

GORDEN R. DOSS

---

# The Challenges of Adventist Discipleship

## Introduction

The missional activity that stands out in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ is disciple making. Jesus called the Twelve and poured his very best efforts into them. When he ascended, the future of his church rested on their shoulders as he commanded them to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:19). Under the superintendence of God the Holy Spirit, disciples would make disciples until Christ returned a second time.

The working definition of a disciple given to the presenters in this conference is as follows: A disciple is one who experiences continual transformation toward the fullness of Christ (1) in a biblically faithful way, (2) in a culturally appropriate way, (3) at the deep, worldview level, (4) in personal spirituality, (5) in personal life style, (6) in family relationships, (7) as a member of the body of Christ, and (8) as a witness to others.

This working definition is very broad and comprehensive and the challenges of fulfilling it are great. Some challenges to making disciples are outside of the church and some presenters will discuss those that arise from specific cultural and religious contexts. My paper addresses some challenging factors arising from within our church and suggests ways to enhance our collective disciple making.

## The Challenges of Mission among Varied People Groups

Table 1 illustrates the different levels of the challenge Adventists face in obeying Christ’s command to “make disciples” (Matt 28:19). Christians of all kinds make up about one-third of the world’s population and non-Christians two-thirds. Only God knows the true spiritual, heart condition of people in any group. But generally speaking, the threshold of belief

and the learning curve of discipleship increases moving from “A” to “E” on the model.

<b>Table 1. World Population Distribution by Religions: Illustrating Levels of Discipleship Challenge</b>			
<b>A</b>	Children raised in Adventist homes with a high level of appropriate discipleship by parents, church school, and local church family.	<b>SDAs:</b>  0.83% of Christians; 0.27% of world's population	<b>Christians:</b>  33.2%
<b>B</b>	Other Christians with high levels of commitment, participation, and biblical literacy.		
<b>C</b>	Nominal Christians lacking commitment, participation, and biblical literacy.		
<b>D</b>	Secular, agnostic, atheistic peoples lacking religious beliefs, commitment, participation, and biblical literacy.	9.3%	<b>Non-Christians:</b>  66.8%
<b>E</b>	Adherents of non-Christian religions having varying degrees of knowledge about and receptivity to Christianity. The “big three” are Islam: 22.4%; Hinduism: 13.7%; Buddhism: 6.8%; altogether: 42.9% of world population (Johnson and Ross 2009:6).	57.5%	

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate in different ways the spiritual journeys people make to mature discipleship. A person without prior knowledge of the Bible and Jesus Christ who experiences a rapid, miraculous conversion leading to baptism will nevertheless have a significant discipleship learning curve.

<b>Table 2. Discipleship Journey Illustrated</b>										
-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
Rebellion against God				Conversion and Baptism			Mature Discipleship			
Absolute Need		Growing Receptivity		Young Faith			Mature Faith			

**Table 3. Modified Engel Scale Illustrating the Process of Discipleship**  
(adapted from Terry and Payne 2013:180)

- +3 Experiencing a lifetime of growth in belief and behavior—maturing discipleship
- +2 Becoming fully incorporated into the body of Christ as a member
- +1 Making a post-baptism evaluation of costs and benefits
- 0 Baptism, becoming a new believer
- 1 Repenting and having faith in Jesus Christ
- 2 Decision to take action
- 3 Recognition of personal problems and need
- 4 Positive attitude toward the gospel
- 5 Grasp of the implications of the gospel
- 6 Awareness of the fundamentals of the gospel
- 7 Initial awareness of the gospel
- 8 Awareness of a supreme being, but no effective knowledge of the gospel

## The Problem of Attrition

The 2016 General Conference *Annual Statistical Report* notes that more than 1 million people have joined our church each year for 12 years in a row (ASR 2016:2). In 2015, 1.26 million people became members to make up a total membership of 19.1 million at year's end (ASR 2016:30, 2). In 2016 almost 100,000 people were baptized in Rwanda, alone, which is something to praise the Lord about.

Some challenges are visible in the numbers of members who leave the church each year. To be able to lead our members forward in the lifelong process of discipleship, the minimum requirement is that they stay within the fellowship of the local church. But starting in 2011, between 0.5 million and 0.75 million people have left the church every year (ASR 2016:5). This loss is in the range of 50% to 75% of the number who join the church each year. The lost numbers include members who have been members for varying numbers of years but do not include losses by death.

In recent years the General Conference Secretariat, through the Office of Archives, Research, and Statistics, has made good progress upgrading the stewardship of membership numbers. Membership audits have been completed in many unions, membership records are being computerized, and local church clerks are being trained. However, more progress is needed and some fear that the losses may be greater than those reported (ASR 2015:2). We do not have research data to know how many members remain one, five, or ten years after their baptism.

We all have personal anecdotes of high membership losses. When I was an MDiv student in a field school of evangelism in Colorado, we baptized 60, of whom only about 10 remained a year later. As a son of the church

I have heard expressions of regret over high membership losses in informal conversations, classrooms, and committees all of my life. In my observation, high attrition is a global phenomenon in our church. Those who have departed are not just numbers but baptized fellow church members who never became mature disciples. The tragedy is that they may have been immunized against the gospel by shallow conversions and minimal growth in Christ.

Let us be realistic. Some who start on the pathway of faith will step off the path. Some of the gospel seed sprouts but die quickly. Even Jesus Christ lost Judas Iscariot. Ananias and Sapphira lost their way soon after Pentecost. Some who fall away do come back and some will probably be in the Kingdom even if they never do rejoin the church. However, our high attrition rates seem intolerable and we need to hold ourselves accountable and under sacred obligation to those who go as far as the baptistery. We dare not assuage our consciences by rushing on with business as usual to baptize another million next year, with the full knowledge that perhaps 50% to 75% of that number will drop out next year. There is the additional challenge of those who stay in the church but do not continue to mature as disciples of Christ.

I don't pretend to offer a complete formula to fix the problems. Neither do I imagine that we can make a change overnight. My proposal is that we need to make a paradigm shift, which by definition, is a lengthy process. To understand the shift we need to make, we must reflect on how the world has changed and ask whether the Adventist mission paradigm has adjusted appropriately to our times.

In the early days of Adventist mission in America, Europe, and Australia we evangelized fellow Christians who were often quite biblically literate and were already walking the discipleship pathway ("B" people in Table 1). The Adventist message was a value-added message that adjusted what Christians already believed. In the rest of the world, the early successes among non-Christians were among traditional tribal peoples who were spiritually open and teachable. In a country like Malawi, where Adventist work started in 1903, the first missionaries combined evangelization, church planting, basic literacy training, Bible study, and medical clinics. The people responded well, the church grew and developed, and Malawi now has over 400,000 Adventists.

**Table 4. Distribution of World Population and SDA Membership**

	Population	SDA Membership
The Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa	26%	77%
The Rest	74%	23%

In 2015, after 140 years of global mission, 77% of the Adventist membership was located in the six world divisions of the Americas and sub-Saharan African (ASR 2016:4). The Adventist Church is a church of the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa. Most of its growth occurs in those six divisions and most converts come from other Christian groups (the B people of Table 1). However, the population of these divisions makes up only 26% of the world population. The other 74% of humanity collectively make up the least evangelized peoples of earth that the world church needs to reach with the gospel. The other 74% of the world population is dominated by C, D, and E people.

In America, Europe, and Australia where Adventist mission began, we find new realities. People who are at least nominal Christians are more secular and less biblically literate than they used to be. Furthermore, immigration has brought Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists and others to those communities. Thus, the task of mission in the West is no longer to merely adjust key Christian beliefs with a value-added message but rather to teach the very basics of Christianity to biblically illiterate nominal Christians or to those who do not confess Christ at all.

When pulling the religious and geographic pictures together, Adventist mission faces the particular challenges of the C, D, and E people who live everywhere in this era of globalization. Their initial threshold of conversion is higher and their learning curve of discipleship is longer than with the B people. At the same time, their spiritual hunger is more intense than ever and the church's challenge is to offer a full meal of the bread and water of life and lead them to spiritual maturity.

## Defining Success in Mission

Perhaps the first step in changing the Adventist mission paradigm is to consider how mission success is defined. To assess any activity, a definition of success is needed. Mountain climbers define success as reaching the top, Olympic swimmers want to touch the edge of the pool first, and auto dealers are successful when they sell cars.

Defining success in mission is one of the most challenging aspects of mission. Ultimately, eternal salvation is the measure of success but only God makes that assessment. On a lesser scale, the true measure of success is faithfulness to God's calling and once again only God makes the assessment. People who are equally Spirit-filled and faithful in their work experience widely differing responses to their very best efforts. The challenge of assessing mission is complex because of the diversity among God's servants, the many and varied tasks they are given, and the almost infinite variety of the cultural-religious contexts in which they serve.

In missions . . . much of what we do is “spiritual. Almost by definition, it proves difficult to know when we have done well, when we have done enough, when we have really finished a task. When have enough people come to Christ? When are believers mature enough? When are leaders adequately trained? And what about our colleagues who labor faithfully in less responsive or nonresponsive areas? How do we measure effectiveness and success? (Terry and Payne 2013:39)

In spite of the multiple challenges of assessing mission, there are good reasons to hold ourselves and each other accountable and to assess the effectiveness of mission endeavors. Most importantly, being effective in God’s mission potentially involves the eternal destinies of our fellow human beings. Individual believers need to hold themselves accountable and administrators who direct the work of others need good measures of accountability. The stewardship and management of mission funds requires good assessment of how they are used. Without assessment, the church risks performing great endeavors that end up being mirages of missional success.

In view of the challenges of assessing mission, the need to use multiple markers of success seems very clear. Using just a single marker of success for mission cannot be defended. Yet, that is what many Christians, including Adventists, have done. That single marker of mission success is baptism. There are other markers in the system like church plants, church attendance, local church membership size, tithe and offerings, and biblical knowledge. But baptism outweighs them all in functional significance. Thus, I refer to the current Adventist paradigm of mission as the Baptism Model of Mission.

## **The Baptism Model of Mission: A Single Marker of Success**

There is unquestionable, unreserved biblical support for seeing baptism as a spiritual rite of passage with the deepest significance. Those who are baptized “have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

However, problems arise when baptism becomes the single marker of success in mission. The terminology of “preparation,” “reaping,” “follow-up,” and “retention” suggest that the punctiliar, completed event of baptism is the goal of mission, rather than the lifelong process of discipleship. By implication, baptism is the main act and everything else is prelude and postlude. A large baptism automatically renders the evangelistic effort a success, no matter what the attrition rates may be. There are some critiques that can be made of the baptism model of mission. Adventists have

not intentionally adopted alien theological beliefs but our functional theology of mission may have evolved away from some deep commitments.

The theological critique starts with the theology of baptism. Adventists do not have a sacramental theology of baptism. In Roman Catholic theology the church is the reservoir of God's grace that it bestows upon lost sinners through the sacraments. The sacrament of baptism saves the eternal soul from eternal hellfire. A newborn baby or an unrepentant sinner who is dying but has not been baptized is in urgent need of the sacrament of baptism to escape hell. The Catholic theology of baptism implies that the most important work has been done when a person has been baptized.

Among other things, the Adventist theology of baptism says that "baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and our reception of the Holy Spirit." Adventists do not believe that the church bestows eternal life in the baptism. The newly baptized person can and should feel secure in their salvation in Christ but from the church's perspective the person is a newborn spiritual baby at the beginning of a lifetime journey. The church's missional responsibility is to lead the new member toward mature discipleship (see Fundamental Belief No. 15 below).

Baptism symbolizes and declares our new faith in Christ and our trust in His forgiveness. Buried in the water, we arise to a new life in Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit. By baptism we confess our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and testify of our death to sin and of our purpose to walk in newness of life. Thus we acknowledge Christ as Lord and Saviour, become His people, and are received as members by His church. Baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and our reception of the Holy Spirit. It is by immersion in water and is contingent on an affirmation of faith in Jesus and evidence of repentance of sin. It follows instruction in the Holy Scriptures and acceptance of their teachings. (Matt. 28:19, 20; Acts 2:38; 16:30-33; 22:16; Rom. 6:1-6; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12, 13). (Seventh-day Adventist Church 2015:7)

A second and related theological critique involves sanctification. The baptism model of mission implies an emphasis on justification to the neglect of sanctification. However, Adventists emphasize the development of a truly sanctified, Christ-like life over one's whole lifetime. Fundamental Belief No. 22 states that "we are called to be a godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with biblical principles in all aspects of personal and social life" (9).

A final biblical critique of the baptism model of mission is that it does not mirror the ministry of either Jesus or the apostles. There is no record

that Jesus baptized his followers but the four Gospels are full of his disciple-making activities. At Pentecost an amazing 3,000 were baptized but Acts 2:42-47 gives a detailed description of how the congregation worked to attract new members and lead them to spiritual maturity. The great missionary Paul did not baptize many people (1 Cor 1:14-16) but invested himself completely in planting churches and making disciples who made other disciples.

There is also a practical critique to be made of using baptism as the sole marker of mission success. When success is declared at the baptistery there are some actual or potential unintended consequences that inhibit comprehensive mission and discipleship.

- Leaders place heavy pressure for large baptisms on pastors and evangelists.
- Pastors neglect their other work, do not develop well-rounded pastoral skill sets, and are promoted solely on the basis of baptismal numbers.
- Major funding is provided for methods with well-known high attrition rates.
- Converts are brought to the baptistery prematurely, without adequate preparation.
- Individuals are re-baptized multiple times for questionable reasons.
- The “follow up” after the main meeting is not adequately funded, planned, or staffed.
- “Preparation and “follow-up” ministries tend to be ad hoc, rather than systemic.
- Dropout rates are high.
- Those who drop-out are potentially vaccinated against future evangelization.
- Members become cynical about evangelism and negative anecdotes circulate about manipulative strategies.
- The assessment of the actual spiritual growth made by a newly baptized person is over-stated.
- Priority is given to understanding doctrinal beliefs while lifestyle transformation, family relationships, and integration into the local church family are neglected.
- The church defines its success as an unqualified failure among peoples where there are few baptisms.
- Priority is given to peoples where baptisms are easiest and least costly (A and B) and the least-evangelized (C, D, E) are neglected.

The solution is not to make vows to improve the old model but to take a bold step into a new model I call the discipleship model of mission, with its multiple markers of success in mission.



## The Discipleship Model of Mission: Multiple Markers of Success

The discipleship model of mission has several characteristics. First, the model gives weight to familiar, well established markers like church plants, local church membership size, church attendance, tithe and offerings, church school enrollment, baptism, and member retention. The set of factors would yield a composite assessment that would be more comprehensive and accurate.

Second, the set of mission success markers is contextualized for each local region and local church. The local political, social, religious, historical, and missiological context guides the selection of markers. You can imagine how expectations and methods would differ between Nairobi, Cairo, Tokyo, and Boston. In some places a church that adds less than 100 new members a year may be seen as ineffective, while in other places a church that adds ten members in a year is highly effective.

Third, one universal that applies to all contexts is that keeping new converts is a top priority. Whether 10, 100, or 1,000 new members are added, their continued spiritual growth and maturation is a top priority. Church participation on the first Sabbath after baptism, after a month, after a year, and onward would be tracked.

Fourth, a variety of transformational ministries would address specific needs. For addiction problems of various kinds Twelve Step Programs would be offered. Topics like marriage, raising children, coping with grief, family finance, developing personal spirituality, and many more would be covered.

Fifth, the discipleship model sees baptism as one step on the spiritual journey that lasts a lifetime. To say it another way, discipleship is a process that has punctiliar events, of which baptism is one very important event. In this model the church's missional engagement with the individual starts at birth, if the parents are members, or when the church first becomes aware of a person's interest. From the point of first spiritual engagement the church ministers intentionally with the goal of guiding the person to mature discipleship over the remainder of their lives.

Sixth, the local church is necessarily the focal point of mission in the discipleship model. The pastor and lay leaders live in community with the membership and are best prepared to choose the set of assessment markers, plan and implement appropriate methods, and assess them.

Seventh, at the administrative level, leaders work with local churches in choosing assessment markers and applying them. Leaders collaborate with pastors and local churches to set regional assessment sets. Because the composition and context of every local church is different, a package of markers needs to be identified by local leaders and the pastor. Conference

leaders can require the development of a contextualized set of markers for every congregation because one size does not fit all. The discipleship model does not imply a pastor-dependent church where the pastor must “hover over” the churches. The very nature of the model, with its many facets, requires full engagement by lay members.

Finally, numbers and statistics are used to track multiple markers in the discipleship model. However, because of the potential problems of excessive “number crunching,” other methods are recommended. Methods like journaling and ethnographic research can create data and records for the on-going search for the most effective means and methods of mission.

To illustrate some multiple markers of mission in action, mission could be seen as a success for individuals when:

- Children attend Sabbath School, Vacation Bible School, church school (where present), and enjoy good fellowship with each other and adults.
- Families participate regularly in church services and outreach and enjoy good relationships with the larger church family.
- Newly baptized members become integrated into the life of the church, participate regularly in church services, use their spiritual gifts in service and outreach, and enjoy good relationships with the church family.
- Members experience victory over personal issues of behavior or addiction.
- Members move into church offices with increased responsibility.

The congregation as a whole can be considered a missional success when showing markers like the following:

- Church services are appropriate for the age mix, educational level, and cultures of the members.
- Members are trained for service according to their spiritual gifts.
- The church follows the spiritual journey of its members and ministers appropriately to their needs.
- Members participate regularly in outreach.
- Outreach is appropriate for people groups in the community.
- The number of baptisms is appropriate for the general context and receptivity of the community.
- There is a low attrition rate for newly baptized members.
- The church has appropriate ministries in the community.

## Conclusion

The multiple markers model produces a more nuanced, accurate assessment of the individual's spiritual journey, the pastor's effectiveness, and the local church's effectiveness than the single marker model. The model facilitates a continual discipleship ministry to the members of the body of Christ. Most significantly, the discipleship model of mission changes the church's perspective in a way that can enhance missional effectiveness among today's least evangelized peoples.

## Works Cited

- 2016 *Annual Statistical Report*. Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research.
- Johnson, Todd M., and Kenneth R. Ross, eds. 2009. *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910–2010*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Seventh-day Adventist Church. 2015. 28 Fundamental Beliefs. [http://szu.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/28\\_Beliefs.pdf](http://szu.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/28_Beliefs.pdf) (accessed 15 September 2016).
- Terry, John Mark, and Jervis David Payne. 2013. *Developing a Strategy for Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.



Gorden Doss was born in the USA and grew up in Malawi. His service has been divided between Malawi and USA. Since 1998 he has taught world mission at Andrews University. He earned a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His wife, Cheryl (Brown), is director of the Institute of World Mission at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. They have two married children and four grandchildren who serve in Egypt and Canada.