investigate understandings and practices of discipleship within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In order to gather the data from participants, the researchers decided to utilize individual interviews as these have been shown to be highly useful in obtaining in-depth information regarding individual beliefs, practices, and understandings (Gray 2014:383). This method of data collection needs to be planned well

and implemented with intentional focus. As a result of these parameters, questions used for the interviews were open-ended to encourage open and honest answers (O’Leary 2010:197). Most of the targeted participants were not local and after deliberation the researchers chose to refine the data collection further by conducting telephone interviews.

Although individual telephone interviews add risk to the reliability and validity of the data they also add to the focus of the data on specific items which was the goal of this investigation. This form of data collection was preferable owing to time constraints, reliable communication mediums, travel costs, and access to international and national participants. The use of telephone interviews was good for overcoming bias caused by social characteristics such as dress, race, ethnicity, appearance, etc. (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:439-441).

Some limitations to be noted using this methodology include the need for interviewers to be articulate, good at listening, and clear in their speech (Cohen et al. 2011:439-441). The order of questions needed to be well planned since this can influence the responses, especially questions asked earlier in the interview. The telephone interviews were shortened to between ten and fifteen minutes as they lacked the sensory stimulation of visual or face-to-face interviews (439-441). As a result only the essential questions were included for this research. The risk to reliability and validity was considerable, as the number of items was fewer than in other forms of data collection (439-441).

**Table 1. Telephone interviews**

No.	Question	Prompt Questions
1	Does your division/administrative context have a working definition of a SDA disciple of Jesus?	What priority does your division place on making disciples? Is there a strategy to make disciples in your division?
2	How do you measure discipleship in your division/administrative context?	What tools or criteria do you use to measure discipleship?
3	Does your division/administrative context currently use discipleship resources? If so, what are they? If not, do you have plans for this area?	Do you consider children’s ministries including Sabbath School, Pathfinders, etc., to contribute to growing disciples?
4	Do you have any other comments you would like to add about discipleship in your division/administrative context?	

The research team developed a process with standardized templates for the initial E-mail contact, telephone interview, follow up E-mail, and final E-mail with the completed transcript. This process introduced the topic, covered the agreement for participation, and prepared the participant for the telephone call and topic. In table 1 are the prepared questions used during the individual telephone interviews.

Once the data was collected it was transcribed using Audacity and then uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Thematic analysis was undertaken by coding the data into emerging themes multiple times. The results are documented below.

## **Participants**

As stated above, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a worldwide organization structured into international divisions, cross-national unions, state conferences and local churches. Forty-eight international leaders across the Seventh-day Adventist Church divisions and unions were contacted to participate in this study. Twelve agreed to take part. Of the 76 individuals (presidents, SPD departmental leaders, and church pastors) invited to participate, 33 responded affirmatively but only 28 took part in the interview process. Overall 40 participants took part in this study.

## **Limitations**

Each research project experiences limitations and for this study there was a limitation on time. This impacted the data collection in a number of ways. Specifically, a contributing factor to our limited qualitative data was the timing of this collection from December 2014 to February 2015. Over this period many individuals were away or on leave, offices were closed over the year-end and this demonstrably contributed to the limited response rate. Two and a half months was a short period of time to conduct the telephone interviews and work around various schedules and international, as well as national time differences. Two individuals conducted the telephone interviews, which could also be viewed as a limitation; however, a procedure was established to ensure that the same process was followed so that the telephone interviews were conducted in a similar manner in an effort to maintain consistency. The telephone interviews were all conducted in English. This was again a limitation for a number of our participants since English was a second or other language. (French was offered as an alternative language, but this was not used during the data collection.) This limitation may have contributed to the small response rate from participants.

Forty out of a potential 126 respondents (31.7%) took part in the telephone interviews. While this is a good response rate overall, the findings of this phase may not be generalizable across SDA Church groups globally. There is, however, the possibility of replicating this study at a later date and comparing the results and findings. Implications and recommendations must therefore take the limited sample size into account. The suggested maximum of 10-15 minutes for each telephone interview meant that the initial establishing of rapport was shortened, as focusing directly on the topic was paramount. This timing limitation also impacted on the number of questions posed, as it was reliant on the participant and their response length to each question. Technology accessibility also presented a limitation, especially in remote areas across the Pacific region. This limitation may also have impacted the participation and response rate.

Finally, SDA church membership consists of both male and female members; a 2013 report indicates that “the church is 57 percent female, and 43 percent male” (Garcia 2013). The respondents in this study were almost exclusively male. Of the 40 participants who took part in this study, one was female. While discussions of gender representation are ongoing in the SDA Church, the issue may be of some relevance when investigating understandings and practices of discipleship. The possibility of gendered perspectives of discipleship may prove a fruitful area for future research.

## Results

The mission of the SDA Church is explicit and articulates discipleship as its main focus and priority. This prompts questions regarding individual understandings of the nature of discipleship, its connection to leadership, both locally and to the worldwide church. Of the participants in this study, 39 of 40 provided their own personal definition of an SDA disciple of Jesus. Interestingly, only 57% acknowledged a global SDA definition of discipleship and connected this directly with their position and role in the church mission. A number of these respondents clearly stated that discipleship was their “priority” and constitutes the central “vision” of the SDA Church.

Common themes and phrases used in a definition of discipleship were gathered from the data. The most frequent phrase used characterized a disciple as “a follower of Jesus Christ.” Other phrases used in conjunction with the previous statement included: “in word and practice,” “demonstrating the love of Jesus,” “being involved in evangelism, Bible study and engagement,” “imitate the Master,” “living as Jesus lived,” “to have Jesus living in us,” “in a personal relationship with God,” and “sharing because it is a desire to see God’s kingdom filled . . . with everybody because we

have a belief and an understanding that Christ died for everybody. Not just for the few Seventh-day Adventists.”

An in-depth analysis of respondents’ discipleship definitions revealed four major themes: church health, counter-productive discipleship actions, disciples’ actions, and communication. Each of these themes are addressed by 50% or more of the participants. The results are shown in table 2.

**Table 2. Four major themes from the data**

No.	Theme	Number of Participants
1	Church health	24
2	Counter-productive discipleship actions	20
3	Disciple’s actions	35
4	Communication	23

Twenty-four participants discussed the theme of church health and the role it plays in discipleship. One person reflecting on the state of discipleship articulated the following: When “the church is buzzing . . . then that is an indication that discipleship is taking place. If it is inactive, if there is complaining, if there is no life in the church, I think that is an indication that discipleship needs to be worked on.” The “fruit” of believers, the tone of the church, and believers’ treatment of each other were indications of church health for nine of the participants. The particular nature of the Adventist heritage was addressed by three participants who stated that an appreciation of the past contributed to church health and framed the culture of the SDA Church. Within this theme the aspect of commitment to discipleship was raised as a concern by four of the participants. One was concerned that his church members are not being disciples but “just . . . mere members.” Another described some church members as “semi-active” without a “real commitment.”

The second theme from the data links directly with the theme of church health. Twenty participants clearly identified counter-productive actions that did not contribute to discipleship. Seventeen of the participants described a lack of conversion as leading to a “focus on the pettiness . . . minor stuff.” Three participants differentiated between disciples and members, commenting that a key concern for disciples is evangelism, while “members . . . don’t have any passion in terms of spreading the gospel.” Also acknowledged was “some deficiency in the spiritual habits . . . [some members] attend church but they don’t really participate and get involved in serving as a community.” Another participant felt that some members hold the view that “you’re an Adventist in good and regular standing as long as you’re not doing anything “bad” . . . so there is a very low threshold of what it means to be an Adventist. The last counter-productive action identified in the data was that a church’s focus can be too much “on

the program instead of the spiritual experience and growth of individuals.” Two participants responded that at times the program was the main focus and once the program ends, there was no reason to return to church.

The third major theme identified in the data was that of disciple’s actions where the participants listed 21 actions that disciples are engaged in (see table 3).

**Table 3. Disciple’s actions**

Action	Number of Participants
Active church participation	25
Teach others	24
Time with God	20
Lead others to Jesus	19
Mentor	19
Work in small teams	15
Lifestyle	15
Outward focus	14
Nurture and support others	14
Bible study	11
Spiritual gifts	10
Fellowship	10
Stewardship	9
Review practices	9
Sharing experiences	9
Have a toolkit	8
Pray with and for each other	8
Baptisms	7
Other spiritual habits	7
Co-laborer	5
Holding each other accountable	3

All participants contributed to the items on the list above, which is a catalogue of characteristics or practices of SDA disciples of Jesus. Active participation in the life of the church rated the highest number of responses. Specific activities discussed within this field included serving the church and community, participating in church-organized activities other than the worship hour, connecting with fellow Christians, and practicing Jesus’ teachings on how to live as part of the church. One respondent noted that “a disciple comes to listen with attention *and* intention,” which leads to participation and service.

Teaching also garnered a high number of responses, reflecting the Adventist Church’s strong traditional emphasis on Bible study and training: “Our Sabbath Schools are key discipleship moments. They’re very important like the rest, Social Ministry, Pathfinders—all of that feeds into it, but [the Sabbath School study hour] of course is when we have them

all together and that's a unique teaching opportunity there that is for the purpose of spiritual [growth]." Bible study was highly correlated with teaching, with a division leader emphasizing: "we keep going back to the Bible and saying that these are the things that Jesus [did] to open peoples' hearts to prepare the soil—so that we're not sowing the seed on stony ground—we're actually sowing it on well prepared ground."

Worship, prayer, and a strong devotional life all were features of spending time with God. A number of respondents identified this element as primary in the life of a disciple, and acknowledged that this time is key to spiritual growth and a strong relationship with God. Some linked developing spiritual maturity in this way to leading others to Christ: disciples "continually mature, growing in Christ . . . and they [then] have that capacity to be reproduced." Another interesting action was "work in small teams." This came through strongly as a key characteristic of discipleship. Disciples are engaged in small groups where they are both mentored and mentor others. This is particularly pertinent for the leaders' personal experience of discipleship, with one respondent noting: "I'm big on several key individuals that I work with . . . that can then go out and disciple as well. So I have a few that I work with closely. Like right now, I have six individuals that I call on a weekly basis to see how they're doing, to encourage them." Another senior church leader describes his experience in the following way: "I call it 'deeply investing,' and that is just journeying in life with a handful of people that I intentionally select and share life with. . . . It just . . . made sense to me based on how Jesus did his ministry. . . . And I think probably it's been the approach I've taken for, you know, almost 20-25 years of ministry, really. And that is to build a team, to empower a team. Not try to do ministry alone. It's more fun when you do it together and it's more biblical in terms of not . . . trying to do ministry all on your own, but doing ministry with other people and seeing that blessing flourish in the ministry God has called them to."

The intentional, targeted focus on discipleship is varied across the represented divisions. One participant stated that they had "an emphasis on discipleship in all areas of ministry." Six participants stated that they were encouraging their team to become engaged in ministry as an act of discipleship. One division has intentionally taken steps to disciple their leadership each Thursday. The administrators "study . . . together and then pray for specific mission activities that we are also supporting and implementing and for . . . needs." This is "not just a regular devotional every day that we have, this is one special weekly meeting lasting for an hour and a half when we are dealing with issues through the small group context." Another leader indicated that his division was not "really very deliberate in discipleship training." He felt they had discussed training on



discipleship but had not done anything deliberate about it yet. Additional comments were that discipleship should be taking place “through the departments’ . . . mission activities and everything.”

Further evidence shows that discipleship is being targeted across the worldwide SDA Church context in different ways. One division has implemented Bible reading for all ages as a priority in their churches to enhance discipleship with their members. Another division runs a specific two-year program with their newly baptized members. This program includes an articulated direction, identification of needs in supporting new members in their spiritual growth, and a mentoring program. They “train the leaders as well as all the pastors and then we supervise, we encourage the pastor to lead it in the local church.” Another division is actively including members in their out-reach programs. They are proposing and creating ministries such as media ministry, health ministry, and book evangelism for children, in order “for community and for church members to participate in this ministry and actually to use their special gifts.” The same division is also implementing a “Twelve” ministry where “twelve people in twelve groups . . . are participating in this project. . . . They are very active in such programs.”

Evangelism as a part of discipleship is very strong across the divisions and is a main focus. All participants agreed that their evangelism programs are going well; however, some raised concern as “we have been great on these evangelistic meetings and we have brought people in . . . but I have not seen a lot of people stay because of the connectedness and community that is created through discipleship.” Another leader stated that evangelism has “brought us two big problems now because a lot of people left because . . . [they were] not connected to the church” and “there was no discipleship, . . . no fellowship.”

Eight participants stated that there is no measurement used for discipleship. The remaining 32 were positive that there are measurements for discipleship and provided eight different corporate church measurement tools which are listed in table 4. The common means of measuring discipleship across these divisions relies on statistics where membership and the giving of tithes and offerings are recorded. Other measures used in isolation included the recording of activities: Bible studies conducted, good deeds done, pieces of literature handed out, making new disciples, mission activities, and Sabbath School lesson materials purchased. There does not appear to be a definite articulated tool implemented to measure discipleship. There are instances where visual measurement is used. These visual observations are of the number of people attending activities, noticing individual discipleship growth, seeing membership involvement, and church activity.

**Table 4. Current SDA Church discipleship measurement tools**

Measurement Tool	Number of Participants
Baptisms	15
Church membership	15
Tithes and offerings	10
Natural Church Development Survey (NCD)	6
National Church Life Survey (NCLS)	3
Reports	2
Self-developed circle tool	1
How Healthy Is My Church questionnaire	1

The first three items in the table provide the current numbers that are reported and noted for churches, conferences, unions, and divisions. Although these figures provide data on aspects of discipleship, some of the figures may not accurately reflect actual participation. For example, church membership is not seen by the participants as a true reflection as there are names on the church roll where those individuals are no longer attending but the rolls are not updated each year. The reporting of baptisms was viewed positively; however, the attrition of all members was questioned in the interviews including the follow up of new members within the first two years of their church membership. The use of the Natural Church Development (NCD) Survey highlighted church health which was a topic covered by six of the participants and positively by others who are planning to use this in the future. The remaining measurement tools also relate to church health and individual input, with no set church corporate direction being implemented.

A further question on measurement asked participants what they wished could be measured for discipleship. Twenty-one of the participants clearly articulated what they would find helpful in measuring discipleship. Nine participants wished that they could measure the active involvement of church members. Eight participants wished that there were a more combined approach to discipleship linking homes, churches, and schools. Possible means of measuring commitment and activity within the church included regular study of the worldwide quarterly study-pamphlet; and being a mentor or co-laborer was raised by nine participants. A number also stated that a measurement tool that measures “each person’s growing, serving, sharing and worshiping factors” would be of benefit to help people “discover their next step” in discipleship growing.

Twenty-seven of the participants are actively utilizing 93 different discipleship resources. Across the board these resources are varied and are often only used in one or two areas. Interestingly, there are many discipleship-targeted resources available within the Children’s Ministries area;

however, only three participants are aware of these resources or using them. The resource mentioned and used the most consistently is the Sabbath School lesson in a small group setting.

When asked about the resources available for discipleship in their contexts nine of the participants responded. Six participants stated that the Sabbath School Lesson (worldwide quarterly study-pamphlet) was one of the main resources, together with isolated programs including "Walk 2015," "In Step with Jesus," "Making Disciples for the Lord," and the General Conference theme of "Reaching." Three participants stated that they did not know of any resources specifically being used in their contexts for discipleship.

Clearly articulating, focusing on, and regularly communicating across the global SDA Church was raised as an important issue when promoting discipleship in the SDA Church. This gives rise to the final theme drawn from the data: communication. Twenty-three participants acknowledged that opportunities do exist to communicate between leadership sectors, but reflected that often this does not eventuate. Directives are not always effectively communicated, for example, from the General Conference down through the divisions, unions, and conferences to the churches. An appeal was given by three participants to keep a constant long-term global discipleship message which can be developed in-depth. Six of these participants said they had little opportunity to talk with others across the divisions, unions, and conferences. Five participants wished they had more links with the churches, and six stated that leaders needed to embody and model discipleship before they could communicate and share it within their contexts.

## Key Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Five key findings have emerged from the data collected across the international and SPD leadership areas. These key findings are as follows: accurate active church membership, communication, leaders linking personal discipleship to their church employment and role, a need for a corporate approach, and baptism retentions.

### Key Finding 1: Need for Accurate (Active) Church Membership Data

Keeping a record of church membership is one of the measurement tools identified and used in the data. Numerous participants raised the issue of ensuring that this church membership record is accurate and

“active.” These participants felt that the numbers were not indicative of reality. The feelings expressed by individuals revealed that these statistics were irrelevant and did not assist in the measurement of discipleship or in determining a healthy active church. A recommendation would be to have an active church roll which is audited each year showing regular attendance of church members.

### Key Finding 2: Communication across Church Entities

The data indicates that there are gaps in the communication between leaders when it comes to understanding, practicing, and implementing discipleship. Further, communication between church leadership and church workers (pastors, ministry leaders, etc.) could be improved. Some of those in church employment are uncertain whether or not a working definition of discipleship exists. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next key finding. There appears to be a limited knowledge and awareness of the measurement tools that are already available for use and being conducted on a regular basis. Or perhaps, there is a problem with the understanding and interpreting of the statistics from these measurement tools. The recommendations would be to disseminate a working definition across the division to ensure that all leaders are aware of the definition and are able to implement it in their own lives as actively employed SDA church members. Church leaders could further communicate various measurement tools in use for all churches within their division. For example, baptisms, tithes, and offerings, church membership, NCD, NCLS, and provide training on how these statistics can assist in helping to understand the discipleship of each SDA Church.

### Key Finding 3: Leaders Linking Personal Discipleship to Their Church Employment and Role

While almost all respondents could articulate a personal definition of discipleship, only 55% linked their leadership role in the SDA Church as part of discipleship. This presents a potential disconnect in leaders' understandings of their leadership role and their personal journey as a disciple of Christ. It would therefore be necessary to ensure that church leaders have a clear understanding of discipleship and how their commitment and role in the purpose and mission of the SDA Church relates to the expectations of their work. The mission of the church is clearly to be and make disciples of Jesus. Being employed as a leader in this faith-based organization would assume that the employee would

function as a committed disciple of Jesus who is endeavoring to continue this commission throughout their work. The definition of an SDA disciple of Jesus clearly states that this commitment takes place in all aspects of an individual's life, including their employment.

#### Key Finding 4: Need for a Corporate Approach with Localized Applications

The data has also revealed a need for a more combined and unified presentation. The results and findings already identified in key findings 2 and 3 show that not all leaders are familiar with a working definition for discipleship or the connection this has to their leadership roles. There are multiple and varied resources available; however, few of the international leaders are aware of these or know where to obtain them. Many participants have created their own resources or sourced them through the Internet. Combining some sort of resource listing would be of benefit to the Adventist Church as a whole. A targeted approach clearly defining a definition with an outline of the roles and expectations is needed across the worldwide church. The apparent "silo" approaches, although going well and contributing to discipleship, need to be shared and spread across the divisions. An important resource to highlight and disseminate to all leaders is the fact that the world-wide SDA Church invests in people as resources, for example, leadership roles, etc., and shares a Sabbath School lesson across nations and languages. As discipleship is the core mission of the SDA Church, there is a need to instill this so as to assist those in areas where this is not happening intentionally.

#### Key Finding 5: Baptism Retentions

It is clear that evangelism is a strong focus of the mission of the SDA Church. A record of baptisms is used as a measurement tool for making new disciples. Making new disciples is part of the mission of the SDA Church. The findings show that the baptism numbers are growing but concern was raised over these new disciples and whether they were still active members at their second year of discipleship. Perhaps a more targeted approach needs to be taken to the retention of members and their discipleship. One church had implemented a mentor program and another was using the concept of co-laborers. A troubling concern raised under this topic throughout our study was the "real conversion" or commitment of the members and their personal relationship with God.

## Conclusion

From these key findings it is evident that a fully articulated definition of a SDA disciple of Jesus is needed for all SDA church members and leaders. Such a definition will be developed in the next stage of this research project, followed by the development of a personal discipleship measurement tool. This initial stage of data collection, however, has highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in the Adventist Church's understandings of and approaches to discipleship, and invites comparative analyses from other global denominational entities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>From a population of almost 37 million people, the South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist church has approximately 423,000 members in nearly 2,000 churches throughout Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific island nations. Of these members, over 80% live in Papua New Guinea and islands throughout the South Pacific Ocean ('South Pacific', 2016). The SPD has four Unions: the Australian Union Conference, New Zealand Pacific Union Conference, Papua New Guinea Union Mission, and Trans-Pacific Union Mission.

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