Discipleship Structures, Movements, and the Role of Multipliers

Introduction

Disciple making movements matter because they were at the heart of God’s design for humankind at creation and they play a central role in his plan to prepare a people for the second coming of Christ. They matter if the promise of Jesus is indeed true, a promise that abundant life is attainable now (John 10:10) and a promise that provides assurance of eternal life in the hereafter (John 14:1-3). Because movements matter, understanding the role of multipliers, the nature of discipleship structures that facilitate movements and nurture multipliers is mission critical. This is especially true in the era of social media and the epidemic of isolation.

If we take the Adventist Yearbook as our measure of denominational thinking one could conclude that up until relatively recently discipleship, disciple making, and disciple making movements have not been at the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s understanding of its mission. This may be because Daniel 7 and Revelation 14 played a significant role in shaping early Adventist identity and sense of purpose; however, recent changes seem to indicate a shift towards disciple making as a strategic priority of the church, a topic which seems to be at the very heart of the mission of God. My article explores discipleship structures, movements, and the role of multipliers as part of this conversation.

Definition of Key Terms

To start the conversation, it will be helpful to define the key terms which form the heart of this article because they can convey multiple shades of meaning. Here is how they should be understood in this context.
Discipleship

Jesus’ relationship with his twelve disciples defines Christian discipleship. This relationship began when Jesus said, “Come follow me.” (Matt 4:18-20) and climaxed with the command to “go make disciples!” (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus initiated discipleship—he “walked, saw, and said.” “And Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, and He saw . . . and He said, ‘come follow me.’” Disciples were shaped by Jesus, “and I will make you,” in a process that re-defined identity, purpose, and priority. These fishermen—who were defined by their nets, instruments of entrapment and death—were transformed into fishers of men—agents of liberty and life.

For the disciples who were being formed by Jesus, the process began with leaving (in Matt 4 they left their nets, their father, and their boats) and was experienced on the way while following Jesus! Between Matt 4 and 28 discipleship was delivered by curriculum and conversation shaped in the context of life. It engaged ordinary simple uneducated people on the fringes of society (fishermen and tax collectors, see Acts 4:13) and was viewed with critical suspicion by the establishment. Discipleship took time (three and a half years) and did not produce immediate results. The growth it produced was internal and often not immediately apparent but it exploded after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 2:41).

Finally, in Matt 28 Jesus defined disciple making and discipleship as something that occurred under his authority and with the assurance of his presence (vv. 18, 20). What started as “come follow” and “I will make” in Matt 4 ended with “go make disciples of all people” in Matt 28. He identified two disciple-making activities: immersing and teaching. First, to make disciples involved baptizing or immersing people in the name (or character) of the godhead, and second disciple making involved teaching people to obey, observe or keep strictly everything he commanded.

In the New Testament the verb baptize (βαπτίζω) is often used to describe immersion in water. This is what John the Baptist, the disciples, and Paul did on occasion. Baptism by emersion in water was consistently described as John’s baptism—a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin (Acts 19:4). In each of the four Gospels John the Baptist made the following statement or something like it, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt 3:11; see also Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). And in John 4:2 we learn that Jesus did not baptize with water but his disciples did. With this in mind it seems that there are two layers of meaning that could be associated with what Jesus says in Matt 28. First, there is the traditional understanding, that Jesus is talking about baptizing people in water and
doing it in the name of the godhead. The second is that Jesus is calling us to immerse people in the name or character of the godhead. To be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire implies total immersion in the person of God. Discipleship soaks people in the character of God and teaches loving obedience and results in the restoration of the image and likeness of God in humankind.

Structures

Casual conversations about the contents of this article have helped me understand that the concept of structures has the greatest potential for confusion. In this article structures refer to the way things are organized or arranged. In other words, structures are the product of the individual parts used to construct them as well as how these parts are arranged. Change the structures, the parts or how they are arranged, and the nature of the product can be significantly different. An example of this can be seen in the difference between water (H2O) and hydrogen peroxide (H2O2). Both are made up of hydrogen and oxygen but the addition of one oxygen molecule to hydrogen peroxide fundamentally changes the product. This demonstrates the principle that how things are structured makes a significant difference to what they are and how they function.

At the level of human experience structures are significant at an additional dimension. This point is illustrated by a statement made by Sir Winston Churchill during a debate on how the House of Commons should be rebuilt after it was bombed by the Nazi’s. He said, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us” (Churchill and the Commons Chamber 2016). This keen observation points to the truth that the structures we create ultimately shape us. This is not only true of buildings, it also applies to how we shape policies and procedures, roles and
responsibilities, and organizational charts. Churchill’s observation could be modified to say, “We shape our institutions, and afterwards our institution shape us.” In this article I will explore the significant impact that structures have on disciple making.

**Movements**

The idea of movements, I have found, conjures up very different pictures in peoples’ minds. This is especially true for those in the medical community, where this term is associated with the bowels or the actions of the body in space and time. To clarify how the word movements is used in this article I would like to share four definitions that have influenced my thinking.

The first comes from a book written by two European social scientists. They offer this working definition as an introduction to the concept of social movements. “Social movements are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action:” Movements (1) “are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents,” (2) “are linked by dense informal networks,” and (3) “share a distinct collective identity” (Della Porta and Diani 2006:20).

In this definition we are introduced to the fact that movements are characterized by collective action, actors, and mechanisms that include conflict, dense informal networks, and collective identity. In other words, social movements are any social action facilitated through informal networks aimed at bringing about perceived positive change by a group of individuals who share a collective identity. Rodney Stark adds religious and missiological insight to this definition:

The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments. Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semiclosed [sic] networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjacent social networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time. (1996:20)

The key idea that is echoed and emphasized is that conversionist movements grow through “direct and intimate interpersonal attachments.” The success or failure of movements is predicted in large part by how open or closed these social networks remain.

David Garrison adds the element of speed to the definition when
applied to church planting. He says, “A Church Planting Movement is a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment” (2004, 21). And David and Paul Watson narrow the definition of a church planting movement to “an indigenously led Gospel-planting and obedience-based discipleship process that resulted in a minimum of one hundred new locally initiated and led churches, four generations deep, within three years” (Watson and Watson 2014:4).

The specifics of these definitions will be discussed and debated by social scientist, theologians, missiologists and concerned constituents. However, there are several general principles that apply to social movements, church planting movements and disciple-making movements alike. First, movements involve change, perceived positive change. Second, they spread through informal social or relational networks rather than through formal institutional structures. Third, disciple-making movements focus on conversion, loving obedience, and positive transformation. Finally, movements are driven by ordinary individuals who multiply, amplify, and propagate the agenda of the movement.

Multipliers

As has already been noted multipliers are key to movements. For the purposes of this article a multiplier is an individual who is trained and equipped to teach others what they have learned and are practicing. These individuals are described by Paul in 2 Tim 2:2: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” Ying Kai, co-author of the book *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution: The Story Behind the World’s Fastest Growing Church Planting Movement and How It Can Happen in Your Community!* referred to the process of preparing multipliers “as Training for Trainers (T4T) because he expected every disciple to train others” (Smith and Kai 2011:17). I am convicted that finding, training, and supporting multipliers under the direction of the Holy Spirit is the key to “disciple making movements.

Background: Movements and the Three Commissions

In Gen 1 and 2 God laid the foundation for abundant life on earth. He also established his purpose for human beings. This purpose existed before the fall, defined God’s original design for people, and clarified God’s ultimate goal in salvation.

In Gen 1:26 we read that God created humankind in his image and
likeness and delegated the responsibility to rule over the air, the waters, and the land and all the living creatures that inhabit these domains. In verse 27 God’s image and likeness is expressed as a “we” and not a “me”—God created them male and female. Then in verse 28, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number (multiply); fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” The very first interaction that took place between God and the people he created is described as a blessing. In essence people were made for blessing! “The creator gave man the commission to fill the earth and to have dominion over everything that lives on the earth (Gen. 1:28ff.). It is the creator’s intention to make the earth a place of blessing” (Bergman and Ottosson 1977:396). This is the creation commission. People were made to fill the earth with the image and likeness of God, the authority of God, and the blessing of God. Blessing, fruitfulness, and multiplication are a part of God’s original plan for humankind.

In Gen 2 God shares close personal interaction with humankind, making, shaping, and breathing the breath of life into them (v. 7), instructing (v. 16) giving purpose (v. 19) and creating companionship (v. 18). In Gen 3:8 God comes to visit the fallen couple in the cool of the day—from the description in Genesis 2 of God’s intimate interaction with his creation we may be able to assume that this “coming in the cool of the day” was a habit of his.

I do not think that it is overstating the case to observe that all the elements of discipleship are present in creation. Adam and Eve walking with their Creator (the Word in John 1:1), Adam and Eve being shaped and instructed by God, and being given the responsibility to fill the earth with the character or name of God, obedience to God, and the blessing of God.

After the Fall the creation commission is repeated to Noah (Gen 9), a second Adam of sorts, in the context of covenant. It is restated to Abram in Gen 12:1-3, a second Adam in his own right. Christopher Wright makes the connection between the creation commission and the Abrahamic covenants in his exceptional book, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative:

In the majestic account of creation in Genesis 1, God’s blessing is pronounced three times: on day five, he blessed the creatures of the sea and air; on day six, he blessed human beings; and on day seven he blessed the [sic] sabbath. The first two blessings are immediately followed by the instruction to multiply and fill the seas and the earth. The third is followed by the words of sanctification and rest that define the sabbath. Blessing then, in this foundational creation account, is constituted by fruitfulness, abundance and fullness on the one hand, and
by enjoying rest within creation in holy and harmonious relationship with the Creator on the other. Blessing is off to a good start. The next time we hear of God’s blessing, it is launching the new world after the flood, and the language is almost the same as in the first creation account (Gen 9). God blesses Noah and his family, and instructs them to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. At the same time he enters into a relationship with them that includes respect for life—whether animal or human blood—and the preservation of life. That blessing and command are then worked out in the spreading of the nations in Genesis 10.

So when we come to Genesis 12:1-3, the word of blessing must include at least the concept of multiplication, spreading, filling and abundance. (2006:208)

What strikes me is that the heart of God for his creation has not changed. Once paradise was lost it was his deliberate and determined purpose to restore his image, likeness, authority, and blessing to human beings and creation. Multiplication and movements are not a missiological fad or some new strategic buzzwords. Rather to embrace the call to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth is a call back to the heart of God and his original design for people. Wright makes a remarkable observation that has radically impacted my understanding of discipleship. He does this by drawing a long line between the Abrahamic commission and the Great Commission:

With the same dynamic understanding of the place of Jesus within the narrative of “the gospel announced in advance to Abraham,” Matthew begins his gospel affirming Jesus the Messiah as the son of Abraham and ends it with the mission mandate that would encompass all nations. He thus sets the church also under the authority of the Abrahamic mission. The words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, the so-called Great Commission, could be seen as a christological mutation of the original Abrahamic commission—“Go . . . and be a blessing . . . and all nations on earth will be blessed through you.” (2006:212)

In this light the command to make disciples is transformed from an evangelistic tool or a church growth strategy into an opportunity to live in obedience to God’s original design for humankind. It is a doctrine as precious as the Sabbath and an institution as sacred as marriage.

From this point of view the great commission is a thunderous echo of God’s design in creation and his object in redemption. “All authority has been given me in heaven and earth” (Matt 28:18) echoes the idea of “and let them rule over the sea, the earth and the air” (Gen 1:26) and “I will
make your name great” (Gen 12:2). Jesus is the first man since Adam’s fall to rule with all power and authority in heaven and earth. Go make disciples of all nations echoes “let us make humankind” and “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” in Gen 1:26, 28 and “go . . . , be a blessing . . . and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you” of Gen 12:1-3. And “baptizing them in the name of the father, son and Holy Spirit” and “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” points to the restoration of God’s “image and likeness” in human beings (Gen 1:26).

If this is indeed true, then disciple making should most definitely be our consuming passion and most urgent priority. And not just disciple making but disciple making that envisions multiplication and movements.

 Movements and Multiplication

Some may say that movements and multipliers are not described explicitly in the great commission or the Abrahamic commission or the creation commission. I am convicted that God’s intention for multiplication is clearly stated in Gen 1:28, “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” In Gen 12:1-3 God says, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you” and “all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.” After Abraham demonstrates that he is willing to sacrifice his son, God tells him, “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Gen 22:17, 18). This text makes the explicit connection between blessing (especially the blessing of others) and obedience. The creation commission is repeated to Jacob in Gen 35:11, “And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number (multiply). A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body.” In each of these passages that allude back to the creation commission and the Abrahamic commission the idea of multiplication is repeated.

In Matt 28 the principle of multiplication is clearly stated in the text. In verse 19 Jesus commands, “Go make disciples!” and in verse 20 he instructs these disciple makers to “teach them to obey everything I commanded.”
There is no doubt in my mind that multiplication is deeply imbedded in the Creation, Abrahamic, and Great Commissions. Earlier I mentioned that movements ripple through social networks, around a common identity, and in opposition to a common enemy. Gen 3 clearly identifies that an enemy has disrupted God’s original design. From Cain and Able on it is clear that God is calling a people with a kingdom identity who will multiply through family networks and who live in loving obedience and blessing. In Matt 28 Jesus relaunches a kingdom revolution through disciple-making movements that restores his original design. Go, be a blessing, be immersed in God’s character (name), and live and teach obedience. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with God’s image, likeness, authority, and blessing.

So if disciple making is God’s original design for us then how do we catalyze disciple-making movements?

Discipleship Structures

In order to answer the question of how to make disciples I believe it is important to understand the significance of structures. Business leaders understand that there is a relationship between mission, strategy, and structure. The mission of a group of individuals articulates a corporate sense of purpose. It answers the question, “Why do we exist?” The strategy of a group creates clarity around coordinated action and answers the question, “How will we succeed?” (Lencioni 2012:143). Finally, structure addresses the question of how a group of individuals organize to most efficiently execute its strategy and accomplish its mission. The following paragraphs develop the connection between mission, strategy, and structure even further:
An organization’s strategy is its plan for the whole business that sets out how the organization will use its major resources. In other words, an organization’s strategy is a plan of action aimed at reaching specific goals and staying in good stead with clients and vendors. On the other hands [sic], an organization’s structure is the way the pieces of the organization fit together internally. For the organization to deliver its plans, the strategy and the structure must be woven together seamlessly. In other words, organizational structure is a term used to highlight the way a company thinks about hierarchy, assigns tasks to personnel and ensures its workforce works collaboratively to achieve a common goal. . . .

It is important to highlight that for too long, structure has been viewed as something separate from strategy. Revising structures are often seen as ways to improve efficiency, promote teamwork, create synergy, eliminate or create new department or reduce cost, including personnel. Yes, restructuring can do all that and more. What has been less obvious is that structure and strategy are dependent on each other. You can create the most efficient, team oriented, synergistic structure possible and still end up in the same place you are or worse if a good strategy is not adopted.

Organizational structure and strategy are related because organizational strategy helps a company define and build its organizational structure. A company’s organizational structure is based on the result of the analysis of organizational strategy. The company will use these results to determine its areas of concentration and how to position itself in order to succeed. (Pedraza 2014)

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**Figure 4. Proper relationship of mission strategy and structure**

Pedaraza’s point illustrated in figure 4 is that mission should ideally inform strategy and strategy informs structure. He said, “Organizational structure and strategy are related because organizational strategy helps a company define and build its organizational structure.” This is the ideal. Structures should be aligned with strategy and mission and not the other way around. Kent Shaffer, quoting David Watson points out what happens when this relationship is reversed:

Strategy is determined by structure. If we are a house church, the strategies we think about are house church strategies. If we are a megachurch, the strategies we think of are megachurch strategies. The problem with this is the strategy is based on us and not who we are trying to reach.
Strategy and structure are intimately connected, but most of us have connected it to the wrong end—ourselves. The strategy cannot be (about) us but about them. We must learn how to reach people within their context not our context.

I’ve got to learn something in order to reach people that churches are not reaching. Our strategy has to be defined by the structures we are trying to reach. This means you have to understand the structures in your community. (Shaffer 2010)

The point being made here is that while organizational structure should be shaped by strategy and aligned with mission, as Pedraza’s argues, it is often the other way around. As an organization’s structures mature and become institutionalized, those structures begin to shape strategy in ways that are not always aligned with mission. Mission becomes secondary to structure and strategy as is depicted in figure 5.

![Structure diagram](image)

Figure 5. Structure shapes strategy and overshadows mission

Churchill’s observation again comes to mind where he said, “We shape our buildings and afterward they shape us” (Churchill and the Commons Chamber 2016). If we are wanting to reach those we are not reaching “our structures need to be shaped by the structures we are trying to reach and not the structures we have built” (Shaffer 2010).

**Seventh-day Adventist Structure**

So what does this mean to discipleship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Between 2001 and 2005 I had the privilege of travelling across the United States and around the world teaching a simple discipleship curriculum I developed with a team of students at Andrews University. What I found everywhere I went was a deep hunger for discipleship among Adventist church members. I presented to an international
group of students at Andrews, a number of churches across the USA, South Africa, and several locations in Europe. The anecdotal evidence was overwhelming. People longed for deeper personal transformation, authentic biblical community, and equipping for effective engagement in God’s Kingdom. This led me to wonder what it was about our denomination that contributed to this consistently expressed sentiment.

I believe that we may find a clue in the church’s official statement of purpose that has been published in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. The earliest yearbook on the Adventist Archives and Statistics website goes back to 1883. The first statement of purpose of the General Conference is the opening paragraph under the title “Constitution of the General Conference and reflects the need for organization and coordination of effort.

For the purpose of securing unity and efficiency in labor, and promoting the general interests of the cause of present truth, and of perfecting the organization of the Seventh-day Adventists, we, the delegates from the several State Conferences, hereby proceed to organize a General Conference, and adopt the following Constitution for the government thereof. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1883:52)

Since its inception the Seventh-day Adventist Church has wrestled with the question of perfecting its organization. This has been and continues to be a noble and positive endeavor. The organization of dynamic and diverse employees and members with different gifts and varying degrees of dysfunction is no small task. The mission’s critical need for order is identified in the following lines that can be found in the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*. Quoting Ellen White:

> The church of Christ is in constant peril. Satan is seeking to destroy the people of God, and one man’s mind, one man’s judgment, is not sufficient to be trusted. Christ would have His followers brought together in church capacity, observing order, having rules and discipline, and all subject one to another, esteeming others better than themselves. — 3T 445. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016:15)

It is clear that the need to observe order, the process of subjecting of one to another, the diminishing of the influence of one’s mind and one person’s judgment over others are to be seen as a critical defense against Satan’s determined efforts to destroy the church. Not only do the structures of the church provide protection against the archenemy of Christ. They are also critical to furthering the work of the church:

As our numbers increased, it was evident that without some form of organization there would be great confusion, and the work would
not be carried forward successfully. To provide for the support of the ministry, for carrying the work in new fields, for protecting both the churches and the ministry from unworthy members, for holding church property, for the publication of the truth through the press, and for many other objects, organization was indispensable.—TM 26. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016:25, 26)

There is no question that the structures of the church have been carefully crafted and refined over the years for the purpose of providing this protection and with the earnest intent of furthering the work of the church. The critical question though is how have the structures that have been created to meet the needs outline above shaped the church’s understanding and vision of discipleship?

The organizational structures of the SDA Church are defined in two important documents. The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual and The General Conference Working Policy. Figure 6 illustrates the coordination and jurisdictions of the various levels of church administration.

Figure 6. Denominational structure (adapted from The Commission of Ministries 2007:15; statistics from The Office of Archives 2016:4)
According to the *General Conference Working Policy*, “the primary building blocks of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church organization are the local church, the local conference/mission, the union conference/mission, and the General Conference” (2015b:51).

Local churches are organized around the contributions of pastors, boards, ministry leaders, and members. Figure 7 illustrates the ministries that represent the ideal makeup of the local church.

![Figure 7. Leaders, ministries, and departments of a local SDA church](General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016:31, 73-109)

The work of the pastor is to care for the members and lead the congregation in its mission. The members’ roles are to support the initiatives of the church with their time and talents. At the center of the life of the average congregation is the Sabbath morning services and activities. In many places the purpose of evangelism is to lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus, invite them to join the prophetic and apocalyptic mission of the church, gather more people into the community of like-minded believers who will faithfully attend Sabbath services and grow towards spiritual maturity. Often success is measured by the quality of the sermons and programming, number of regular attendees, and the faithfulness of the members both in doctrine and lifestyle. In this context discipleship is either seen as an informal process that takes place in good Adventist homes and includes family worships and involvement in the
ministry and mission of the church. Or it is seen as a formal process that focuses on taking new members through a curriculum designed to deepen their understanding of biblical themes and integrate them into the life of the church.

Leaders serving at the level of conferences, unions, and divisions can find themselves absorbed with managing the many details and issues that come with balancing budgets, mitigating risk, owning assets, employing people, responding to human crises and dysfunction, running institutions, and leading initiatives that are conceived locally or handed down from above. A lot of time can be spent meeting, traveling, mediating, speaking, and teaching. Having spent significant time consulting at the conference level I have observed that there are two additional dimensions to the structures of the church. There is the task of coordinating the work of a group of elected officials and the ever-present sub-plot of sessions or elections and the uncertainty of re-election. The team dynamics that result when an elected leader is given the responsibility to lead a group of people who have each been elected to their positions is a subject for another paper. The point is that these structures impact how we conceive of discipleship. In this context discipleship and disciple making often take the form of initiatives, websites, and curriculum development and distribution. Instead of the needs of people and the mission of the church informing and shaping thinking and structures, the structures play a significant role in shaping how we conceive of and go about the work of disciple making.

Considering the nature of the structures that have been created over the years it is understandable that members and administrators are inclined to see the fulfillment of the Great Commission and the discipleship mandate from an institutional perspective. Evangelists and pastors do the baptizing, and teaching is relegated to the denomination’s vast educational systems. Hospitals do the healing and churches are the place where members serve and give, are dedicated, baptized, married, and supported through divorce, death, and natural disasters.

A survey of the Adventist Yearbook reveals that discipleship is a relatively new addition to the church’s official articulation of its mission. The first time the word discipleship or disciple appeared in the Church’s mission statement was in 2011:

Our Mission—The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to make disciples of all people, communicating the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Savior and unite with His remnant Church, discipling them to serve Him as Lord, and preparing them for His soon return. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2011:8)
This represented a significant shift for the church. Here the core mission of the church is clearly to make disciples of all people. Communicating, leading, uniting, serving, and preparing form subsets of this single focus. The year before the mission statement read:

Our Mission—The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to proclaim to all peoples the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Saviour and to unite with His church, and nurturing them in preparation for His soon return. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2010)

Here the core mission of the church is the proclamation of the gospel rather than making disciples. This mission statement was first recorded in the 2001 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2001:8). For several decades prior to this the church’s core mission was described as follows: “The purpose of the General Conference is to teach all nations the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the commandments of God” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1999:9). The focus in this statement was on teaching the gospel and the commandments. In 2015 the mission statement was updated to read:

Our Mission—The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to call all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the everlasting gospel embraced by the three angels’ messages (Revelation 14:6-12), and to prepare the world for Christ’s soon return. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Office of Archives and Statistics 2015:9)

It appears that the emphasis of the church shifted back to one of proclamation—calling people to become disciples rather than making disciples. This represented a shift back to a focus on delivering a message rather than the process of making disciples.

In the General Conference’s strategic plan entitled “Reach the World” it is encouraging to note that significant time and attention is given to the need for discipleship. A careful reading of this text seems to suggest that the backdrop for this emphasis is retention, member engagement, and spiritual maturity. The following list of key performance indicators (KPI)—measurable outcomes that signal progress towards a given objective—for discipleship are telling:
VIII. Because our Christ-given mission is to create communities of faithful disciples:

**OBJECTIVE:** To nurture believers in lives of discipleship and to involve them in service

**KPI** Church members express lifelong commitment to the church and personal, prayerful involvement in its mission

**KPI** Evidence of increased church-member involvement in service in the church and community

**KPI** Each division and union has a designated Nurture and Retention coordinator and a Nurture and Retention committee

**KPI** Widespread adoption of Seventh-day Adventist membership software to improve records of local church membership

**KPI** General Conference departments collaborating with one another and in consultation with division leaders in creating materials that meet expressed needs in the areas of nurture, retention, and discipling

**KPI** Each division holds conferences on nurture, retention, and discipling

**KPI** Evidence that church members around the world recognize the need for, and support the roles of, organizational structure for the accomplishment of mission. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015a:18)

In this context the object of disciples is lifelong commitment to the church and involvement in its mission, increased involvement in the service of the church and to the community through the church. To accomplish these outcomes each Division is instructed to appoint a nurture and retention coordinator—an indicator that discipleship here is understood to mean helping people to continue to grow after baptism and remain faithful members. In addition to this, membership software provided by the General Conference, material development coordinated by the different departments of the church, conferences on nurture, retention, and discipling are tools that will be provided by the church for the purpose of facilitating disciple making. The final measure of success is that “members around the world recognize the need for and support the roles of, organizational structure for the accomplishment of mission.” Although these efforts are to be applauded and the renewed focus on discipleship is to be commended the language and focus of these objectives begs the question, Is this evidence of the “we shape our structures and afterward they shape us” syndrome?

I find this new focus on discipleship as an institutional objective both encouraging and disturbing. On the one hand, it is wonderful that disciple making is a centerpiece of the church’s strategic plan. On the other hand,
it appears that there is still a need or opportunity to clarify what exactly this means to the organization and the ordinary member. Will the results of this initiative serve the needs of the institutional church or empower ordinary members to live in loving obedience and follow Jesus’ command to make disciples? Two contemporary disciple-making movements stand in stark contrast to the disciple-making strategies that appear to be heavily influenced by the structures of the church.

**DMM and T4T Contemporary Disciple Making Movement Catalysts**

In the Jan/Feb and May/June issues of *Mission Frontiers Magazine* a two-part series exploring the similarities and differences between Training for Trainers (T4T) and Disciple Making Movements (DMM) was published. The authors begin their observations by noting that

> the Spirit of God is launching Church-Planting Movements (CPMs) around the world, just as he has done at various times in history. With Acts-like DNA disciples, churches and leaders are multiplying every few months. In the glorious mystery of God causing the growth, we find that he calls us to join him in the work. (Smith and Parks 2015:36)

What follows is a summary and a description of the mission, strategies, and structures defined by two mission practitioners committed to living in obedience to Jesus’ command to make disciples. Both Ying Kai (T4T) and David Watson (DMM) came to the conclusion that strategic and structural changes were necessary if disciple-making movements were to be catalyzed. Both men came out of traditional institutional church structures. Both were considered successful soul winners and church planters but through different life experiences came to the same conclusion: training trainers of trainers (Kai’s definition of discipleship) or investing deeply in multipliers is critical to the success of the mission of Christ. For these men disciple making is a process not a curriculum or content. This point is made in the following paragraph referring to people who request the book:

> When people ask me to “send them T4T,” I cringe. What they are looking for is content, but they may completely miss the process of training trainers. The process must take people from lostness to 4th+ generation believers and churches. It’s not simple discipleship. It’s a discipleship re-revolution that leads to church-planting movements! (Smith and Kai 2011:95)
So what are the similarities and differences between the strategies and structures of the discipleship re-revolution proposed by these two schools of thought and practice? The first key similarity is a profound respect for the authority and power of the Word of God and the miraculous moving of the Spirit of God as central to the mission of God. For these individuals, the core focus is not primarily teaching what the Bible says but teaching people how to study the Bible so that they can faithfully hear what it says, practice what they are learning, and teach others to do the same. The focus is not on persuading individuals to join a denomination that calls itself a movement but on training and equipping individuals to catalyze disciple-making movements. A breakdown of the structures that deliver discipleship is shown in Figure 8.

For both of these disciple-making strategies and the structures that are developed around them, relatively slow growth is expected in the beginning and explosive growth is expected as multipliers are trained. Discipleship is not a part of evangelism, rather evangelism is seen as a process built into the process of making disciples. Individuals are trained to share what they are learning and practicing with their networks with the expectation that they will be blessed by God and experience God’s miraculous interventions. The DNA of dynamic disciple making is imbedded from the very first meeting. In contrast to an educational system or institutional initiatives where students sit in classrooms listening to lecturers for two or three days or four to seven years before they engage in ministry, participants are urged to discover and act on God’s Word in the context of everyday life. People are taught to worship, identify needs, minister to those needs, study the Bible, share with others what they are learning, and hold each other accountable for the commitments they are making in every lesson. Within this paradigm a person who only knows five percent of all there is to know about Christ but is practicing ninety percent is seen to be better qualified to make disciples then someone who knows seventy-five percent of everything that there is to know but is only practicing twenty-five percent (Smith and Kai 2011:85).

The context where disciples are made in both of these disciple-making systems is social networks. The local church is the basic building block for the institutional structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but the family unit and social networks are the focus of disciple-making movements. Ellen White affirms the central role that families and family networks play in creating significant personal and societal change,
## T4T & DMM Meeting Format Similarities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T4T</th>
<th>DMM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>**FIRST THIRD OF THE MEETING</td>
<td>LOOK BACK**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASTORAL CARE – Ask group members “How are you doing?” and respond – prayer, biblical counsel, meeting needs, etc. Can be done in smaller subsets.</td>
<td>- What are you thankful for this week? (Prayer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>WORSHIP – Worship God in praise and song.</td>
<td>- What needs do you or others have? (Intercession)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Addressed in “What are you thankful for?” and later “What do we learn about God?” Developed more fully in church phase.)</em></td>
<td>- How can we help meet these needs? (Ministry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOVING ACCOUNTABILITY – Asking questions of each member about Following Jesus (“How did you obey what God told us last time?”) and Fishing for men (“Whom did you share with or train and how is that going?”). Key is developing a culture of openness and mutual encouragement/edification.</td>
<td>Repeat and Review of last Bible story</td>
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<tr>
<td>VISION CASTING – A short encouraging word to remind the members what God wants to do in them and through them. Vision has a 30-day expiration point, so it is continually renewed.</td>
<td>- What did we learn about God last week?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What did we learn about people / ourselves?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How did we obey / apply the Scripture?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Who did we share with &amp; how did they respond?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The main component of this is focused on sharing with others and seeking to start new groups with those who respond with interest. <em>(See the question below)</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Broader visioning varies. Movements have explicit long term visions that some repeat in local church meetings and/or in leadership meetings of leaders from various churches in the larger movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**SECOND THIRD OF THE MEETING</td>
<td>LOOK UP**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW LESSON OR BIBLE STORY – with simple application for obedience and/or using a set of inductive questions</td>
<td>New Bible Story</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Everyone in the group restates the story in their own words (showing understanding) and helps correct others as they repeat by referring back to the text (Bible as authority).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What do we learn about God? (Worship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What do we learn about people / ourselves? (Confession / Repentance)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>- How will we obey? (Accountability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**FINAL THIRD OF THE MEETING</td>
<td>LOOK AHEAD**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRACTICE – Practice until the group is competent and confident to pass this on to others. This usually means 8-10 repetitions.</td>
<td>- With whom will you share what you have learned? (Evangelism)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Plans for meeting the needs expressed in the coming week (Ministry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SET GOALS WITH PRAYER – Listening to God and setting goals to obey. The group prays over these goals and re-commissions one another.</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 8. Comparison of DMM and T4T meeting formats *(taken from Smith and Parks 2015:32)*.
The restoration and uplifting of humanity begins in the home. The work of parents underlies every other. Society is composed of families, and is what the heads of families make it. Out of the heart are “the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23); and the heart of the community, of the church, and of the nation is the household. The well-being of society, the success of the church, the prosperity of the nation, depend upon home influences. (1905:349)

If this is indeed true then it stands to reason that the best investment that can be made for the betterment of families, church, and society would be to invest in heads of families. The critical question for this article is what are the structures that will deliver discipleship to the very heart of society? Both DMM and T4T agree with White’s assertion that the family unit and social networks are the fundamental building blocks of disciple making. Figure 9 illustrates the structures of disciple making that focuses on training multipliers:

In this diagram the square represents the missionary, pastor, or disciple maker. The focus of ministry is training multipliers in the context of life using strategies and structures outlined in figure 8. Notice that the trainer is involved in training multipliers as the movement grows. The
trainer is forced to grow in her/his capacity to lead and train as successive generations multiply. Leaders are developed in the context of community and the everyday battle to become like Jesus. People are trained to discover what God is saying to them in his Word, respond in loving obedience to his spirit, and sharing this life changing journey with others. The ultimate measure of success is an increase in trainers of trainers or multipliers.

**The Role of Multipliers**

Multipliers are central to movements. Jesus deliberately spent three and a half years investing in his disciples with the expectation that they would multiply, make disciple-making disciples—be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and to the ends of the earth. As we have noted earlier, this is not some fantastic innovation. In the very beginning God created fruitful multipliers who were to fill the earth with his image and likeness, authority, and blessing.

For modern movements there is no mystery to multiplication. When ordinary individuals experience not just a message but the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10:10b)—when they experience genuine blessing, these ordinary people spontaneously and naturally share what they have found with everyone that they care about. This is especially true because the norm for most people is a world dominated by a life filled with stealing, killing, and destroying rather than abundant living, curse rather than blessing. Could this be what drove the early church like a wild fire across the Roman Empire often in the face of severe persecution? Could this be what fanned the flames of the Waldensians, the Pietists, the Methodists, and early Adventists? Ordinary people made the profound discovery that they were made for blessing and once they had experienced that blessing were compelled to go and be a blessing.

**Conclusions**

How we understand and organize for disciple making matters. Discipleship structures, movements, and the role of multipliers matters. Movements matter if what Jesus promises is true. All our friends and relatives, by creation and redemption need to know the good news. We need to tell them, show them, warn them, and train them. It’s true—we can enjoy abundant life now and eternal life in the hereafter. We were made for blessing others. There is an urgency to our mission because what is will not always be. God intends to end the curse, destroy evil, and restore his uncontested blessing. Jesus is coming soon.

Structure and strategy matter because how we organize and how we
work can get in the way of why we exist. How we teach is as important as what we teach. We can teach about discipleship and abort disciples and disciple makers. I am deeply convicted that the modern disciple-making movements we see being catalyzed by practitioners who are influenced by the likes of Kai and Watson are an invitation for us to rediscover our Adventist roots. Bible study that is focused on the plain text of Scripture, the expectation that the Holy Spirit will lead, and the commitment to taking this life-changing message to the world describe the passion of our early pioneers. The three angel’s messages are about the everlasting gospel and the promise of judgment on deception and evil. God’s end-time people have the faith of Jesus and live in loving obedience to his law (Rev 14:6-12). Discipleship is an invitation to a live a life and share a life not just a message.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a special message and an end-time mission. The various structures of church organization are at some level benign, even useful for maintaining order and coordinating the efforts of a worldwide church. The challenge may be that the church at times can only see as far as its self-imposed parameters. Modern disciple-making movements recognize that the basic building block of the Kingdom of God is the individual in her/his family or network. Time, energy, and resources are focused on training trainers who understand the Word of God, strive to obey the will of God, and share the work of God with people—people they love in their social networks and people they come to love because Christ’s love compels them. This insight may be the critical link to the urgent mandate to “Tell the World.” The role of multipliers matter because they are the measure of the quality and the effectiveness of our faithfulness to Jesus’ call to go, to be a blessing, to make disciples, and deliver the life he promised.

It is my conviction that if we use disciple-making initiatives in an attempt to improve retention and engagement we will fail, but if we invest in relationships and engage in systems of disciple making that have depth and take time, retention and engagement will be the fruit of our labor rather than its focus. This is not a call to do away with the structures of the church but rather to reinfuse them with the principles of discipleship. This is a call to recognize that institutions and initiatives and budgets and boards can blind us to the simple mandate to invest deeply in people with structures designed to encourage worship, ministry, obedience, and witness.

The administrative structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church serve a critical function. Property is owned, institutions are administered, entities are coordinated, resources are gathered and distributed, problems are solved, and people are supported. However, there is danger that must
not be ignored. Power may be vested in individuals responsible for stewarding the structures of the church but “all Power” is behind the humblest disciple maker. Committees may take actions but the real action is on the front lines in families as the Holy Spirit miraculously moves through social networks. Bold initiatives cannot replace the blessing. For movements to succeed, strategies and structures must be simple and within the reach of those with limited resources and little technology. For our identity to be derived from our mission rather than our structures (Knight 2001:8) our structures and strategies must be shaped by the people we are to reach and the contexts they live in. Discipleship—the training of trainers—must become the heart of evangelism and not a tool to ground, nurture, and mobilize people after evangelism.

**Recommendations**

I would like to make the following recommendations:

1. Revert to language in the 2011 mission statement in the 2011 Adventist Yearbook that calls us to make disciples—not just call people to discipleship.

2. Begin the process of assessing our structures and strategies for alignment with God’s disciple-making mission. Then explore what small changes to our thinking and behavior it will take to coach multipliers in every local context.

3. Add the category of effective multipliers to tithe and baptisms as the key measures of success. Rather than promoting a single method, every church and conference should be required to report three things: (a) how many multiplying exist in each church, (b) how many generations of multipliers are there in the local community, and (c) what are the strategies and structures most effective for discipling maturing multipliers or trainers of trainers.

4. Expect every church leader, pastor, and faithful members to be training trainers. In addition to governing the coordinating bodies of the church, everyone from the General Conference president down through the ranks should be expected to be investing in a process of training multipliers.

5. “Go, Be a Blessing!”

**Works Cited**

Burn: Discipleship Structures, Movements, and the Role of Multipliers


________. 2010. Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2010. Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.


Laurence Burn was born in South Africa where he met the Lord Jesus Christ and later fell in love with cross-cultural missions while traveling to Zambia, Lesotho and Botswana. His calling to serve the Mission of God lead him to served as a Student Missionary on the Island of Palau, a Youth Pastor in Northern California, a Chaplain at Andrews University and at Adventist Frontier Missions where he is currently the Training Director. Laurence is happily married to Lois and is enjoying the wonderful problem of raising two extraordinary teenagers, Ruth and Jonathan.