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Pastors' Perspectives on Assimilating New Members: Part 1–Challenges and Needs

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Pastors' perspectives on assimilating new members

Part 1 — Challenges and needs

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America has established a goal of 100,000 baptisms by the end of 2010.

Other parts of the world also have goals for their territories. That goal raises the urgent question: are the local Adventist churches prepared to nurture and assimilate these new members? The gospel commission says that we should “go and make disciples” by baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. We have set a goal for the baptizing, which will bring us converts. But have we also set a goal for teaching them to obey Christ’s commands, which is needed to make them *disciples*? Dallas Willard calls this blindness to teaching “the Great Omission.”¹

My interest in discipling peaked when Gary Swanson, associate director of the General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department, asked me to oversee the development of a year’s worth of undated adult Bible study guides (i.e., quarterlies) to be used to disciple and assimilate new members into the Adventist Church. Before I could begin such a task, I wanted to talk with pastors in order to find out what they see as the challenges and needs of new members in becoming disciples of Jesus and members of the Adventist Church. We set up three focus groups for

June and August 2008 in three locations across the United States.

What did we find?

Research methodology

A focus group methodology was chosen because it uses open-ended questions, yet allows the collection of data in a shorter amount of time than does conducting individual interviews.

Pastors were supplied by asking individual conferences to select pastors based on these criteria:

1. Their interest and/or demonstrated capability in establishing new believers.
2. Their age, gender, experience, and diversity.
3. Their willingness and availability to participate.
4. Recommendation of confidence from conference leadership.

The conferences represented were the following: Allegheny East, Chesapeake, Georgia-Cumberland, Gulf States, Mountain View, Potomac, South Atlantic, South Central California, and Southern California.

Findings

Challenges within the church. As we discussed the needs of new members, we defined new members as “adults who have joined the church from some background other

than the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” Consider the challenges faced by these new members as they walk into a subculture whose worldview often conflicts with society. Pastors say that new members want to be accepted and have a sense of belonging to this community of believers. New members wonder, *What is expected of me? And what do Adventists do?*

Like entering any new culture, they immediately face a language barrier. What is footwashing? ADRA? Camp meeting? Spirit of Prophecy? Haystacks? Christian education? October 22? Loma Linda? Battle Creek?

The pastors in all four focus groups were emphatic: the number one challenge faced by new members is old members, or what one pastor called “*difficult* old members.” Or, as another said, “They need protection from the saints.” A third pastor said, “In all the churches I’ve pastored, when someone leaves, it’s because some member grabbed hold of them and just literally drove them out with their unnecessary rules. ‘Don’t eat this. Don’t do that.’ ”

These were some of the other difficulties that pastors felt new members faced.

- New members’ expectations may set them up for disappointment. During an evangelistic

meeting they were the center of attention, but once they join the church, they may feel “neglected.”

- The Adventist lifestyle presents many new behaviors: Sabbath keeping, tithes and offerings, a healthy diet, and church school, to name a few.
- Sometimes a conflict presents itself between what the new members have been taught about lifestyle issues and how they see long-time members living.
- At times arguments among old members destroy the fragile faith of new members.

Personal challenges and challenges at home. The pastors all agreed, too, that converts bring with them many habits and addictions that they need and want to overcome. Too often they assume that with their commitment to Christ and their baptism they will come out of the water able to live a completely

victorious life. Many find, much to their disappointment, that this is not always the case.

If a new member is the only one in his or her home who is an Adventist, he or she can face serious challenges. Some new members also have to deal with those from their old churches who hear about their conversion to Adventism and say, “What have you done?” before sending them right to the Internet with all the disinformation it contains.

“I think the Internet,” one pastor said, “is the number one problem.”

What new members need

Once we recognize the challenges new members face, we need to ask ourselves, What do they need to be disciplined to Christ and assimilated into the church? The pastors talked about the need for the doctrines of the church to be taught and to get new members

involved in ministry, but they also emphasized the need for developing deep and healthy relationships with Jesus first and foremost—and then with the church members and their families and friends.

Relationship with Jesus. Several pastors stated that the new members’ need for a relationship with Jesus is the first and most important need. One pastor said, “They have fallen in love with Jesus, but they don’t know how that translates into their day-to-day life.”

Relationships with church members. In more than one focus group, someone loosely quoted research that says new members must find two or three friends within the first few weeks of joining the church, or must find six or seven friends within six months, or they will drop out. Many expressed agreement that new members need a mentor, coach, or spiritual guardian, specifically called by the church, who has the gifts of teaching and friendship,

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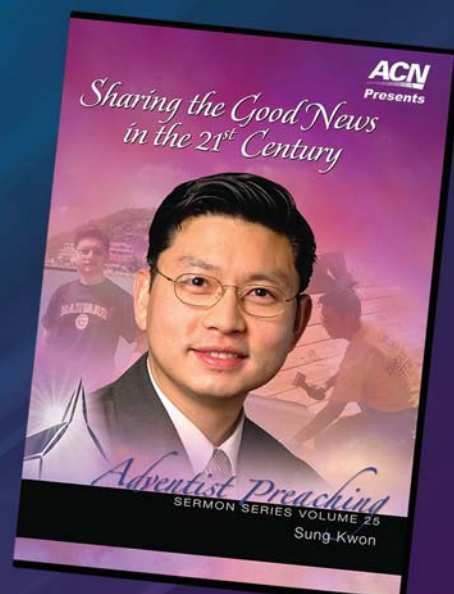
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“to take that family under their wings.” It should not be for a short time, they said, but for six months, a year, or longer.

Besides immediately getting two or three new friends, they need to increase friendships “gradually as they enter new circles, so that they don’t lose what they had [before baptism], but instead they gain.” They have to feel that they belong to this church family. To accept new members as friends and part of our church family seems like a simple thing to do until you realize that new members and old members live and function in two separate worlds.

The pastors’ greatest frustration dealt with the issue of some long-time members’ attitudes and behavior toward new members. There was consensus on the importance of preparing the church for new members.

“My problem,” said another pastor, “is that the culture I create for evangelism, the pre-work, the meeting itself, is a foreign culture to the church. We say that nurturing and soul winning is our primary ministry. People come into the church believing that, but when they settle down into the church, the church’s culture is not *that* culture. So it’s a shock. All of those things [that we did for evangelism] are events, not culture to the church.”

“The problem is that discipleship is not purely cognitive,” said a pastor. “It must be modeled, not simply taught. Who will model it? To come into this church now, you are coming into a group of people who have never been discipled themselves. They are just clinging to the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs. That’s powerful, but it’s absent of the relational.”

Relationship with the church as an organization. For people who come into the church through an evangelistic series, the transition from the evangelistic meetings to the regular church may bring a difference not only in personal relationships but also in worship styles, meeting location, and other

matters. A pastor gave an example: “Evangelistic meetings are totally different from the church. More open. Lively singing. Then we put them in the church to sing, ‘Nearer

the fact that they have friends and family who become a cycle of evangelism. Get them involved in ministry and sharing their faith,” one pastor suggested.

TOO OFTEN THEY [CONVERTS] ASSUME THAT WITH THEIR COMMITMENT TO CHRIST AND THEIR BAPTISM THEY WILL COME OUT OF THE WATER ABLE TO LIVE A COMPLETELY VICTORIOUS LIFE. MANY FIND, MUCH TO THEIR DISAPPOINTMENT, THAT THIS IS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE.

My God to Thee.’ That’s a culture shock.”

The pastors in all four focus groups expressed the importance of getting new members involved in some kind of ministry. They need to feel that the local church needs them. Serving with others in a ministry also naturally develops personal relationships with other members.

Relationships with family and friends. The pastors presented two types of intentional instruction that new members need in relating to family and friends. First of all, they need to know how to explain their new lifestyle even while they themselves are still learning how to implement or adjust to it. All of the issues around Sabbath keeping immediately become a source of curiosity, or annoyance, to their family and friends. Then there are dietary changes and the giving up of alcohol. These lifestyle issues directly affect relationships.

Second, they need to be encouraged to bring their friends and family to church. “Capitalize on

What biblical teachings and doctrines need to be taught?

Besides relational needs, we discussed the biblical teachings and Adventist doctrines that new members need to be taught during their first year as members. At first, all four groups would list things such as tithing, Sabbath observance, diet, health reform, church history, eschatology, Christ’s ministry in the sanctuary, and the gift of prophecy.

But very quickly they slipped into a discussion of approaches or emphasis. One said, “When it comes to doctrines: heaven, the millennium, some of those doctrines—those are really hot buttons. Hell is really big. They want to talk within the context of what they are seeing in the movies and TV. We aren’t addressing this in the context of what they are seeing.”

Talking about the relevance of the worship service, a pastor said, “Those thirty or forty minutes that people dedicate to come to church and to have an encounter with God—those moments are special

because the people are waiting for something. . . . And we can have great knowledge of history and theology, but if we don't apply the Word to their issues today, it's not going to be relevant. They'll say, 'That was nice; but I didn't learn anything that had to do with my life.' "

"I notice," said a pastor, "that many [Bible study] guides are not even asking questions people would ask. They are just asking questions that fit with the text." Another pastor supported that comment: "Ask the hard questions. . . . I find that people get offended if we don't ask the question even when we don't have the answer."

The pastors became quite animated when they began to emphasize the importance of studying the Word, and not any specific teaching. One pastor said frankly, "I think we need to emphasize the place of the Word of God. If I spend some time in the Word, maybe some of my questions will be answered instead of [my being part of] a generation that says, 'That's just not the way I see it.' "

"I struggle with closing the gap between cognitive knowledge and personal experience in what I am preaching and teaching," a pastor confessed. "I struggle with how to present the Word. I can teach them about forgiveness and how they are saved. But how can I lead them with that same teaching to experience forgiveness and rejoicing in their personal salvation?"

Conclusion and reflections

When people make or renew a commitment to follow Jesus and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church from another denomination or from no religion, most must go through a classic worldview transformation. The comments and stories of the focus-group pastors reinforced the difficulty of such a change. At the same time, because these new members are faced with close family and friend relationship


challenges, they have a great need to establish new relationships among believers and be given time to grow in Christ. How the church responds to them often determines whether or not they can make it through this difficult transformation.

The tragedy is that too often church members do not sincerely welcome them and provide the discipling they need. Instead, many offer apathy or judgment. As one pastor said, "The disciplers need to be disciplined." Bill Hull, who has spent more than 20 years focused on discipling, says that "the church struggles with what it means to follow Jesus." He says the church itself needs to be evangelized "to choose the life of discipleship."² For the Adventist Church to choose the life of discipleship will require more than a few seminars on "How to Witness" and "How to Welcome New Members." In many cases, members themselves need a worldview transformation from a Christless Christianity to a surrendered following of Jesus.

Near the end of his book, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, Paul Hiebert summed up in one paragraph the essence of what I learned from the 41 pastors in four focus groups:

We must . . . realize that new converts often experience "conversion shock." Their initial reaction is often one of euphoria and joy. When this wears off, they begin the difficult task of learning to think and live as Christians. They must learn a new language, behave in new ways, and form new relationships. In short, they must be enculturated into a new culture and socialized into a new community. During this period new converts often face periods of doubt and depression. They question their decision, and some return to


their old beliefs. During this time of reevaluation, the support of the Christian community is extraordinarily important. . . . When individuals convert one by one . . . they often lack strong group support. Only the most committed sustain their new faith outside a supporting community of faith.³

If we, the Adventist Church, are successful in assimilating and discipling new members that we are praying will come into the church, we will need to declare 2010—and beyond—as the *Years of Discipleship* in addition to the emphasis on evangelism. 

Part 2 of this research report will focus on discipling strategies.

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 15.
2. Bill Hull, *Choose the Life: Exploring a Faith That Embraces Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 14.
3. Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 331.

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