



DISCIPLING *Nurturing* **AND RECLAIMING**

NURTURE AND RETENTION SUMMIT

Foreword by G. T. Ng, Ph.D.



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PUBLISHED BY: Review and Herald® Publishing Association

PRINTED BY: Editorial Safeliz, S.L.
Pradillo, 6, Pol. Ind. La Mina, E-28770 Colmenar Viejo, Madrid (España)
www.safeliz.com

COVER DESIGN: Erika Miike
INTERIOR DESIGN & LAYOUT: Regina Reaves
COPY EDITORS: James and Ida Cavil

EDITED BY: General Conference Nurture and Retention Committee:
Geoffrey G Mbwana, Gerson P Santos, Rachel Bustamante, Torben Bergland, Gary T Blanchard, Marcos F Bomfim, Ramon J Canals, Cheryl Doss, Sherri Ingram-Hudgins, Anthony R Kent, Linda Mei Lin Koh, Gary D Krause, Elbert Kuhn, Duane McKey, Willie Oliver, Karen J Porter, Heather-Dawn K Small, David Trim, James M Howard, Galina Steele

Ex-officials: Ted N C Wilson, G T Ng, Juan R Prestol-Puesan

ISBN: 978-0-8280-2871-4

PRINTED IN SPAIN.

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New Member Discipleship

Disciple-making Principles and the *Discipleship Handbook*

JAMES HOWARD

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH is “Go . . . and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19).¹ We cannot afford to make anything less. Many churches have mistakenly assumed that baptizing new converts is equivalent to bringing them safely into the fold. Yet the startling number of members who have left the church over the past 50 years tells a different story. The truth is that baptism is only one of many steps toward becoming a mature disciple of Christ. And it is this, becoming a mature disciple, that is needed to help members grow stronger and keep them faithful to Christ.

So what is needed in order to fulfill the commission to make disciples, and not mere members? This article will begin by establishing principles that are important to remember when making disciples. It will then explain how these principles can be applied in an intentional and systematic new member discipleship plan using such tools as the *Discipleship Handbook*. The first principle is that the *process* of discipleship is the growth cycle. Second, the *instruments* of discipleship are people. Third, the *goal* of discipleship is Christlikeness. And last, the *power* of discipleship is from God.

THE PROCESS OF DISCIPLESHIP

When Jesus described the evangelistic mission of the church, He often used the analogy of the agricultural growth cycle to describe the growth of the kingdom of God: “A sower went out to sow” (Luke 8:5). “The fields . . . are already white for harvest” (John 4:35). “The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matthew 9:37).

The farmer must *prepare* the soil, *plant* the seed, *cultivate* the growing plants, *harvest* the crop, *preserve* the harvest, and then repeat

the cycle using the seed reaped in the previous harvest. Similarly, the gospel sower must prepare the soil of the heart with friendship and service, plant the seed of God’s Word with literature or spiritual conversations, cultivate spiritual interest with ongoing Bible studies, harvest decisions for Christ with personal and public appeals, and preserve the harvest of souls with a systematic and intentional discipleship plan for new members (*see figure*).



Figure:

The GROW Model. Learn more at <https://grow.adventist.org>. The top icon represents the first step of preparing the soil of the heart. Continuing clockwise, the second icon represents planting the seed of truth, the third icon represents cultivating spiritual interest, the fourth icon represents harvesting decisions for Christ, and the fifth icon represents preserving the harvest with ongoing discipleship. The continuous circle represents the cyclical and multiplying nature of discipleship.

The key principle taught by Jesus in His agricultural analogy is that making disciples is a *process*, not an event. Far too often we describe the mission of the church in narrow terms. We consider evangelistic outreach to be isolated from nurture, and we view numerical growth as separate from spiritual growth. Yet we discover that discipleship, when properly understood, is a process that includes both! Notice the following statements by Ellen White: “When souls are converted, set them to work at once. And as they labor according to their ability, they will grow stronger.”¹ “The more one tries to explain the Word of God to others, with a love for souls, the plainer it becomes to himself.”² “Let ministers teach church members that in order to grow in spirituality, they must carry the burden that the Lord has laid upon them—the burden of leading souls into the truth.”³ “Those who are most actively employed in doing with interested fidelity their work to win souls to Jesus Christ are the best developed in spirituality and devotion.”⁴

From these inspired statements we discover a beautiful synergy between evangelistic labor and personal spiritual growth. It is by laboring for souls that we grow spiritually ourselves. Outreach and nurture are two sides of the same coin. Whether we call that coin evangelism, discipleship, or soul winning, a true and comprehensive definition will include every phase of disciple-making. It will include ministering to people's needs, introducing them to Bible truth, engaging in ongoing Bible studies, leading them to follow Christ and be baptized, and then nurturing and training them as they grow into well-rounded and active disciples of Christ.

We have only one mission. It is both the best strategy for church growth and, at the same time, the best strategy for the nurture and retention of our members. Discipleship is one continuous process that begins before baptism, continues after baptism, and leads the disciple to become more like Jesus and to carry on His mission of winning souls. The process of discipleship is the growth cycle taught by Jesus.

THE INSTRUMENTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

When Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19), He was talking to His disciples. While it is true that books, classes, and sermons may be helpful in the discipleship process, we must always keep in view that it is *people who make disciples*. True discipleship requires relationships, time, and a living example. The reason Jesus was so effective at making disciples was that He understood this principle and therefore invested significant time and energy in developing the Twelve. They learned to pray by watching Jesus pray. They learned to depend upon the Scriptures when they saw how Jesus depended on the Scriptures. They learned how to sacrifice and deny themselves by how Jesus denied Himself. They learned how to minister to others' needs and teach the gospel by watching the Master Healer and Teacher.

Paul also understood this principle. He wrote to the young minister Timothy: "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). Christ and certain representatives of the church taught Paul, Paul taught Timothy, Timothy was to teach faithful men, and these faithful men were to teach others also. That's four generations of discipleship in one verse!

The important takeaway from this discipleship principle is that we can't simply hold a class or give someone a book and call this discipleship. New members learn how to be disciples by spending time with Jesus, but

they also learn from the example of more experienced church members who are willing to invest time in them. For this reason both Paul and Peter emphasize the importance of being a godly example (see 1 Peter 5:2, 3; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-7). Ellen White concurs, stating that “one example is worth more than many precepts.”⁵

Since the primary instruments of discipleship are people, the quality of the new disciples we make will to a great degree be dependent upon the quality of the disciple-makers! For this reason the first step for church leaders in establishing a new member discipleship plan should be to prepare and train godly mentors.

THE GOAL OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus explained the ultimate goal of discipleship when He declared, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). The goal of discipleship is to be like Jesus—*Christlikeness* in character and behavior. Jesus had a lot to say about what it meant to be a disciple, but in every case He was simply calling on His followers to be like Him.

A few of Jesus’ statements are sufficient in order to grasp the primary aspects of this goal of Christlikeness in His followers: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17).

Jesus explained that those who follow Him were to become loving, self-denying, soul winners—just like Him. This is a high calling indeed. It is also a compelling reason we can’t afford to cease our labors for new converts immediately after they are baptized. Does a newly baptized member understand how to be a loving, self-denying, soul winner—a disciple who makes other disciples? We are not truly fulfilling the mission unless we are leading our new members to be not merely consumers, but producers. We must encourage and help them to become loving, obedient, active fishers of men and women.

Jesus instructed His disciples to not only baptize new believers, but to continue “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Discipleship includes practical instruction in Christ’s way of living. This begins with His habit of communion with God in prayer, His study and dependence on Scripture, His bold witness to the truth, and His loving ministry to the needs of humanity. It also includes many other practical areas of biblical instruction, such as baptism,

Sabbathkeeping, reverence, stewardship, health, modesty, marriage, and family.

It should also be noted that discipleship in the last days will reflect the unique message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the remnant church of Bible prophecy. This message, entrusted by God to His people and firmly established in the Bible, is the foundation of faith and practice for end-time disciples. With a wealth of guidance through the Bible and the prophetic counsel of Ellen White, our Lord Jesus Christ desires that His disciples in the last days will follow in His footsteps and reflect His image.

THE POWER OF DISCIPLESHIP

While it is true that people are the primary instruments in making disciples, it must always be remembered that the power required for true discipleship comes from God. No matter how much we love people, build friendships, establish confidence, provide godly examples, or show sympathy, none of these has power to convert or transform the soul. We must connect people to Christ and His Word. It is through the foundational spiritual habits of prayer, Bible study, and witnessing that the Christian beholds and experiences divine power.

When surveys are taken of those who have left the church, reasons such as conflicts, hypocrisy, lack of love and care, or offensive attitudes are often cited to explain why they left. While we must take these seriously, we should also not fail to discern and address the more fundamental reasons that are rarely recognized or expressed. More often than not, the reason new members leave the church is that they failed to establish or continue in spiritual habits that would have given life and power to their spiritual walk with God. Without these spiritual habits, they become easily discouraged, distracted, tempted, or offended.

Ellen White writes of the spiritual habit of prayer: “Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted and the health of the soul be preserved. . . . Neglect the exercise of prayer, or engage in prayer spasmodically, now and then, as seems convenient, and you lose your hold on God.”⁶ Rarely will someone who leaves the church state that the reason they left is that they stopped praying regularly. They may not even recognize this. Nevertheless, the neglect of this habit causes many to lose their hold on God. This is the hidden but true reason we lose many members out the back door.

Another essential spiritual habit is spending regular time in the Bible. Jesus boldly declared, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. . . . The words that I speak to

you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:53-63). It is often the case that new members come to a Bible study or evangelistic meeting and are convicted and compelled by the inspiring biblical preaching and teaching. However, when the meetings are over and after they are baptized, they gradually lose their inspiration. What happened? They had been genuinely changed by the Word being taught to them in the meetings, but they never learned how to regularly feed *themselves*. New members must be taught that unless they consistently read the Word, they will not be able to maintain a spiritual life. The Bible is not like other books. It is not merely informational, but transformational. It is through the living and powerful Word of God that we are converted, or born again, and the same Word is needed for power to live a victorious Christian life (see Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23; Matthew 4:4). For this reason Ellen White warns, “Satan well knows that all whom he can lead to neglect prayer and the searching of the Scriptures will be overcome by his attacks.”⁷

Because of the creative power in God’s Word, we should make its study foundational to any discipleship plan for new members. This plan should include five different levels of Bible study: (1) encourage the spiritual habit of personal daily Bible reading, (2) give Bible studies to share the full Adventist message for the first time, (3) give baptismal preparation studies to ensure readiness for baptism, (4) give discipleship studies after baptism to integrate new members into the life and mission of the church, and (5) review our message with more in-depth Bible studies that prepare new members to give Bible studies to others. By saturating the discipleship process in the Word of God, divine power will be imparted to the new disciples. For the five levels of Bible study listed above, the General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department has developed resources to aid churches in their discipleship training. To encourage daily Bible reading, the *Discipleship Handbook* contains a daily Bible and Spirit of Prophecy reading plan. The resource *Fundamentals of Faith* is specifically designed for use in baptismal preparation studies. The main portion of the *Discipleship Handbook*, which will be discussed later in this article in greater detail, can be used for discipleship studies after baptism. And the *Bible Study Handbook* can be used to prepare and train members to give Bible studies to others.⁸

Just before ascending to heaven, Jesus told His disciples, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). When we share the gospel of Christ with others, we join God in His work and experience His power. While the

power of prayer and Bible study is familiar to most Christians, the power of God experienced through witnessing is far less common. Even so, nothing solidifies new disciples in their faith like sharing God's Word with others. When we engage in this vital work, the power of the Holy Spirit strengthens our convictions, increases our faith, grows our knowledge, and expands our love for souls.

In the great mission of making disciples, we must always remember that our job is not merely to connect with people, but to connect people to Christ: "If we can awaken an interest in men's minds that will cause them to fix their eyes on Christ, we may step aside, and ask them only to continue to fix their eyes upon the Lamb of God."⁹ Jesus is the Master, and we are all His disciples. All power resides in Christ and His Word. In order for us to make disciples and retain them in the church, a discipleship plan must focus on developing in new members the foundational "power" habits of prayer, Bible study, and witnessing.

NEW MEMBER DISCIPLESHIP AND THE *DISCIPLESHIP HANDBOOK*

When we understand that the discipleship process follows the growth cycle, that the primary instruments of discipleship are people, that the goal of discipleship is Christlikeness, and that the power of discipleship comes from God, we are ready to establish a new member discipleship plan that will improve both member involvement and retention rates. The General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department has developed the *Discipleship Handbook*, which may be used as the foundation of a new member discipleship plan in any local church. The remainder of this article will use the *Discipleship Handbook* to show how a local church can apply the principles of discipleship in a practical way to disciple new members.

But first, why would we want to use a book for new member discipleship if true discipleship is based on relationships more than books, classes, or programs? While it is true that books don't make disciples, they *do* equip disciple-makers! Ellen White had these wise words to say regarding the thinking of many church members: "Many would be willing to work if they were taught how to begin."¹⁰ There are a few important things to remember about the practical application of making disciples: (1) discipleship happens at the local church, (2) church members, and not pastors, are the primary disciple-makers, and (3) even most experienced members are not familiar with how to mentor new members. In light of these realities, and Ellen White's counsel that church members

need taught “how to begin,” it becomes vitally important that tools and resources be provided to equip church members with a simple process and clear direction for the discipleship of new members. This is the purpose of the *Discipleship Handbook*.

HOW TO USE THE *DISCIPLESHIP HANDBOOK*

It is important to make the distinction that the *Discipleship Handbook* is not merely a book about discipleship. Rather, it is a local church discipleship tool that can be used in the discipleship process of every newly baptized church member. When considering the five phases of the disciple-making process (prepare, plant, cultivate, harvest, preserve), the *Discipleship Handbook* fits in the final phase—the nurture and training of new members for preserving the harvest. The book contains 26 chapters, which correlate to 26 weekly meetings (six months) between mentors and new members.

To begin, local church leaders should read through Appendix A, “The Discipleship Plan,” to understand how to implement a simple discipleship plan for new members. They should then give a copy of the book to as many members as possible, asking them to read and familiarize themselves with the book in preparation for using it to mentor newly baptized church members. Because every member is to engage in the work of making disciples, every member should be preparing for a time in the future when they will serve as a local church discipleship mentor for someone newly baptized. Alternatively, only a small group of experienced members already willing to serve as mentors could be asked to read the book to familiarize themselves with the new member discipleship process.

The process for using the *Discipleship Handbook* is straightforward and simple. When new members are baptized, each one is paired with a more experienced member called a mentor. Both new members and mentors are given a *Discipleship Handbook* if they don’t already have one. Beginning immediately after baptism, mentors and new members meet weekly to review one chapter of the *Discipleship Handbook* together. This may be done individually or in a small group. It may be ideal to meet before prayer meeting or after church, thus merely adding an hour to a day when the mentor and new member already plan to be in the same place. In Appendix A, “The Discipleship Plan,” one-page meeting outlines are provided to guide the mentor in what to do during the weekly meetings. These outlines include discussion questions for the chapter being read that week. More important than this, however, are the activity ideas given to mentors to integrate the new members into the life and

mission of the church. Activities such as introducing new members to members they haven't yet met, arranging for Sabbath lunch and fellowship with other members, inviting new members to experience family sundown worship, taking new members on outreach activities, and many other recommended activities are suggested in the weekly outlines. These activities, or similar substitutes, are essential for training new members and for integrating them into the life of the church.

In the second weekly meeting, which focuses on the topic of the Bible in the devotional life, the new member is encouraged to begin using the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy reading plan found in Appendix B of the *Discipleship Handbook*. This reading plan consists of daily readings of 15 to 20 minutes per day. As the new members are guided to a Bible passage to read during their daily devotional time, they are also asked to read a correlated passage in the writings of Ellen White. Each week, when mentors and new members meet, they are encouraged in the weekly outlines to begin their meeting by sharing one insight gained from their devotional time that week. By doing this, support and accountability are provided to help nurture the daily devotional habit in the new member. Of course, in order for the new member to follow the reading plan, the mentor will need to provide the necessary Ellen White books, or point them to free access versions on apps or websites.

It is important that the local church personal ministries leader, or someone appointed as a discipleship ministry leader, provide active oversight of the new member discipleship process. Biweekly or monthly mentor meetings are one way to do this. Alternatively, the discipleship ministry leader may make personal contact every few weeks with each mentor. The reason this support and accountability is so important is that it is often the case that new member discipleship breaks down because the mentors are not fully committed. They may allow difficulties in schedules or distractions in their lives to prevent them from gaining any momentum with weekly meetings. If the meetings between mentors and new members don't happen weekly, it greatly reduces the quality of the disciple-making.

Over the course of the six-month process, mentors and new members will study many important topics. The 26 chapters in the *Discipleship Handbook* cover discipleship, the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, personal prayer, character development, family worship, Adventist mission and identity, personal witnessing, church attendance, church ordinances, church organization, Adventist history, Adventist ministries, lifestyle, Sabbath observance, reverence, stewardship, health, modesty, entertainment,

marriage and family, the evangelism cycle, preparing the soil of the heart, planting the seed of truth, cultivating spiritual interests, and harvesting and preserving decisions for Christ with ongoing discipleship.

FOUNDATION PRINCIPLES AND THE *DISCIPLESHIP HANDBOOK*

We began this article with certain foundation principles of discipleship, the first being that disciple-making is a process that follows the growth cycle. This is reflected in the *Discipleship Handbook* in various ways: (1) the last five chapters provide instruction in the evangelism cycle and all five phases of disciple-making, (2) the weekly outlines encourage the mentor to engage in several hands-on soul-winning activities with the new member, and (3) at the conclusion of the book, the new member is encouraged to use the book in the future to mentor someone even newer to the faith.

The second principle was that the instruments of discipleship are people. This is reflected in the discipleship plan outlined in the *Discipleship Handbook* by the pairing of each new member with a more experienced mentor. This vital relationship is built by incorporating weekly meetings as well as activities they experience together outside the meetings. In addition to the relationship between the new member and the mentor, there is also an intentional effort to connect the new member to both the worldwide church (e.g., history, organization, ordinances, etc.) and the local congregation (e.g., meeting attendance, social life, mission, etc.).

The third principle was that the goal of discipleship is Christlikeness. This principle can be seen in the *Discipleship Handbook* in various ways. The very first chapter, “To Be Like Jesus,” establishes this as the goal of discipleship. The fifth chapter, “By Beholding,” focuses on becoming like Jesus by beholding Him in prayer and the reading of His Word. Various aspects of practical, Christlike living are also reflected in the Christian lifestyle chapters.

Fourth and last is the principle that the power of discipleship is from God. This principle is applied from the outset of the *Discipleship Handbook*, with an introduction in the first chapter to the eight spiritual “power” habits of consistent prayer, Bible study, family worship, Sabbath School attendance, church attendance, prayer meeting or small group attendance, personal witnessing, and involvement in church ministries. Several chapters are dedicated to giving practical guidance and strong encouragement to developing these spiritual habits. The Bible and Spirit

of Prophecy reading plan is also introduced to equip new members with a simple plan that can help them discover the power of a consistent devotional life.

CONCLUSION

Whether you utilize the *Discipleship Handbook* or something similar, waste no time in employing an intentional and systematic plan to disciple every new member in your church or territory. With the four discipleship principles outlined in this chapter as your foundation, aim to develop every member into a loving, self-denying, soul winner—like Jesus. By doing this, you will not be limited to the plan of addition, but will experience the abundant joy of the plan of multiplication. “One soul, won to the truth, will be instrumental in winning others, and there will be an ever-increasing result of blessing and salvation.”¹¹



JAMES HOWARD

Jim Howard is associate director of the General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department. His 17 years in pastoral and administrative ministry were preceded by a 12-year career in corporate accounting. He is married to Sonya, his wife of 24 years, and has two daughters—Kayla, 22, and Lindsey, 19. Throughout Howard’s ministry of preaching, teaching, training, and developing resources for soul winning and discipleship, his burden has been to lead every member to a closer walk with Jesus through communion with God, fellowship with the church, and active involvement in both personal and public outreach.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bible texts in this chapter are from the New King James Version.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 355.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900, 1941), p. 354.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1925), p. 69.
- 5 E. G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 356.
- 6 E. G. White, *Christian Service*, p. 59.
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Prayer* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2002), p. 84.
- 8 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 519.
- 9 The resources mentioned are currently available with the exception of the *Bible Study Handbook*, which is currently planned to be published by the end of 2021.
- 10 Ellen G. White, *Maranatha* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1976), p. 99.
- 11 E. G. White, *Christian Service*, p. 59.



The Amazing Influence of Sabbath School for Discipleship and Growth

RAMON J. CANALS, D.Min.

CHRISTIANITY HAS BEEN EXPERIENCING a continuing decline in Bible study and prayer. According to the Pew Research Center, only one third of Christians in the United States read the Bible at least once a week. Like many Christian churches, our own church is being affected. If transformation is to happen in the church, the study of the Bible must be front and center, for without it there is no spiritual growth. Ellen G. White writes, “None but those who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict.” As Seventh-day Adventists we are blessed to have a religious-education institution for members of all ages—Sabbath School! Sabbath School was designed with the purpose of helping its members grow in spiritual understanding as they get into the Word of God daily. Sabbath School has a tremendous qualitative and quantitative influence on making disciples and growing and developing the church. What changes must happen in local church Sabbath Schools to harness their potential to improve and enlarge the church? What is the secret of getting church members excited about coming to church early and staying in the church? These are questions many people are asking.

The answer to these questions might be a different kind of Sabbath School—a Sabbath School focused on worshipping God through prayer, Bible study, genuine fellowship, and uncompromising focus on mission. This is not a dead or boring Sabbath School. This is what I call “Sabbath School Alive”!

Sabbath School has been called the “heart of the church” for good reasons. If rightly conducted, Sabbath School can bring life to the church,

just as the heart brings lifesaving blood to the body. In other words, Sabbath School has an amazing influence for church growth and retention of members. Calling Sabbath School the heart of the church might sound like a cliché, yet it is an undeniable truth.

Not only is Sabbath School the heart of the church, but its importance in the life of the believer cannot be underestimated. I like to define Sabbath School as an opportunity for developing relationships: relationship with God, relationships with one another, and relationships with the community. Thus, Sabbath School is about restoring relationships on the Sabbath day—a day designed by God for worship and fellowship. It is about worshipping God and making disciples—learning and growing in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10).

As in the days of the Colossian church, we face the danger of being deceived by the elemental spiritual forces of the world rather than growing by abiding in Christ. We face the danger of forgetting who we are and why are we here. We should never forget that we are people of the Bible and that we are called to prepare the world for the second coming of Jesus.

I was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church at the age of 20 after a dramatic encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. Although I grew up serving as an altar boy in the Catholic Church, I had never read the Bible. After my baptism as a Seventh-day Adventist I was given an assignment that I credit with helping me develop a love for the Bible and for Sabbath School. I was asked to teach the youth Sabbath School lesson.

Although I had never studied the Bible before, let alone taught it to others, I took this responsibility seriously. I began to study the Bible study guides and the Bible intensely, getting up very early every morning to study. One of the reasons I spent so much time studying the Bible was that I knew so little about it and I wanted to be sure I knew my lesson well when before the class on Sabbath. The effort of getting up early in the morning and dedicating hours to prayer and the daily study of the Bible were instrumental in cementing my faith and deepening my love for my Savior, Jesus. Reading the Bible daily helped me acquire a deeper understanding of God's will as it is outlined in the Bible, and a desire to share this knowledge with other people. I grew spiritually as I spent time with God and His Word.

The result will be the same for anyone who decides to spend time with God and the study of His Word. As we grow spiritually, we become aware of our fallen condition and are more willing to become partners with God in saving souls for the kingdom of heaven. As we continue to

grow in the knowledge of the will of God, we will learn to please Him in everything we do. It is this knowledge and a love for Jesus that keeps people in the church. We can devise plans and strategies to keep people in the church. We can try to close the back door and the windows and perhaps the chimney to prevent people from leaving the church. But unless we help them develop a close relationship with Jesus through the study of the Bible and prayer, all efforts will fail.

Church growth has been a subject of much study in recent years. Everyone in church leadership is concerned about the empty pews. As a pastor, I hated the empty pews. And I asked myself the question “How can I reverse this trend? How can I fill the empty pews?” Several years ago I was serving as a pastor in a church that had been declining for years. As I started praying and thinking about what to do, I realized that the answer to my questions was right in front of my eyes: the Sabbath School class. Yes, the Sabbath School class! I realized that all the resources I needed to bring revival to the church were right there staring at me. The Sabbath School class is the perfect structure for church growth because of its size. Any expert in church growth will tell you that to grow a healthy church, you need to develop small groups. Why small groups? Here are 10 reasons:

1. **Jesus’ Example:** To grow His church, Jesus chose a small group of disciples. Small group ministry was Jesus’ way of making disciples. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you” (John 15:16).³
2. **Ellen White’s Counsel:** Ellen White encourages small groups focused on mission. The Sabbath School class is a functioning small group. “The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before me by One who cannot err.”⁴
3. **Spiritual Growth:** The Sabbath School class is ideal for spiritual growth. Small groups provide a special environment for experiencing God as we worship Him through the study of the Bible, prayer, and fellowship. “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20).
4. **Encouragement:** To encourage one another in a small setting is better than in a large group. Small groups help facilitate biblical applications to your personal situation. “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns

away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:12, 13).

5. **Fellowship:** The best way to find fellowship is in a small group. Small groups provide growth in Christian lifestyle through shared experiences, victories, and challenges, in a familiar setting. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).
6. **Responsibility:** Sabbath School helps members become responsible for their own spiritual growth. Instead of depending on the pastor to nurture and care for them, through the small Sabbath School class they learn to care for themselves and for one another. The small-group setting can help members overcome sin through the encouragement of sharing struggles and victories. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).
7. **Discipleship:** A small Sabbath School class can facilitate discipleship more effectively than the large church (see Matthew 28:18-20). Small groups help fulfill the Great Commission to make disciples by offering a place to worship, pray, study the Bible, and grow.
8. **Meaning and Fulfillment:** There is nothing more powerful to help people stay in the church than a sense of belonging and meaning. The small Sabbath School class can develop projects to impact their community. Small groups offer the opportunity to serve God by helping others. "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (Acts 5:42).
9. **Tender Loving Care:** The small Sabbath School class is effective in caring for and loving one another. Small groups are an intimate place where love and care are given and received. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).
10. **Success:** The small Sabbath School class focused on Bible study, prayer, and soul winning is resulting in church growth wherever it is implemented (see Acts 2:41-47). Wherever this methodology is carefully followed, it yields fruit! It is successful in making disciples!

How can Sabbath School be an influence to help you grow your church and make disciples? Here are three ways.

I. SABBATH SCHOOL HELPS YOUR CHURCH GROW SPIRITUALLY

Spiritual growth can happen only as we feed ourselves from the Word of God. Ellen G. White comments, “The beauty and riches of the word have a transforming influence on mind and character.”⁵ If church members depend on the 30-minute sermon from the pulpit once a week, they will become weak, dependent church members. On the contrary, if they study for themselves daily and connect with God individually, they will be strong, independent disciples growing in grace and serving their communities.

Sabbath School is a tremendous influence on growth in the Christian faith and on maturing in Christ. Ellen G. White writes, “The influence growing out of Sabbath school work should improve and enlarge the church.”⁶

Influence to Improve the Church

Sabbath School is the very basis of our Christian growth; it is the daily, weekly, continuous focus on God’s Word that leads an individual, and the church collective, to grow in spiritual strength. The emphasis on Sabbath School, and Sabbath School attendance, is vital if the individual and the church are to flourish in spiritual growth and biblical understanding.

The influence of Sabbath School in the growth of the church cannot be underestimated. Sabbath School, if rightly conducted, can be an agency for growth in the church by helping its members know God and develop a close relationship with Jesus. There is nothing more effective for spiritual development than the study of the Bible. Satan is aware of the power of the Bible for spiritual transformation and for keeping people connected to Jesus and active in the church. Ellen G. White asserts, “Satan well knows that all whom he can lead to neglect prayer and searching of the Scriptures, will be overcome by his attacks. Therefore he invents every possible device to engross the mind.”⁷ This is why we must do everything possible to help people love and study the Bible. People cannot love Jesus, who is our life, if they don’t know the Bible, because it is in the Bible that Jesus is revealed.

II. SABBATH SCHOOL HELPS YOUR CHURCH GROW NUMERICALLY

Influence to Enlarge the Church

To enlarge the church means simply to make it bigger—to help it grow. Sabbath School can enlarge the church by teaching members how to give

Bible studies, how to share their faith, how to work in their communities, and how to make disciples. The importance of Sabbath School as an instrument for church growth was clearly set forth by Ellen G. White when she said, “The object of Sabbath school work should be the ingathering of souls.”⁸ Notice that she saw Sabbath School as an institution that could help enlarge the church through numerical growth.

Mandate to Make Disciples

The Great Commission of Jesus is a mandate to make disciples. Therefore, making disciples should be a priority for any pastor or church leader who wishes to follow in the footsteps of the Master. The Sabbath School class has the perfect structure for discipleship and disciple-making.

The Gospel of Matthew introduces the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry with His preaching the arrival of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:17). “Follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people” (verse 19). “Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: The kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 10:6, 7). After Jesus’ resurrection He gave His disciples His final all-encompassing command to make disciples of all nations (see Matthew 28:19). With this command Jesus created a self-perpetuating, living organism that will never run out of human resources. Sabbath School, if done correctly, can be a powerful instrument in making disciples.

III. SABBATH SCHOOL KEEPS YOUR CHURCH UNITED THEOLOGICALLY

Sabbath School is the instrument designed by God to keep the church together theologically, because Sabbath School is the vehicle through which the universal message of the three angels of Revelation 14 is proclaimed to its members. The global perspective of the SDA Church is acquired through the Sabbath School. If Sabbath School disappeared, the church would lose its integrity as a world church. Thus, Sabbath School is the golden thread that keeps the Seventh-day Adventist Church united theologically and sociologically.

A study conducted by the General Conference Department of Archives, Statistics, and Research found two important factors regarding Sabbath School. The first factor was that Sabbath School is a powerful, positive influence in church life around the world. The study found that the adult Sabbath School lessons are well liked and regarded as spiritually beneficial by church members everywhere. So too is the overall

experience of Sabbath School. The researcher, David Trim, concluded that “it is a strength on which the church should build.”⁹

Another important takeaway from the study, Trimm reported, was that less than half of all Seventh-day Adventists worldwide have experienced any denominational education, and many pastors have had limited Adventist education. Although the percentage of church members who have attended Adventist educational institutions partly reflects rapid church growth rather than lack of commitment to denominational education, this means there is a growing need for education for the children of the many recent converts. There is also a need for pastors to receive a thorough and distinctively Adventist training and to have opportunities for continuing education.

CONCLUSION

As I travel and speak with church leaders around the world, one thing has become clear. They feel that people are not attending Sabbath School and church in some places because those places have lost their focus on mission. And because of the weak spiritual condition of the members.

Sabbath School was created to strengthen the spiritual lives of the members as they study the Bible and seek to share their faith with other people. It is one of the divinely appointed methods for instilling the gospel in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. The key to church growth and Sabbath School revival is every member involved in the mission of saving souls by practicing what they have learned in Sabbath School. “The Lord desires that those who are engaged in the Sabbath school work should be missionaries, able to go forth to the towns and villages that surround the church, and give the light of life to those who sit in darkness.”¹⁰

The writings of Ellen G. White affirm that those who engage in Sabbath School work should be men and women of faith, humility, consecration, and spiritual knowledge. They will then be able to go forth into the world to share God’s amazing love for His children. The Great Commission of Jesus was not for church growth. The Great Commission was to make disciples. However, if we make disciples instead of members, the church will grow exponentially. It’s worth noting that Jesus’ mandate necessitates that the church train laypeople for evangelism. Encouraging Sabbath School classes to be actively involved in their community is one way people of any language or ethnic background can be motivated, trained, and equipped to fulfill Christ’s mandate. Then, as the disciples grow spiritually, the church will grow numerically.



RAMON J. CANALS, D.Min.

Ramon J. Canals is the director of the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department of the General Conference. Previously he was vice president of the North Pacific Union Conference and also served as evangelist, evangelism coordinator, and ministerial and Hispanic ministries director. He graduated from Central American Adventist University in Costa Rica (B.A.). He also holds a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) and a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) from Andrews University. Canals' mission is to encourage, energize, empower, and equip the saints for the mission of saving souls. Canals enjoys racquetball, reading, music, and memorizing entire chapters and books of the Bible. He is married to Aurora, an assistant treasurer at the Chesapeake Conference who holds a Bachelor of Business Administration. They have two adult children, Jessica and Gabriel, and three beautiful grandchildren.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/>.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 593.
- 3 Bible texts in this article are from the New International Version.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 115.
- 5 Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900, 1941), p. 132.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1938), p. 9. (Italics supplied.)
- 7 E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 519.
- 8 E. G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 61.
- 9 David Trim, *Strategic Issues From Global Research* (Silver Spring, Md.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2011-2013).
- 10 Ellen G. White, in *Sabbath School Worker*, Sept. 1, 1892, p. 74.