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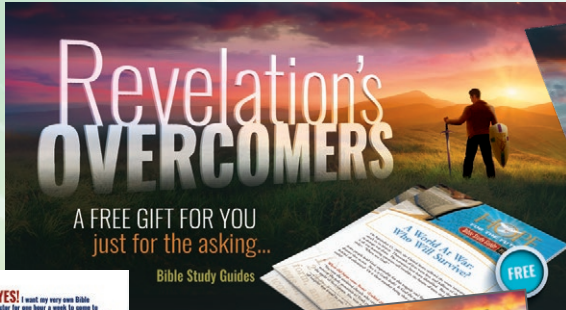


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“These are model articles for any serious Christian journal, and it was a pleasure to see *Ministry* publishing them.”

Restoration of intimacy

I appreciated “David the Great” by Mark Rutland in the January 2019 issue. It had many good thoughts.

I have felt that “David was a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14) could refer to him before he was made king, when he was an exemplary young man. At this time in his walk with God, David wouldn’t even harm King Saul (who had been pursuing him).

I like what I read in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 723: “Infidels have pointed to the character of David, bearing this dark stain, and have exclaimed . . . , ‘This is the man after God’s own heart!’ . . . It was when he was walking in the counsel of God, that he was called a man after God’s own heart. When he sinned, this ceased to be

true of him until by repentance he had returned to the Lord.”

When David saw that kings (in his day) could take whatever they wanted from others, he became a different person. He even went so far as to believe he could take another man’s wife. When God sent the prophet Nathan to reprove the king, David sincerely repented. He cried out, “Create in me a pure heart, O God” (Ps. 51:11) and asked God to take his life instead of his son’s, as punishment. David’s intimacy with God was now restored.

—Helen Fearing, email

Challenge and opportunity

The article “Whosoever will . . . Embracing Everyone” by David Penno (March 2019) does present some serious, but not insurmountable, challenges.

In regard to the active LGB+ friend or family member, love and acceptance as a person is always the right thing, but it should not stop there. It seems appropriate that the LGB+ person should be related to as the church relates to a smoker, drug addict, or alcoholic. They should be loved, accepted, and given all the support we can give them while at the same time encouraging them to take advantage of a support group, so they can be helped to understand the true nature of their habit, and its sinful reality, and the fact the Holy Spirit cannot dwell in a temple that is willfully contaminated by sin or sinful practices. (See Romans 1:21–32; 1 Corinthians 10:8; Revelation 22:15).

Certainly, any LGB+ person who desires help deserves our earnest prayers and friendly and loving support as they battle with their inclinations and practices as we do with any person who is struggling with any practice that heaven will not condone or admit. But in the end, we must call sin by its

right name, or we will be found guilty ourselves.

—Ray Erwin, retired pastor

Wrestling

Today I read the March issue of *Ministry*. I wanted to say “well done” for publishing the articles by David Penno and Leslie Ackie. Penno openly and sincerely wrestles with thorny issues and, rather than providing answers to difficult questions, proposes ideas—*Ministry* should be a place for dialogue, and Penno shows how that can be done. Ackie is admirable for his strong stand against domestic abuse and shares real wisdom based on his personal experience with counseling. These are model articles for any serious Christian journal, and it was a pleasure to see *Ministry* publishing them.

—David Trim, director of the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, General Conference

“Out of the park”

We just received and read the March 2019 issue of *Ministry*. If we can use the terminology of baseball, *Ministry* “hit it out of the ballpark!” Each of the articles is very valuable and worth spending time to read and meditate on its content. We’re especially pleased that four of the articles were written by former or current Family Ministries (FM) directors. We want to congratulate these four writers as well as Jeff Brown, associate editor of *Ministry*, who is also a former FM director. You FM directors represent this ministry in a most positive way and have made great contributions to the health and well-being of families in our church with your articles. Not only are you making a presence but also a contribution to all the families that read these papers.

—Claudio and Pamela Consuegra, Family Ministries directors, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists

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Are good deeds—well, good?

Many Christians undermine the value of good deeds due to misunderstanding their role in their walk with God. Meaningful work and acts of kindness are extremely important, but what is their real value? We believe, together with the Reformers and many Protestants, that we are saved *sola gratia, sola fide*, and *solo Christo*—by grace alone, by faith alone, and by Christ alone. Yet, good work plays an unalterable, unmovable, and irreplaceable role in the Christian life.

As Christians, we confess that we follow Christ and keep His commandments not to be saved but because we are saved; therefore we obey God and do charitable work out of our gratitude for the free gift of salvation. We believe that we are not saved by our works but solely by the works of Jesus, by His victorious, unparalleled, and holy life and death (John 3:16; Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:21). His atonement on the cross secured our salvation, and there is nothing we can add to it (Rom. 3:25; 5:8; Heb. 9:28). He is alive today to intercede for us as the only, all-powerful Intercessor (Rom. 8:34; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:25).

Because we are saved by God's grace alone (Rom. 4:5), many people wrongly conclude that good deeds, works, or obedience are not an essential and indispensable part of the Christian life. This is a huge mistake and a misunderstanding (Rom. 3:31; 6:1–4; 1 Cor. 7:19). What is therefore the function of good deeds? Practically, good deeds comprise five crucial roles:

1. *Our work is not important for our salvation (our righteousness is like "filthy rags," [Isa. 64:6])¹ but it is crucial for the salvation of others.* Jesus underlines:

"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16; cf. 1 Pet. 2:12), and again, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34). Meaningful actions are mighty instruments in favor of evangelism to fulfill God's work, His mission, and vision.

2. *Our work reveals the quality of our relationship with God. A fake friendship cannot last.* Our behavior speaks louder than words as to whether our faith is alive or dead (James 2:14, 17–20, 26). James brings it to the practical level and argues that failing to help people in need proves that such faith is empty, dead, and useless (vv. 17, 20).

3. *Good deeds make us pleasant and easy people to live with (Rom. 12:9–21; Gal. 6:2; 1 Pet. 2:11, 12).* Our joyful lifestyle must be positive and thus will be contagious. As God is serving, we should serve; as God is unselfish, we should be unselfish; as God is gracious, we should be gracious; as God is forgiving, we should be forgiving; and as God is encouraging, we should encourage others.

4. *Good works are important for growing in and maintaining our relationship with Christ (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 1:10).* Daily prayer, regular Bible study, witnessing, fasting, systematic giving, tithing, a healthy diet, stewardship, and involvement in worship are significant habits that help us enjoy a good spiritual life. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), thus cultivating self-control and discipline is a sign of God's Spirit working in us.

5. *Good deeds bring a deep satisfaction and make those who do them happy.* Good work not only affects

Our work reveals the quality of our relationship with God. A fake friendship cannot last.

people around us but it also has a very positive influence on us and our feelings and thinking process. Working for others strengthens our own happiness and relational and social well-being. Feelings of gratification and approval are the results.

These five functions of our good deeds reveal our identity—who we are. They, therefore, confirm that we are God's children. Paul explains that what really counts in life is "faith expressing itself through love" (v. 6). This is why God's followers are exhorted: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb. 13:16, ESV). "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the New International Version.

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Celebration of diversity

I (Joseph) am a Seventh-day Adventist and teach at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. The seminary has some five hundred people from all over the world—including countries I have never heard of before! In attendance are men and women, students of different colors, cultures, backgrounds, and tastes in music and with many different theological persuasions. Yet all of these people love the Lord, love the church, and want to see the fulfillment of the mission of God's kingdom. They study and discuss with one another both in classes and common areas, and once a week they come together to worship the Lord. This is why I celebrate diversity in the Lord's church.

For the last 20 years, I have been traveling all over the world, conducting seminars and training men and women to have healthy churches and spiritual experiences. In my travels, I have seen all kinds of diversity: in styles of worship, music, preaching, and even in potluck meals. However, in all of these varied places and on these occasions, I saw people who love Jesus and are committed to the church. They reach out to their neighbors; engage in ministry; and, to the best of their ability, try to fulfill Jesus' commission. This is why I celebrate diversity in our church.

I appreciate that the church has a big umbrella that accommodates different views and persuasions. In spite of these differences, I have seen the beauty of diversity. Most of the time, I see people getting along quite well with

one another and supporting each other. In addition, they pursue growth in God and His purpose for their lives. Here are some celebrations of the differences I have found in the church.

Differences in lifestyle

One of God's greatest gifts to us is a day devoted to enjoying Him, and this is meant to be God's gift to the world. Yet we vary greatly in the way we worship. There are contemporary services, traditional services, and blended services. But all the churches are striving to provide a space for worshipers to have an authentic experience with God and to encounter His presence and grace. How one can best enjoy the Sabbath can vary from person to person and place to place. Some people may want to minister, some may want to fellowship, and others choose to delight in the day by going out in nature.

We also differ from one another with regard to our individual practices. Scripture offers much instruction on how to live a healthy life, and practices vary all the way from enjoying sugars and fats to eliminating both, from exercising daily to not exercising at all, and from eating meat to raw veganism.

Scripture also emphasizes simplicity, and some have been selective in what we consider simple. Some oppose what they consider the lavish purchasing of houses and cars while having a preference for jewelry and ornaments. Others have the opposite view. In some places churches are ornate and extravagant, while elsewhere people worship under

the shade of trees. We all say we believe in simplicity, but the interpretation of that term varies greatly.

Differences in practice

While baptism by immersion is offered to all who decide to turn to Jesus and live for Him, I have seen many differences in practice when it comes to baptism: the age of the baptismal candidate, what the candidate needs to believe prior to baptism, how much pre-instruction the candidate should receive, and how long the candidate needs to attend church before getting baptized. These are all dealt with differently throughout the global church. They are often tailored to the context of the local situation, intending to help the individual who is seeking after God.

Even church potlucks vary greatly depending on where you are in the world. Some churches serve meat while others serve only vegetarian fare. Some potlucks are seen as incomplete without desserts, and others do not see them as necessary. All of these meals are extensions of the culture, needs, and ministries within the local context.

Differences in theology

There are several different views about the nature of Christ. Some believe in a prelapsarian Christ who was like Adam, just in a weakened form. Others believe Christ was postlapsarian, fully like us yet, despite His sinful propensity, still able to overcome sin.

The majority of believers hold that God is the Creator and Ruler of the

universe and that life on the earth has been relatively short. But the church has allowed for diversity in thought concerning microevolution and the length of time that life has been on the earth. With the intersection of Scripture and science, the church has allowed for ambiguity and contradiction while still

controversial or difficult ideas. When we are given a safe place to discuss doubts, ask questions, and engage in deeper conversation, we are much more likely to latch onto the church community. This is the beauty of diversity.

Unfortunately, there can often be a perceived unfriendly attitude toward

appreciated the traditional, some who desired the contemporary, and some who sought common ground in blended worship services. But there were two things that the church members agreed upon: their love for Jesus and the mission of the church. Through regular fellowship and small groups, the reading



Through regular fellowship and small groups, the reading of Scripture, intentional prayer, and a focus on mission, despite our differences we were united into one community.

maintaining faith in the credibility of Scripture and the Creator of all.

In spite of all of these differences in lifestyle, practice, and theology, the church still believes in unity and may have even become more effective in its mission because of this diversity.

Thriving through diversity

As a young adult church member, I (Katelyn) have seen a number of my peers walk away from the church. But what has been a common factor for those who have stayed? I believe it has been a community with open, nonjudgmental dialogue. The young adults of our church supremely value authenticity as well as the ability to openly address

doubt within the church. If a member is toying with different ideas, this can be interpreted through a lens of fear: fear that the individual may be swaying away from the truth. However, nothing is gained and no one grows when there is no diversity. There is no dialogue when we all think and act the same. But when we can come together in our differences, create a caring space to share our thoughts, and genuinely listen and engage with one another, we are given the opportunity to learn, grow, and connect.

The last church I (Joseph) pastored was quite unique. We had many different kinds of people, some very conservative, some very liberal, and some anywhere in between. There were some who

of Scripture, intentional prayer, and a focus on mission, despite our differences we were united into one community. We worshiped diversely: one week our service would be very traditional, the next it would be quite contemporary, and still another week it would be blended. We evangelized diversely: we engaged in public evangelism as well as personal and friendship evangelism. Even theologically we were diverse. We differed in how we viewed the nature of Christ, the sanctuary, and even simplicity. Through this unity in diversity, we were not only able to become closer as a church family but also to reach out effectively to a greater number of people.

We provided a place where people could connect with God no matter

their preferences of service. We gave opportunities to minister in whatever way a person felt called—with prison ministry, community outreach, child evangelism, and more. Through dialogue we learned to appreciate one another's thoughts more. For example, those in the church who emphasized grace learned more about the importance of holiness, and those who emphasized holiness learned more about the significance of grace. We became a richer, fuller congregation, learning and growing from one another. As a result of tapping into our diversity, the church approached the completeness Paul wrote about in Galatians 3:28, we "are all one in Christ Jesus."¹

The necessity of growth

In one of her letters, Ellen White wrote about the necessity for diverse thinking: "As there are divisions everywhere in society, the Lord Jesus would have the unity of His workers appear in marked contrast to the divisions. In unity there is strength; in division

there is weakness. . . . Diverse in mind, in ideas, one subject is to bind heart to heart—the conversion of souls to the truth, which draws all to the cross."² We may be diverse in thought, but we are united in Christ. Our differences should not be a cause for disunity because we are bound together by the Cross. The more we dialogue with each other, discussing different ideas, the closer we are drawn to Christ. In essence, diversity helps us grow and brings us closer to God. This is where true unity begins to take form.

Unity requires an attitude of flexibility and growth. A good question to ask ourselves is, *Do I have a fixed mind-set or a growth mind-set?* Someone with a fixed mind-set believes that his or her personal qualities are fixed traits, viewing the world from a singular perspective. An example of a fixed mind-set can be seen in Luke 16:31, where Jesus spoke of the Pharisees, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from

the dead.' " Peter also demonstrated a fixed mind-set when, even after receiving a vision explaining what his attitude toward Gentiles should be, he reverted to his previously held stance toward them. Paul had to rebuke him to change his ways (Gal. 2:11–13).

People with a growth mind-set believe they can and should learn and grow, not being restricted to any set of ideas. Growth mind-set allows us to dialogue with one another, having a meaningful conversation that allows both of us to be better off after our conversation concludes.³ Paul, then Saul, demonstrated a growth mind-set when Jesus appeared to him and called him to minister on His behalf. He turned from persecuting Christians to cultivating them (Acts 9:1–19). When the angel appeared to Mary to tell her she would give birth to the Messiah, the young woman hesitated at first but quickly accepted the impossible, saying, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word' " (Luke 1:38). Peter wrote



Are you concerned about your children's salvation?

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of a growth mind-set when he stated, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).

The Pharisees approached life with a fixed mind-set, stuck in their rules and regulations. Hence, when the crowds encountered Jesus, they were amazed because He spoke new, fresh words.⁴ On the other hand, a good example of a growth mind-set can be seen in Caleb and Joshua, who saw an opportunity when 10 other spies saw only impossible obstacles (Josh. 14:6–15). When Saul’s army saw an enemy too big to take down, David saw a giant who was too big to miss (1 Sam. 17). Growth mind-set allows for God to speak new light and truth into our lives, and, of course, this fits perfectly with our Adventist understanding of progressive truth: God continues to reveal new light in His time, and we must be ready and eager to accept His new light, which may mean new interpretation or application.

We are told in Scripture to keep pursuing understanding. “Incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly” (Prov. 2:2–7). The Word of God is urging us to study, learn, and expand our minds. We are not to be fixed in one mind-set; we are to allow God’s wisdom to grow and change us.

Paul echoes this sentiment in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” It is in choosing to approach life through a growth mind-set that we truly are able to let God transform us.

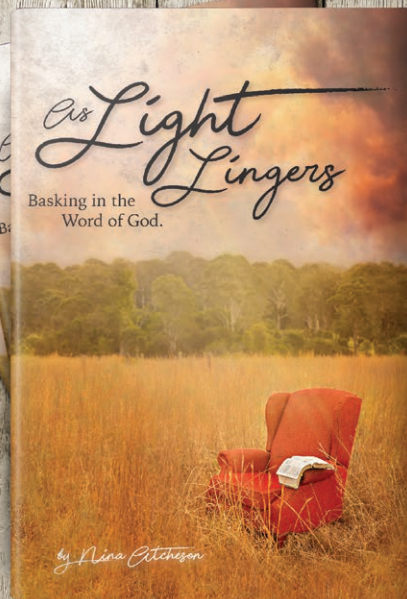
Conclusion

Diversity is worth celebrating. It can be incredibly helpful in bringing us together in dialogue, love, and mission. By engaging with our differences, we can not only reach more people effectively for the kingdom of God but also be more united as a church body. When we choose to listen to, dialogue with, and learn from one another, we allow ourselves to be humbled. We cannot be united in our diversity and remain proud of heart. It is a spirit of humility that allows us to truly connect not only with those with whom we agree but also with those with whom we differ. 

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture passages are from the New King James Version.
- 2 Ellen G. White, Letter 31, 1892.
- 3 Jason Flom, “Fixed vs. Growth Mindsets,” Q. E. D., December 12, 2012, qedfoundation.org/fixed-vs-growth-mindsets/; “Decades of Scientific Research That Started a Growth Mindset Revolution,” Mindset Works, mindsetworks.com/science/.
- 4 See Matthew 12:23; 15:31; 21:10; Mark 1:22; 9:15; Luke 2:47; 4:36.

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Church ministry in a digital age: *Five steps pastors must take*

It happens each morning. Before prayer is on their lips or slippers are on their feet, your congregants' phones are in their hands. They are checking email, news, and social media. Mobile devices are not only the spark of their lives as the day begins but they also fuel their digital experience throughout the day.

As the digital ecosystem around them grows, so does their dependence on it. It consumes their home lives, social activities, and career paths. Amazon's Alexa orders their pizza delivery and finds the movie they will watch on their smart TV. They plan their leisure time through Expedia and Airbnb. Apple's Siri continues the digital conversations away from home as they shop, drive, or walk the dog. Their Fitbit device measures their steps and heart rate. With their phones, they digitally manage their appliances and receive notification when their Amazon package delivery status changes. At work they efficiently schedule their work and vacation time and prepare timesheets all by email, Office 365, and other digital tools. With the simple touch of a button, the swipe of a finger, an utterance, or a focused view of their face, they are connected, empowered, and informed by and with their multiple devices.

Then comes worship. As they enter a church, it all ends for these electronically oriented members. Their digital

world could not be further from the church's analog space of traditionally structured order and reflective worship. Printed bulletins take the place of updated Facebook timelines, and spoken announcements from the podium replace phone notifications. Church leaders find themselves asking, "How relevant is the church experience in this technology-driven era?"

This article will explore the new challenges and opportunities for the church in an increasingly digital world. It highlights five steps pastors and church leaders must take to understand our new reality better and to support members effectively as they navigate today's digital landscape. If it was true in the days of Issachar, it is doubly true today: we need leaders with an "understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chron. 12:32, ESV).

1. Know the times

Never before has technology so fueled and driven our lives as today. Connective computing technologies have become part of the everyday devices, products, and services that touch almost all facets of our existence. The technology world has dubbed it the Internet of Things (IoT).

Digital advances have rewired our thinking. Our technology-driven age has spawned cognitive and behavioral changes in the way we interact with

the information-rich world around us. Such a compulsion to find and share information can help the church. But it needs a continuous flow of relevant, shareable, spiritual, and valuable insight to distribute to the church's network of information-hungry sharers. With such tools in the capable hands of our digitally active members, we will discover a goldmine of personal ministry activity, potentially creating the most robustly empowered distribution network for the gospel that the church has ever known.

But the overwhelming scale and pace of digital information are having an adverse effect on the way our congregants are learning. It has changed how they take in, learn from, and respond to the digital world surrounding them. The Barna Group insightfully makes this point: "Generation Z's lower cognitive regions, which stimulate impulse, are constantly being activated by the bombardment of neurological arousal provided by text messages, Facebook updates, and video games. At the same time, the so-called Google culture of learning—finding answers to any question within seconds—continues to change the way Generation Z youth concentrate, write, and reflect. . . . Their capacity for linear thinking has been replaced by a new mode of thinking, in which they need to take in and dish out information in a fast, disjointed, overlapping manner."¹

Certainly, this phenomenon spreads beyond just Generation Z. Each generation—from our youngest to oldest—that employs digital technology may, potentially, experience similar cognitive and behavioral influence.

2. Kiss goodbye

All who are digitally connected will encounter and interact with some, if not all, parts of what has become known as the FAANG vendors—Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google. Responding to Facebook updates, updating your music playlist with iTunes on your iPhone, tracking your Prime delivery from Amazon as you review their product recommendations, scanning Netflix for your next binge-worthy series, and finding anything you need on Google in mere seconds happens in quick, successive, parallel moments for us—regardless of age. Such a connected dynamic is the new normal for our congregants. In more ways than one, “the old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17, NIV).

Our homes are becoming increasingly automated with instant, intuitive, and efficient control of our lights, window shades, entertainment, appliances, security, and energy use. Nest Learning Thermostats—synced to your weather apps—automatically adjust room temperature inside based on the weather outside. Music and TV volumes lower when phone calls come in or when Mom pulls into the driveway.

On-demand and real-time voice-enabled navigation keeps us aware, on time, and in control. Even remaining connected to our email, music, entertainment, and schedules has become safe and normal while driving.

Control of our finances is digitally at our fingertips. It has allowed us to bypass the drive to the bank, printed forms, long lines, and the bank teller. We now have instant access to and control of our funds from anywhere through an internet-connected device—in our homes, on the road, while shopping, or at work. Technology has become the new gasoline that fuels our digitally enabled automotive experience.

We now live in a digital atmosphere that always surrounds us. Our digital ecosystem is always learning, always recognizing where we are, and intuitively providing what we need next. Choices of music, TV shows, movies, videos, news, events, and notifications continuously arrive. It keeps us informed, providing us with an unequalled sense of ease, access, and control.

What this means for the church is that every member increasingly comes to it from a digitally connected world. They are empowered, informed, and influenced by digital information at an unprecedented pace and scale. The things that matter most to them they instantly receive on screens and interfaces that connect with their careers, homes, health, family, education, travel, finances, and more. This connectivity momentum will grow dramatically as each digital action we make today adds to the scale and evolution of the digital ecosystem that will surround us tomorrow.

3. Kill the urge

A generational line has divided our membership with what has been called digital natives on one side and traditional members on the other. Pastors must resist the urge for an “us versus them” culture to grow in their church. As the pastor of both groups, your goal must be to always strive for win-win scenarios. “If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor. 12:26, ESV).

Many traditional members may resist the use of technology in study or worship by those more digitally oriented. They may view the inclusion of devices and technology as an affront not only to the authenticity of godly worship but also to God Himself during worship. This reaction becomes even more emotional when the digital experiences occur within the sanctuary.

Both sides share the same theological beliefs and desire the same spiritual growth, feeling the call and pull of the same Holy Spirit. Furthermore, they confess their dependence on the same Savior. Yet, they still find

The burden that digital growth has placed on church leaders is for them to be as responsive to their congregants as the digital world has become.

themselves at an impasse—not one of belief but one of the culturally driven expectations of worship. E. M. Kaye has aptly defined participants from both sides of the technological divide: “Those born into the age of digital technology around the year 2000 or later are called ‘digital natives.’ They understand and are comfortable with all things digital. Those born before the new digital technological age and who are now having to switch from an analog culture to a digital culture are termed ‘digital immigrants.’ Most churches are made up of both groups.”²²

In their research study documented in *Making Space for Millennials*, the Barna Group noted some interesting mind-sets that appear on both sides of the generational divide in our churches. “One way to think about this generation is as exiles in something like a ‘digital Babylon’—an immersive, interactive, image-rich environment where many older believers feel foreign and lost. More than six in 10 Millennials like that they know more about technology than older adults. And, the truth is, the church needs the next generation’s help to navigate digital terrains.”²³

Those born in the age of print firmly advocate for the authentic feel of the printed Bible. They can hold it in their hand, put it on a shelf, and pick it up

again for more study. For them there exists almost a romantic attachment between them and the Word by way of the printed Bible. Though they know it to be historically true, they cannot really fathom a time when God's Word did not exist in book form.

So much of what they know about Jesus they searched for and found in a printed Bible. They felt the words as they ran their fingers over the raised ink on the delicate and almost sacred paper. It was this authentic experience with God's Word that brought them thus far. Because it inspired them, gave them hope, and saved them, they can not imagine it in any other way.

4. Knock on doors

Today's pastors face a choice: view the changing digital landscape as gates of opposition to be frowned at or doors of opportunity to be knocked on. The changes in digital technology have dramatically transformed the world. It has become an interconnected ecosystem of constant data exchange between people, devices, services, platforms, and brands. Today's increased hunger for the instant, on-demand choice of information, action, and response shapes the digital environment. This living, breathing, and rapidly growing digital landscape, replete with pitfalls and opportunities alike, surrounds both our present and potential church members.

The shifting digital landscape has influenced congregational expectations of what the church should be. Digital natives seek a connected, on-demand, and responsive church environment. Expecting instantly accessible spiritual support and answers from their church leaders, they look for a spiritual ecosystem that they can effortlessly connect to their own. The burden that digital growth has placed on church leaders is for them to be as responsive to their congregants as the digital world has become.

Church leaders have begun incorporating digital opportunities. Today, pastors are connected with members on Facebook, Instagram,

WhatsApp, Twitter, Snapchat, and other relevant social media platforms. It has opened the door for closer familiarity with members and families. Because it provides timely knowledge of family and member needs, it can enhance the ability to minister compassionately and in the moment.

For the church to find lasting success in reaching and influencing our growing group of digital natives, we need to not only appreciate this behavioral shift but also be willing to adjust to it. This digitally equipped group are active sharers of information. But what the church shares with them needs to be in a shareable format. A 35-minute sermon can still be appropriate, but the salient points of the sermon may need to be shareable in the moment, whether through text, images, video, or audio.

While today's digital information comes at such a rapid pace, individually the information itself arrives in a small, snackable form. Whether images, videos, text, or audio—the bite-size package must be designed to be quickly reviewed, ingested, and shared (if deemed valuable enough). It should be clear, direct, and useful.

Equipping members digitally makes the church relevant in their lives, increases their spiritual knowledge, and empowers them to share the gospel—digitally. Without this shift, the church is at risk of losing meaningful connection with the group that will be its future.

5. Keep in “touch”

Responding to member needs in the digital age does not just mean or require a digital response. We must never lose the human touch as we seek to support members in our digital age. Instead, we need to strike a balance between being reactive and being responsive. For today's pastor, the temptation with digital contact is to instantly respond to each and every individual notification, message, or prompt. That will prove overwhelming for anyone.

Yet there is a reason for optimism. Our digitally robust congregants may appear digitally preoccupied or distant. However, they are persistent in their

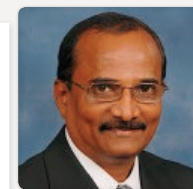
search for God, beyond the walls of the church, within their interconnected world. Armed with their phones and tablets, they are already connected with the Lord before they arrive at church. Our challenge, then, is not to *introduce* them to God. It is an opportunity for the church to rewire its ministry framework digitally, enabling our digital natives to *retain* their digital connection with the Lord while at worship.

Today's on-demand pastors need to learn how to employ the digital world so that it allows them to take a breath, think clearly, and respond prayerfully. The digital world is pregnant with potential efficiency. Tapping into that potential in a measured and balanced way enables clear communication, good use of time, and dependable spiritual support for members and families. The sharing of His Word has escalated at every innovation of human communication, from scrolls, to the codex, to the printing press, to the telegraph, to radio waves, and to television broadcast. Today the communication blessing comes in the form of digital media.

Pastors must find a balanced way to include the digital in the worship environment so that it infuses the worship culture with excellence, informs our digital natives with connectivity, and marries fellowship and spirituality with growth. The digital should also be used as a tool to extend ministry reach and share your church's brand of worship with an ever-widening digital audience. Digital resources are a tremendous blessing from the Lord, a tool to accomplish the gospel commission. The right stewardship of this blessing is the real challenge and opportunity our church leaders face in an age when, truly, “many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase” (Dan. 12:4, ESV). 

- 1 Barna Group, *Gen Z—The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2018), 17.
- 2 E. M. Kaye, *The Christian Church in the Digital Age: Over 501 Digital Ministry Ideas for Pastors and Christian Leaders* (Jacksonville, FL: Christian Digital Ministries, 2014), 187.
- 3 Barna Group, *Making Space for Millennials: A Blueprint for Your Culture, Ministry, Leadership, and Facilities* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2015), 60.

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Members' lives matter

I migrated to the Washington, DC, metropolitan area May 20, 2004, with my wife and two adult children.

With nearly 30 English-speaking Seventh-day Adventist churches in the area, my family and I took the opportunity to worship in various churches on different weeks. Almost all of them were warm and welcoming. Finally, we decided to become members of the Southern Asian Seventh-day Adventist Church (SASDAC) in Silver Spring, Maryland. Situated on a 20-acre property with a well-laid-out and exquisitely furnished sanctuary, it can seat nearly 1,000 people. Its membership rolls list 905. With the addition of children and visitors, the sanctuary should be full every Sabbath. Yet, one can easily observe empty seats most weeks.

The head count

After attending the church for a couple of weeks, I noticed two young women standing behind the last pews of each row at the eleven o'clock service, counting those present. Not having seen it done in the churches in India, it seemed a peculiar practice to me. Curious to know the reason for the practice, I ventured to ask them. They explained that the local conference¹ required each church to report the number in attendance at each worship service. Later, when I became one of the church's associate pastors, I learned that the conference employed the head count to determine the level of member participation in each church. The conference also used the

statistics to train and motivate pastors to increase and strengthen member involvement. Attendance at worship services provided a way to assess member engagement.

I became curious to learn more about the practice. The opportunity came my way when I was appointed as the congregational pastor of SASDAC. I went back to the clerk who did the head count each week. She told me the average attendance for a particular month was 543, which is 60 percent of the membership, meaning that 40 percent of the members were missing during that period. I wondered whether such a condition existed not only in my current home church but also in congregations throughout the Potomac Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.²

When I contacted the conference administration for statistics on church attendance, they quickly confirmed that a similar situation existed in almost all the churches. Out of the total conference membership of 34,728, the average weekly attendance is 16,909, which meant 48.69 percent in attendance and 51.31 percent missing.³

Researchers use a variety of terms to label the process of not attending or affiliating with a church or denomination: dropping out, backsliding, exiting, disidentification, leave-taking, defecting, apostasy, disaffiliation, disengagement,⁴ being unchurched,⁵ and becoming dechurched.⁶ Adventists commonly refer to members who do not attend church regularly as missing or inactive. Admittedly, although

missing members seems to be a common phenomenon in each church, I had never realized that more than 50 percent of the members of churches across the conference were absent each week.

The trend

The global, interdenominational trend agrees with what has been observed in North America. In Europe, while the Catholic countries such as Italy, Spain, Ireland, and Portugal tend to have relatively higher attendance, Protestant countries such as Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden have lower attendance levels.⁷ In his research, Detlef Pollack found similar patterns of decline in many other Eastern and Western European countries. Concluding the study of church attendance in Europe, Philip S. Brenner says, "Most Eastern European countries resemble those in Western Europe—low and stable (e.g., Estonia, Czech Republic) or declining (e.g., Slovenia) attendance. Others with relatively high attendance, like Poland, have attendance rates similar to higher-attendance Western European countries (e.g., Italy, Ireland), and demonstrate similarly negative trends. Only in three countries, namely Romania, Russia, and Bulgaria, is there somewhat consistent evidence of increasing attendance."⁸

Trends from the general population in Australia demonstrate a long-term reduction in church attendance. About 40 percent of Australians reported at least monthly attendance in 1981,

but that dropped to 25 percent by mid-1990.⁹ Tom Smith then found that attendance fell from 28 to 17 percent by 2009.¹⁰ While Kevin Ward reported 20 percent of the population in New Zealand goes to church regularly,¹¹ Smith stated later that attendance had shrunk to 13 percent.¹²

Latin America has fared better than North America and Europe. By the year 2000, attendance rates ranged from 33

percent in Brazil to 57 percent in Puerto Rico.¹³ African and Asian countries did even better, though surveys have yet to take all the major countries into consideration. Stable attendance by the early 2000s was 52 percent in South Africa and 80 percent in the Philippines. But subsequent study also reveals a decline in attendance.¹⁴

Mark Chaves's recent summary of religious trends in America noted that since 1990, attendance "unambiguously has not increased." "Attendance has gone down or essentially remained stable."¹⁵ According to American National Election Studies (ANES), from the 1960s until 2008 church attendance declined from about 43 to about 38 percent.¹⁶

Based on the most recent data, 38 percent of Americans are active churchgoers, 43 percent are unchurched, and the rest are dechurched.¹⁷ Another report suggests only 23 percent visit a church every week, 11 percent almost every week, 12 percent once a month, 25 percent seldom, and 27 percent never.¹⁸ While the numbers differ from

one report to another, they do indicate declining attendance and engagement. The statistical report of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America is not different.¹⁹ According to a statistical report presented during Annual Meetings in Silver Spring, Maryland, in November 2017, the total membership of the North American Division was 1,218,397 for the year 2016. But the average attendance per

came to 603,550. And toward the end of their wilderness journey, as they were about to enter into Canaan, God directed Moses and Eleazar to "take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel from twenty years old and above" (Num. 26:2, NKJV). It came to 601,730. Although the numbering here was not related to member engagement, it illustrates that God was interested in numbers.

Seeking after those who are lost and engaging them in ministry and mission is critical. Failure to count and seek after that which is lost has serious consequences.

week stood at a mere 177,372 (14.5 percent).²⁰ But a report presented during the same period by the Potomac Conference showed a much better picture. Of 34,725 members on the roll at the end of 2016, an average of 16,591 attended every week.²¹ That is 47.77 percent in attendance, close to or even better than the national average presented by the Barna group of researchers. Nevertheless, 52.23 percent are still absent from church every week.

Numbers matter

So far, I have been presenting facts based on numbers. The anti-number proponents may not agree with the importance the church gives to numbers, but I, for one, believe that numbers do matter. They did to God. Speaking to Moses in the tabernacle of meeting in the Wilderness of Sinai on the first day of the second month, He asked the Israelite leader to conduct a census of all the males 20 years old and above—"all who are able to go to war in Israel" (Num. 1:3, NKJV). The total

Jesus and His disciples counted how many the five loaves and two fishes fed. The early church noted that on the day Pentecost, "about three thousand were added to their number" (Acts 2:41, NIV). Later, Peter and John reported their evangelistic success as 5,000 new members. The leaders of the church reported to Paul at the Council of Jerusalem that "many thousands of Jews have believed" (Acts 21:20, NIV).²² Such examples suggest that God requires us to count too.

William Hoyt states that the church needs to keep track of how many come to worship services, how many unbelievers become believers, how many participate in small groups, and how many serve in ministry.²³ Gone are the days when the church clerk would ask the congregation to report how many sick it had visited, how many Bible studies it gave, how many poor it cared for, and how many literature pieces it distributed during the week. Keeping track of the visitors that the Lord brings to the church, how many visitors return the following week, how many of them

later became believers, and how many members engage in or disengage from ministry are important in assessing the effectiveness of our ministry as well as the value we place upon each member.

Members matter

When the Pharisees and the scribes sighed and muttered about Jesus, “ ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them’ ” (Luke 15:2, NKJV), He questioned, “ ‘Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep” ’ ” (vv. 4–6).

The shepherd in Jesus’ parable represents God, for He “agonizes over every lost soul.”²⁴ He actively seeks out the missing until they are found. Nor does He make distinctions between the sheep because “all sheep are important to Him.”²⁵ Laying aside His glory, Jesus came in search of every lost individual in the world. Ellen White states that “this world is but an atom in the vast dominions over which God presides,


yet this little fallen world—the one lost sheep—is more precious in His sight than are the ninety and nine that went not astray from the fold.”²⁶ To Christ, every person is important, because He gave His life for every single soul on Earth. “The Saviour would have passed through the agony of Calvary that one might be saved in His kingdom.”²⁷

To emphasize the value of each member and to gauge the effectiveness of our ministry, it is important for us to keep track of members in attendance, their spiritual growth, and their ministry and mission involvement. In 1986, the church attendance in the United States was 48 percent. By 1996, it had dropped to 37 percent, 47 percent in 2006, and 35 percent in 2016.²⁸ Seeking after those who are lost and engaging them in ministry and mission is critical. Failure to count and seek after that which is lost has serious consequences.

While I agree that cultural factors, such as secularism; pluralism; post-modernism and liberal education; and sociological factors, such as excluding, judging, and rejecting, as well as failing to provide opportunity to be involved in the ministries and mission of the church will affect member involvement in the church, neglecting or not seeking to

bring back missing members is also a major factor in declining attendance. Recent statistics from the Barna Group state that between 6,000 and 10,000 churches in the United States die each year. That means about 100 to 200 churches close each week. Thirty-two percent of people surveyed after they left the church reported that no one from their congregation ever contacted them.²⁹

Early in my ministry, I learned that a particular member had disengaged from the church for a couple of years because of some relationship issues and was in danger of falling back into her old ways. I did three things: (1) *Feel the pain*. Her pain must become my pain (1 Cor. 12:26); (2) *Fast and pray*. Some battles are only won that way (Matt. 17:21); and (3) *Beat a path*. It took several attempts of visitation and prayer—but a big celebration took place the day she came back to church and worshiped with us.

Jesus said, “ ‘For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost’ ” (Luke 19:10). I imagined how heaven celebrates when a soul is brought into or back to the fold of God. Where is the flock given to us? They are bought with a price! Numbers and members matter for the kingdom of God. 

1 SASDAC functions under the Potomac Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which includes the territory of Northern Maryland, Virginia, and the Washington, DC, area.
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3 *Potomac Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Annual Membership Statistical Report*, 2015.
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6 Skye Jethani, “Who Are the De-Churched? (Part 1),” *Christianity Today*, March 2010.
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21 Trim, *2017 Annual Statistical Report*, 18.
22 William R. Hoyt, *Effectiveness by the Numbers: Counting What Counts in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), xvi.
23 Hoyt, *Effectiveness by the Numbers*, 3.
24 Henry G. Covert, *Discovering the Parables: An Inspirational Guide for Everyday Life* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 101.
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26 Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941), 190, 191.
27 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 483.
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29 Thom S. Rainer, “Hope for Dying Churches,” *Facts & Trends*, Jan. 16, 2018, factsandtrends.net/2018/01/16/hope-for-dying-churches/.

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Women in the Word

While affirming the call to proclaim the gospel alongside our brothers in ministry, this article offers tips, advice, and even instructions on how to be the best preachers God has endowed us to be at a time when the contributions of women in the world and, slowly, in the Word, are receiving increasing attention and recognition.¹

Finding meaningful mentors

First and foremost, I maintain that we need role models. In recent years, the number of women responding to the divine summons to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2) has increased exponentially. While, according to a recent study, “sobering figures point to overall enrollment decline” in North America,² seminaries across a range of denominations report record high registration of women. For instance, during the 2012–2013 school year, women accounted for approximately 37 percent of Protestant seminary students.³ Many of them are older professional women who have left lucrative careers to prepare to preach and teach the gospel.

Yet, despite the proliferation of books, journal articles, and YouTube sermons by women, there still remains a shortage of role models and mentors in local seminaries and churches. A female role model for women in ministry is vital because, as Carol Norén

states, “Seeing another woman in the pulpit has the effect of raising a sort of mirror to the woman preacher. It causes her to compare her own work with this other person who is like her and yet not like her, to reflect on how she has grown and what she may become.”⁴

Mentors are needed, but they must be real. Women are not looking for those who just pay lip service to the process of mentoring—they require individuals who will bring meaning and faithfulness to the role. Areas in which mature women in ministry can mentor those new to the role include dress, general decorum, pulpit presence, deportment, and speech, such as finding one’s preaching voice and proper posture.

No matter how supportive of women in the pulpit a man may be, he cannot successfully help in such areas with balanced sensitivity and diplomacy. Norén maintains, “*A feminine role model can demonstrate what a masculine one can only parody.* The way a woman’s laughter, solemnity, tension, and other moods come across over a public address system is something only a woman preacher can show another.”⁵

Norén’s comments hit the mark, including, her assertion, “When a woman who is a role model testifies to the divine, enabling grace at work in her own life and ministry, her successors learn to claim its sustaining power for themselves.”⁶

Embracing real role models

Many women have been incredible wordsmiths, prophets who spoke for God, and iconic preachers and teachers who have left indelible legacies across the rocky road that women in ministry tread. Some, like me, had no mentors but paved the way for those who will follow in their footsteps—until Jesus comes.

To these role models from the past I turned, especially during the early years of my ministry, to obtain the guidance I so desperately needed. Although the list is too long to include all those from whom I drew strength, wisdom, understanding, and professional guidance, there are three individuals who have had, and continue to have, a great deal of influence on my life and ministry—though I have never had the privilege of meeting any of them.

Ellen G. White (1827–1915), cofounder, formative leader, and prolific author of my denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Ellen White “has been largely ignored”⁷ in the homiletics and religious literature of mainstream Christianity, despite the fact that she is the most translated American author of either gender and the most translated woman writer in the history of literature.⁸

A strong supporter of women’s role in ministry, as well as the family, Ellen White pointed out for me that there is a singular niche for women in ministry as there are aspects of ministry that men

cannot accomplish. She stated, “The Lord has a work for women as well as for men. They may take their places in His work . . . , and He will work through them. . . . The Saviour will reflect upon these self-sacrificing women the light of His countenance, *and will give them a power that exceeds that of men. They can do in families a work that men cannot do, a work that reaches the inner life. They can come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach.* Their labor is needed.”⁹

Rev. Dr. Ella Pearson Mitchell (1917–2008), first woman dean of Sisters Chapel at Spelman College. While Dr. Mitchell taught at the American Baptist Seminary

politician, and the first African American congresswoman from the southern states. The daughter of a Baptist minister, Jordan served as a United States congressional representative from Texas. She was the first and, to date, the only African American woman to deliver the keynote speech at a national political convention. From my early teens, I have been a logophile (lover of words), but it was from Barbara Jordan that I learned their full importance, value, influence, and power.

I observed how she articulated and gave life to each expression so that her words not only left a lasting impression but, like cherished servants,

best of our God-given ability. Women have a unique voice as they excel in discovering or drawing fresh insights from Scripture. The reason is that we do not stand outside a text and analyze it. We step into its world, see, taste, and smell its texture before concluding exactly what it means. This kind of hermeneutic is experiential.

Finding one’s voice must also take place in a literal sense. The human voice is the vehicle for the message and the best indicator of who the presenter is. “Without a dynamic, natural voice, it is difficult to obtain and maintain the attention of the listener.”¹¹ Yet, among preachers, it is the least-understood

As pastors, we encounter many painful occasions and transitions. These provide opportunities to introduce rituals to relieve the distress some may have carried for years.

West and Claremont School of Theology, her greatest influence on my preaching life and ministry came through *Those Preachin’ Women*, a five-volume collection of black women’s sermons that she edited, as well as *Fire in the Well*, a joint autobiography with her husband, Henry, the acknowledged father of black, or African American, preaching.

From her I learned to avoid mediocrity at all costs and to embrace a consistent “practice of excellence,” especially “as a means of dealing with those who would despise” or oppose women who respond to God’s call to preach. “Excellence” she insisted, “transcends its detractors, and in the end it will conquer, moving past opposition to be used by God.”¹⁰

Congresswoman Barbara Jordan (1936–1996), lawyer, educator,

always fulfilled their mission. Watching her forever changed my attitude toward the use of words, the coining of phrases, and the elocution of a speech or sermon. Her demeanor was authoritative; her emotions, tempered; her timing, impeccable; and her voice like a bell that jarred the nation awake from an uneasy slumber. A voice in the wilderness crying out for justice, she spoke with authority in a manner that all, great and small, could hear and understand. From that day I dared to dream of speaking like Barbara Jordan.

Finding one’s voice

A question that holds great significance for preachers is how to find one’s voice. First, let it be known that women already have a voice that we are now empowered to seek, find, and use to the

and worst-protected or cared-for instrument for communicating the gospel.

“Normally, without any special effort, the voice is easily manipulated up and down the pitch range, altering between loud and quiet, fast-paced and leisurely, and modulating quality to add variety. This control over the many dimensions of sound should be treasured.”¹² Preachers can distinguish between their natural or habitual voice, and discover their natural voice by two methods:

1. *Practicing breathing exercises.* Breathing exercises emphasize the use of the diaphragm instead of the throat for vocalization. “*Breathing* for speech differs from ordinary breathing employed during sleep or other nonvocal activities. Speech utilizes expiratory air, which vibrates the vocal folds and

produces sound. . . . Common breathing problems of the minister include: (1) speaking too long without a pause for breath, (2) pausing long enough for a short gasp only, and (3) placing too much attention on breathing by using shoulder and neck muscles rather than the efficient abdominals, resulting in strained, unnatural voice.”¹³

2. *Controlling pitch.* Before she learns how to manage it, pitch can be the bane of a woman’s voice when amplified. The pitch is “determined by the length, mass, and balance of tension in the vocal folds. For example, a small woman would have smaller vocal folds and therefore produce a higher pitch than a large man. But other factors such as stress or stage fright add tension to the vocal folds and can result in an elevated, strained voice.”¹⁴

Being prepared to change

When I became senior pastor of one of our largest congregations in North America, the men who had been used to often hearing the amplified monotone of their male senior pastor complained vociferously that I screamed when I preached. It was an insight from the Holy Spirit that enlightened me to realize that it offended their eardrums when I raised my voice during moments of exuberance, because they were unaccustomed to hearing the amplified sound of a woman preacher.

Now, as a role model for women in the Word, I share tips with other women on how to strengthen their voices so that it does not sound screechy or nagging when amplified. For example, I once read that Ellen White developed her voice during the days before microphones by going into the woods to practice projecting her voice. Since I view her as one of my role models, I, too, went into the woods near our church and preached loudly to the trees.

The result was, and is, that my vocal cords developed a strength and resonance that has engaged listeners and, according to their own admission, changed the minds of many who

objected to women preachers. Today, I highly recommend tools found in the video accompanying the book *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*.¹⁵ And I still claim that there is a forest of converted trees in Maryland where I preached and projected with such passion that it often brought sweat, if not blood.

Adopting feminine phrases

Women preachers should feel free to use feminine phrases or jargon such as “weaving, sewing, patterns, pregnant, and birthing” into sermons. Today, even men use such language in the pulpit as they talk about being impregnated by the Holy Spirit and speak of the inspiration of birthing a sermon.

Rita M. Gross explained this God language when she wrote: “Let me say immediately that I am quite aware that God is not really either female or male or anything in between. I only wish the people who argue to retain solely male imagery were as aware that God is not really male as I am that God is not really female. I am talking about the only thing we can talk about—*images* of God, not God. . . .

“All the words used in the religious enterprise are, in the long run, analogous and metaphorical. . . . They are tools—linguistic conventions. Such are the inherent limitations of language about God.”¹⁶

Introducing new rituals

I once read an article, “Finding Comfort After a Miscarriage,” in which the author wrote, “Jewish women who find that the tradition does not provide rituals to sacralize the events of their lives have turned back to the tradition for the tools to create new rituals.”¹⁷ I had just received a phone call a few days prior from a young mother whose first child had died in her seventh month of pregnancy.

She and her husband were distraught and wanted me to do a funeral for the baby, whom they had lovingly named. As we laid that tiny child to rest

in the cemetery in a specially designed box, the parents’ grief was palpable. Watching them cling to each other in their loss, I remembered the above quote and decided at the graveside that I would introduce a new ritual into the life of my congregation.

Within a few weeks, we held our first service for parents who had lost infants. The invitation included others outside our regular church members and, to our surprise, the service was packed that morning. Members made a small cradle and placed it at the foot of the cross, on our platform. I preached a sermon about Christ’s love for little children, followed by a litany I composed that allowed parents to express their grief and mourn their loss.

During the service, I urged those present to name their prematurely deceased child or children. Near the end of the service, we suggested that participants write the name of their lost child or children on a card prepared for the occasion. We instructed them to place the card in the cradle at a specific time during the program. Then we prayed about all of those children, calling out their names before God and our congregants as we joined in the families’ grief. By the end of the service, there was not a dry eye among the worshipers. Many expressed then, and for weeks afterward, how cathartic and healing an experience it had been for them.

As pastors, we encounter many painful occasions and transitions. These provide opportunities to introduce rituals to relieve the distress some may have carried for years. As Susan Grossman says, “There are no traditional prayers to recite over a miscarriage. There is no funeral or mourning ritual to follow. After suffering a miscarriage, a woman does not even routinely recite the prayer said after coming safely through a dangerous experience, . . . something all women can do after giving birth.”¹⁸

We must exercise our privilege to create rites for these and other important passages in the lives of all members of the body of Christ, whom we serve. For this, too—among the

diverse opportunities to preach and teach—we have been called and sent by our Savior.

Preaching to save souls

I was blessed to be the first black female pastor, the first female senior pastor, and the first female professor of preaching in my denomination. I have proudly embraced the fact that “it was Mary who first preached a risen Jesus;

and the refining, softening influence of Christian women is needed in the great work of preaching the truth now. If there were twenty women where now there is one who would make the saving of souls their cherished work, we should see many more converted to the truth. Zealous and continued diligence in the cause of God would be wholly successful, and would astonish them with its results.”¹⁹ This singular honor has, at

times, also been a misfortune, in that I did not have female role models to help me understand and work through some of the challenges and opportunities I encountered as I matured as a minister through various positions. But I have been ever thankful for the presence and providence of God that has consistently ordered my steps and unfailingly guided my life as I have matriculated through this ministry called preaching. ▣

- 1 See Hyveth Williams, *Nothing but the Best: A Guide to Preaching Powerful Sermons* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2018).
- 2 Barbara G. Wheeler and Anthony T. Ruger, “Sobering Figures Point to Overall Enrollment Decline,” *In Trust*, (Spring 2013): 5. intrust.org/Portals/39/docs/IT413wheeler.pdf.
- 3 Wheeler and Ruger, “Sobering Figures.”
- 4 Carol Norén, *The Woman in the Pulpit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 30.
- 5 Norén, *Woman in the Pulpit*, 30.
- 6 Norén, *Woman in the Pulpit*, 30.
- 7 William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 502.
- 8 Arthur L. White, “Ellen G. White”: A Brief Biography,” The Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., whiteestate.org/about/egw/bio.asp.

- 9 Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1998), 19; emphasis added.
- 10 Ella Pearson Mitchell, ed., *Those Preaching Women: More Sermons by Black Women Preachers*, vol. 2 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1988), 14.
- 11 Willimon and Lischer, *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, 495.
- 12 Willimon and Lischer, *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, 495.
- 13 Willimon and Lischer, *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, 495; emphasis in original.
- 14 Willimon and Lischer, *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, 496.
- 15 Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit, eds., *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

- 16 Rita M. Gross, “Female God Language in a Jewish Context” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 168, 169.
- 17 Susan Grossman, “Finding Comfort After a Miscarriage” quoted by Ann Braude, “Women and Religious Practice in American Judaism,” in *In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women’s Religious Writing*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 150.
- 18 Susan Grossman, quoted in Braude, “Women and Religious Practice,” 150.
- 19 Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1998), 18.

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Culture shift:

Courage over comfort

I see a disturbing trend. I have given this trend considerable thought because it impacts our church and our church leaders. Please know from the outset that I am not a controversial guy. I am not a troublemaker by nature. I love the church, and I have a natural affinity for pastors. I write because I care. The heart of my concern is culture, specifically, church culture.

Culture is difficult to define; this is especially true when it comes to the culture of the church. I googled “church culture” and found an article by Ronald E. Keener where he quoted Samuel R. Chand (a culture expert) saying, “Culture is the strongest force in any organization.” Chand goes on to say that “the best way to understand culture is the statement: ‘This is how we do things here.’”¹ He notes that this is a common theme. For example, I saw this statement on a wall in one of our industries in Australia: “The stories we tell is the culture we create.” Chand continues identifying culture with, “It is the atmosphere in which the church functions. It is the prevalent attitude. It is the collage of spoken and unspoken messages.” Keener asks so eloquently the question all of us have asked ourselves at one point or another: “Why is it that we are not where I know we should be as a church?”² The answer? Our culture is holding us back.

Setting the stage

I pastored a wonderful church in Oregon that truly desired to impact the community. We were able to see God use us to influence a county that was 70 percent unchurched. We designed our worship service with the unchurched in mind. We used music to bring a worship experience that was alive and engaging. We used drama to set up sermons that would pull the congregation into the worship experience. And many times, we would use a song at the end of our messages that would pull on heartstrings like nothing I have ever heard. People visiting our church would come through the front door and say to the greeters or to me, “What’s going on in here?” My answer was that the Holy Spirit was alive and well in the Kelso-Longview Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Culture shift

But now, 11 years removed from being the pastor there, I can see that what really happened was a Spirit-inspired culture shift. We became obsessed with a community that proudly proclaimed their unbelief in God. On many occasions, I reminded our leadership team that the community might not believe what we believe, but when they meet us, they will meet a group of people who will show them just how much we believe in our God. And we did that together. We sought

to do everything with excellence. This culture of excellence became our driving force for years. I preached that excellence in all things was attainable. We set a high bar of expectations for one another. In weekly committees, such as the planning and review committee, we prayed and then reviewed and planned our services. We designed worship programs with music and drama to maximize the impact of our message each Sabbath morning.

This committee wanted worship to revolve around themes, and they wanted to plan those themes in advance of my actual sermon. In the beginning, I struggled with this request. But after I saw the advantage of the group being able to plan our services, I worked hard at presenting themes six to eight weeks in advance. I listened to elders tell me that I was not connecting enough with the congregation when I preached. At times I swallowed hard, wanting to make excuses for myself. But, refusing to let my ego get in the way, instead, I would ask, “How can I do this better?” It seems that each time I asked the question, the leaders had good advice for me, and I applied it. As the culture shifted, I had the feeling that we were all in it together; the church would succeed in our community as we succeeded in our responsibilities. We were committed to the idea that the worship hour would be God’s time to meet His people, and we would never

waste a moment of that precious holy time. We challenged each other with prayer; smiles; encouraging words; and, yes, even constructive criticism. As we planned together, I felt God's presence as much in my elders' homes on Monday evenings as I did in church on Sabbath morning. I share these details because they give you an understanding of my experience with our church. Pastoring

and then to give them the support and training to accomplish those dreams. We believe this can be done even for the pastor who has a three-church district.

Accountability

When I pastored, I asked a male dentist and a female doctor to be my accountability brother and sister. We met every Wednesday at noon at the

their phones. It may be our culture, but I felt it needed to change if we were to achieve excellence for God.

So, I told our pastors that their workers report helps us to understand what they have been doing for the past month. Since we were raising the bar of accountability, I stated, "If we receive no workers report from you, you will receive no travel budget from

Clearly, as I learned in Oregon, the local pastor is the individual who has the greatest influence on the local church, and that influence can be either positive or negative.

Kelso-Longview Seventh-day Adventist Church was the most incredible time of my life.

Today's culture

In my current position, my administrative responsibilities prevent me from regular involvement in a local church because I travel around our territory from week to week. I have come to realize that I have very little influence in the local churches in our territory. Clearly, as I learned in Oregon, the local pastor is the individual who has the greatest influence on the local church, and that influence can be either positive or negative.

I, along with my advisory committee, owe it to the church members to equip our pastors so that their influence is decidedly positive. The value of our pastors must be elevated in the eyes of the local church. That begins by elevating the pastors in the eyes of the local conference administration. The administration must support, encourage, and hold pastors accountable to reach for their highest potential. We are beginning to allow our pastors to dream

dentist's office. We focused on several things that were specifically designed to help me improve. For example, we read a portion of the Bible throughout the week, and then we talked about how we might apply what we learned to our lives. The real accountability began when they asked me several tough questions: What are you reading? Where are you going? How are you doing financially? How much time did you spend with your wife last week? Have you looked at anything inappropriate? After I answered those questions, they asked the most important question: Did you just lie to us? I needed accountability in my life to reach my potential. I needed to be challenged and checked on weekly. This accountability helped me to get better as a person and a pastor.

Accountability is often a missing factor among church leadership. We asked pastors for a monthly report; many did not turn them in. We sent emails and texts; many did not respond. We addressed the issue at a workers' meeting; many did not show up. We clamored for their attention; they preferred texting or playing games on

us." Today, 100 percent of the pastors send their reports on time. The culture is shifting.

It is our deepest desire to help our pastors live lives of influence so that their leadership has maximum impact. We met with the pastors and talked about developing plans. We emphasized that we were in this work together. We talked about working hard and working smarter. We communicated clearly that if anyone was working part-time for full-time pay, it was going to stop as of that day. We set up quarterly meetings with every pastor at their home or in their church. We gave them templates to help them put their plans on paper for the quarter, and when we visit, we review those plans to see what they have accomplished and what they still have in progress. We encouraged them to vision cast with their elders and church boards. We spend anywhere from two to four hours with each pastor. Occasionally, we include spouses. These visits have proved to be invaluable.

It is an inspiring time of sharing that I only wished I could have had with the

conference presidents I worked with when I was a pastor. We hear stories of baptisms, potential baptisms, Bible studies, and other growth activities, and I detect excitement in our pastors as they share their hearts. We talk about sermon topics and preaching schedules in multichurch districts. I hear about difficult visits to hospitals and home visits where the pastor helped a church member with a particular job or task. They share their plans to train their members in how to give Bible studies. I am careful to remind them that everything they accomplish in their district is directly related to building relationships with their members. They tell me about their families and how they are doing. We pray together and frequently eat together. Each time I leave a pastor's home, I have an overwhelming feeling that we are changing the culture.

It is becoming more difficult to find young people who are called to ministry and still recognize the hard work ahead of them. We interview at one of our universities on a regular basis, and we often ask these theology majors how many hours a week they expect to work as a pastor. Sometimes we get a blank stare followed by several moments of silence. They typically respond with a puzzled look and an answer in the form of a question: "Twenty or thirty hours a week?" My reply is shockingly honest: "That is half-time work; are you planning to work for half-time pay?" Frequently, a student will tell us that they do not know how many hours they will have to work. It is obvious they have no idea of what it will take to be an influential church leader. It is our responsibility to guide and encourage them to understand that they are called to sacrifice. I am finding that once we share our vision, we are met with eagerness and hunger because these students desire to accomplish something great for God. Everyone wants to succeed in their profession. My job is to create an environment where that can best happen.

We have created a culture where many pastors think they have no boss and no accountability, so they feel they

do not have to visit or return phone calls; they get paid just the same either way. I have heard several stories of calls made to the church for the pastor to visit a sick spouse, and the pastor never shows. I cannot understand this negligence. If this is the way we lead, something is missing from our calling. I participated in an evangelistic series at a church where the pastor did not even show up for the meetings. But some feel it is acceptable to stay home all day and babysit, play video games, and generally waste away day after day. And in that culture no one says; "Hey, you can't do that." The reality is this: You cannot do that in any other job. We are raising the bar and, with an arm around the shoulder, challenging our pastors to do better. We are explaining that this is the most important work in the world and that our approach toward the work we do needs to change. This is what we are aiming for in the Gulf States Conference.

Let us consider our church members. They work 40–50 hours every week. We chastise them when they do not want to come out for prayer meeting or committees. But in reality, that extra meeting we have planned for them adds to their workweek. When their pastor has been home most of the day and only comes out of his house for prayer meeting (many times late) and then complains because only four members are there, he needs an attitude adjustment to realize ministry's expectations of him. It is our responsibility to sit down and share with him in a kind but direct way what this is costing him by way of influence in his church. We show our love and respect for people by being present, on time, and prepared. It does not work any other way. When you can share with your members at prayer meeting or a committee where you have been and whom you have seen that day, they likely smile and are willing to go the extra mile with you. The culture shifts again.

We must remember why we accepted the call from our Lord to pastoral ministry. We cannot allow a culture that expects so little from us

to dictate how we will respond to our calling. Remember, and return to your first love.

Except we become like them

There was a little girl in our congregation that was the granddaughter of one of my elders. When I would finish my sermon on Sabbath, she would come running into my arms, and I would carry her down the center aisle with me. She contracted cancer as a two-year-old. Leading out in an anointing service for her was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. She ended up at Seattle Children's Hospital. I went up to visit her, and her grandparents (my elder and his wife) were there. Haley was crawling into logs in the children's play area of the hospital. She crawled out of a log and looked at me with a big smile that I will never forget, and then she patted the log, inviting me to join her in the log. I gulped hard as I reluctantly moved toward the log. I am a pretty big guy, and I thought to myself, *I could get stuck in that log.* And I did. Haley and my elder and his wife laughed so hard. So did I! I worked myself out of that log and came out sweating, and then Haley jumped up on my lap.

I have forgotten a lot of sermons, music, and dramas we did at church. I have forgotten committees and Bible studies and baptisms. But I will never forget Haley! To me, this is what my call to pastoring was all about—that I could be at Seattle Children's Hospital that day, and a moment in time froze forever for me, a moment with that little girl and her grandpa and grandma.

Change the culture. Incarnate yourself with your people. And if you get stuck, you may sweat a little, but worry less—laugh more—and ask God to help you decrease, while He increases. ▣

1 Ronald E. Keener, "A Church's Culture Is the Atmosphere in Which the Church Functions," *Church Executive*, July 1, 2011, churchexecutive.com/archives/a-church%E2%80%99s-culture-is-the-atmosphere-in-which-the-church-functions.

2 Keener, "A Church's Culture."

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Digital discipleship

Almost everything you need to know about being a pastor in the digital age starts with a stick.

Well, to be fair, it is more than a stick. In the right hands, this “stick” commands respect. In the Bible, we find a stick in the hands of Moses. Through it, God empowered Moses. The majority of the time, Moses used it in accordance with God’s will, though through a lapse in judgment, it also became a tool of disobedience.

And now, as we face the complexities of the digital age, we can rest assured that we are dealing with the same God but with a different stick.

Just as the Lord asked Moses many years ago, “What’s in your hand?” He raises a similar question today. What we find at hand is a plethora of digital tools, devices, and strategies that are considered distractions of the enemy by some but are awesomely powerful when wielded to do God’s work.

What is digital discipleship?

Digital discipleship is the use of all the tools and strategies at our disposal to carry out the Great Commission. It is strategically positioning ourselves as a church online and creating a Christian presence that allows us to

- answer questions,
- provide comfort,
- meet needs,
- empower members,
- support social media influencers,
- build digital communities, and

- show Jesus’ love in a compelling way.

Furthermore, digital discipleship acknowledges the special abilities of the techies and creatives in our church and empowers them as we have traditionally empowered our personal ministry leaders, Sabbath School teachers, and Pathfinder directors. It elevates the role of the church’s communications team from the typesetter of the bulletin and the sound team to that of vital partners in ministry.

This article will outline ways you can lead your local church to consider or refine your approach to digital discipleship. Also, we will discuss the digital discipleship ecosystem as well as outline some practical ways you can lead your church to get started in the digital space.

Digital discipleship and the local church

A church’s unique quality is its ability to create community and be a place of life-changing teaching, learning, and launching of disciples. In the early church, community was natural and almost inevitable. The church did things together—shared problems, dreams, discouragements, financial obligations, and a love for Jesus and His calling. Today, technology allows us both to extend that community and amplify our message to groups that we can more tightly target than ever before. As you consider practicing digital discipleship

in your congregation, it is helpful to frame the what, who, and how.

The what of digital discipleship

As you approach your church team and suggest that the church create a digital discipleship plan, keep in mind that there are three natural ways to integrate digital discipleship into what you’re already doing or to develop something new.

Meet the needs of people within your community in the digital space. You can think of digital discipleship as what you do on your website, social media, and in online groups to meet your community’s needs. It could be as simple as encouraging your church members to share and engage in conversations on their social media accounts or optimizing your web content to help people who are searching for answers online.

Continue to meet the needs of the groups you are already ministering to, but also provide support for people on your social media accounts, in forums, or on your church website. For example, consider having a section on your website about parenting, health, or prayer. Host an online Bible study or prayer meeting. Livestream a cooking class. Always seek to meet peoples’ needs, whatever they may be.

Meet the needs of people in your community in person around a digital or creative topic. Digital discipleship can be powerful when it allows churches to meet in person. Options range from

The local church has the opportunity to speak to the local community and answer questions through its involvement in its own social media.

hosting seminars about keeping your children safe online to setting online boundaries for teens or hosting a six-week photography course. You could also conduct a computer class for senior citizens. The specific needs of your community will dictate the best options, so talking to them to understand their challenges is key.

Utilize digital or creative tools. Use tools that help fulfill the particular objectives of your various ministries. Remember, digital discipleship is a ministry that serves other ministries and should integrate into your church's communication, evangelism, and ministry plans. You should use it as a means to accomplish an objective and not just to be an objective unto itself. In other words, do not buy expensive live-streaming equipment because everyone else is doing it. Ensure that what you are doing is helping to reach the people you are best positioned to influence.

With this in mind, employ the most effective tools. Many churches have seen success with apps like WhatsApp, YouVersion, Echo, or Facebook. Some set up events on Meetup.com, and others have invested in photography or videography equipment. Whatever decision you make, always use technology in ways that will help you to reach your goal.

The *who* of digital discipleship

If you are mentally reviewing your congregation and not a single techie or creative person comes to mind, do not worry; digital discipleship is still for you. While this ministry creates a platform for techies and creatives, it also has room for others who have a passion for sharing Jesus. Between your church and a neighboring one, you should be able to find a group of content creators, distributors, engagers, and curators to form what we can call your technological ecosystem.

Content creators. Content creators are masterful storytellers, talented artists, and skilled graphic designers. They take biblical concepts and stories and provide interpretations and depictions that capture our attention and lead us on a journey. In addition to celebrating artistic talents, we must also recognize those with technical abilities, such as our computer scientists who build systems, design platforms, and provide engineering genius. They create digital reality out of our dreams.

Content distributors. Think of content distributors as our digital door knockers. They get content seen by sharing it on the social media accounts, in online forums, and in WhatsApp groups. This effort creates the opportunity to start conversations.

Content engagers. Content engagers join online conversations in a compelling, Christlike manner. The first, or engagement stage, emerges from the conversations we have online. In fact, it is the keystone in the digital discipleship process. What you say online can have a huge impact on someone's day, mood, and perception of life around them. Are we using our conversations to lead persons to the Lord?

Content engagement is not just responding to the conversations that start on our social media platforms; it is also proactively joining conversations on relevant social media accounts, engaging with texting platforms, and being a good member of online groups.

The local church has the opportunity to speak to the local community

and answer questions through its involvement in its own social media. We also have the chance to build relationships through interaction on the web pages of local businesses, in local online groups, and in community forums, thus giving us a voice and allowing us to be part of the conversation happening online in our geographic area.

Content curators. Much like a museum that gathers items that are most worthy of display, a curator or an administrator on the church's social media account can curate content from around the internet to make it easier for church members to then distribute it. Typically, the social media accounts of Adventist magazines, TV stations, conference offices, and individual churches are great content curators.

The *how* of digital discipleship

Now that you understand the *what* and *who* of digital discipleship, we can deal with the question of how to implement it. As previously mentioned, digital discipleship is a ministry that supports the other ministries in your church and should integrate into your church's communication, evangelism, and ministry plans. Again, you should use it as a means to accomplish an objective and not let it just become an end in itself. So, the starting point should be to consider how applying digital discipleship principles to what you are already doing can bolster your efforts.

Think like someone who is searching. Once you have studied what you are already doing and how digital discipleship can enhance it, the next thing to do is to exercise empathy. We need to begin to think like a person looking for a church community as we set up our websites and social media accounts.

If you were searching, what questions would you have about church? What would encourage you to attend? Why would you reach out to understand Jesus better? What might you see that would give you a boost of encouragement to persevere through hard times?

Show online visitors what life might look like if they were part of your community. Give them a glimpse of the events, spiritual life, and friends they might encounter. Show them how they can have their questions answered. Be your authentic self by displaying actual photos of members on your website and social media accounts. If necessary, bring a photographer in to take them. Being real online can make a huge difference.

Remember, while it is important to put thought into your website and social media design, keep in mind that it is not a science, and effective design can require revisions and continual adjustments. Knowing that you can test, change, and update can relieve the pressure of always trying to get it right the first time. Most importantly, understand why you are posting something in the first place.

Value the talents of the creatives and tech savvy among you. Traditionally, we have not always created space in the church for creatives and the tech savvy to place their talents on the altar in service to God. Weaving digital discipleship principles into the fabric of your church's communication, evangelism, and ministry plans can allow more people to feel that the church values their time and talents. Providing recognition for the gifts of creatives and the tech savvy and inviting them to be partners in ministry is an essential part of digital discipleship.

Identify the specific needs of the people you are trying to reach. Review some of the ministries your church is running and understand what their demographic is. See whether there's an opportunity to bolster their efforts by implementing a digital strategy. You can aim ads to specific groups based on demographics and behaviors. For this reason, it is best to decide *who* you are trying to reach.

You can learn more about their needs by understanding where they hang out online. If someone is struggling with a problem, they may already be seeking a solution. Go to the Facebook pages where they may participate or the Instagram accounts they may be

following. What online groups are they part of? Check out the conversations. What are they saying? What needs do they express? Use this information to shape how you address the community you want to reach.

Meet your community needs in the digital space, around a digital need, or by utilizing a digital tool. Continuously question what you are doing online. Seek to ensure that you are using the best method possible to meet needs. Utilize tools that help you accomplish your objectives and meet the community where they are, whether it's online or in person.

Be intentional in your livestreams. Many people are unwilling or unable to enter a church building. Members of our local churches may have stopped attending church but are still willing to anonymously watch a service online. Parents, previously involved in the church, can be distracted on Sabbath morning by attending to the needs of their children. Others have hearts ready to listen to spiritual messages but feel intimidated by being in a church building itself.

By fostering relationships online, some who were unwilling to attend may return. Others who became disengaged may re-engage and find spiritual renewal. Shape your livestreams with this in mind.

Always be intentional in your online interactions. Take the opportunity to speak to your online audience, appeal to them, and have specific calls to action for them. Give them their own space on your website and social media accounts and create an online spiritual home for them. Provide the opportunity for conversations instead of simply putting your message into the void of the internet and hoping God will do the rest.

Meet needs online outside of your livestreams. While livestreams are important, you should also offer ways to share spiritual content online outside of the traditional church hour. That might include online small groups and prayer sessions midweek. Consider webinars and online evangelistic series. Another channel might be online cooking

classes, parenting webinars, and other online classes.

Not all online relationships must remain in the digital space. Seek to build relationships with people online that encourage and attract them to attend your church. Many things need to happen for persons to trust you as they contemplate giving up their Saturday morning for a church building. Digital discipleship can play a role in familiarizing people with your congregation and encouraging them to attend.

Your voice matters. And now, if you are wondering, it *does* matter what you as a pastor post online. Gone are the days where your social media account was your personal space. With that being said, be a real person online. Share your love of sports or cat memes or parenting failures. Be real; be authentic; and, above all, be like Christ.

Growing in discipleship

A foundational text for digital discipleship is Romans 12:15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Make this your practice in the online space. Local churches have a variety of opportunities. We often begin our online interactions through livestreams of church services and advertising evangelistic programs. Join conversations where a wise word will prevail. Share in people's joy and their sadness, just as you do in your in-person ministry.

While we want to use all the digital tools we can, all resources should be used with wisdom and discernment. We still depend on a close relationship with God. Through prayer, collaboration, and strategic thinking, ask God to guide you and your congregation on how to use the digital space to help people grow in discipleship. Remember, same God—different stick. ¹

¹ The author organizes an annual digital-discipleship conference. For more information regarding the 2019 conference in Queensland, Australia, visit the "Digital Discipleship Conference 2019—QLD, Australia" page of the Adventist Church in New Zealand website at adventist.org.nz/event/digital-discipleship-conference-2019/.



Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family

by Paul David Tripp, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.

The author of *Parenting*, Paul Tripp, is concerned that most parents have gotten so lost in the endless tasks of parenting that they have forgotten the “vision that holds them all together and sanctifies them with meaning and purpose” (131, 132). In each chapter, Tripp focuses on one gospel principle for parenting that he hopes will pull back the curtains so that tired, frustrated parents can take in a big picture of parenting philosophy. This is not a book of practical and effective strategies. There are no 10-step processes or sample conversation scripts. In fact, Tripp argues that new strategies are not what parents need. Instead, this book offers the bird’s-eye view of parenting—how God may view the parenting tasks and challenges of everyday life.

It is important to note that Tripp has written about parenting before. He shares that he “became increasingly uncomfortable” with *how* parents were using what he had written (141). He began to see that the gospel foundation—the big picture *why* of parenting—was missing in these parents’ experience, and that prevented them from understanding and correctly applying any *how* principle he might share. Simply put, most parents will misuse the *how* unless they have already marinated in the *why*. *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family* is that *why*—and it is a powerful and must-read title for all Christian parents.

While Tripp covers gospel principles on topics including grace, identity, authority, control, and rest, he really uses each topic as a new facet for viewing the same overarching principle: parents are ambassadors. Parents do not own their children; they should not focus on what they “want for their children and

from their children” (168, 169). Instead, parents should “faithfully represent the message, methods, and character of the leader who has sent him [or her]” (176, 177). It is not the job of the parent to change or shape the child—that’s God’s work.

One point that Tripp reinforces is that parents suffer from the exact same challenge as their children: a sinful nature. In children, it causes all the behavior about which parents complain—fighting, possessiveness, complaining, and more. But parents also want their own way, feel possessive of their belongings, and complain! “*I am more like my children than unlike them,*” Tripp says, “and so are you” (156). Our children may be addicted to the latest cell-phone game, but parents often have an “addiction to the law of our comfort, pleasure, success, and control” (155). Further, to get our way, we often resort to fear, rewards, or shame-based methods to achieve that control and comfort. Parenting is a strange and glorious situation where God uses sinners to represent Himself to more sinners. Only God’s grace can make that possible!

Tripp also challenges parents’ mind-sets by insisting that the challenging moments are gifts of grace: “Parents, if your eyes ever see or your ears ever hear the sin and weakness of your children, it’s never an accident, it’s never a hassle, it’s never an interruption; it’s always grace” (171). These moments reveal our hearts and the hearts of our children. These are ministry opportunities! Further, when we experience God’s gifts of the Spirit in these moments, we can see how God parents us as we parent our children.

Another central theme is that of talking consistently and constantly about God’s grace, glory, and mercy—in every discipline moment, as the central reason



behind every rule, and to open the eyes of our children to the hidden reality of God. Tripp not only suggests this to parents but also models it throughout his book. While he frequently calls out poor parenting practices, he never fails to point to God’s mercy and grace as the power for change in both our lives and the lives of our children.

This book would have been more accessible if it focused on the *how*, but without the *why* it would not have been more effective. Instead, this volume prods parents to reflect and evaluate their current practice against the standard of the gospel and courageously points to God’s gracious solution. The *how* of good parenting is easily found in many other quality resources, but this book about the *why* is a powerful presentation that can shape your parenting practices and infuse them with meaning. I recommend it without reservation. **V**

—Reviewed by Joelle M. Worf, a full-time parent of two young children as well as a student in the Master of Pastoral Ministry program at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



► Women in Inter-American Division called to enrich church and community

Photo: Libna Stevens, Inter-American Division News



Miami, Florida, United States—More than 200 women leaders from across unions, conferences, and missions throughout the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Inter-American Division (IAD) prayed, shared, and networked together during a two-day training conference held February 10–12, 2019.

“God has put in your heart a special passion and energy to do what you do for the Lord,” said IAD president **Elie Henry**. “You represent a vital force that perhaps is not as appreciated as it should be, but you are all important and have a place in God’s plans.”

Themed “Chosen and Loved,” which is drawn from Jeremiah 31:3, the event sought to remind women that they have been chosen and loved by God with a great purpose, said **Dinorah Rivera**, who is the IAD Women’s Ministries director and was the main organizer of the gathering. “When women find their purpose in Jesus, they can be used by the church with greater impact because they are living that purpose,” she said.

“We want women in the church to be strengthened and nurtured—that woman who may be following the Bible doctrines, who attends church regularly but may be dealing with abuse, lack of identity, and more, and we want to reaffirm her value in Jesus,” Rivera said.

The leaders were challenged to commit to leading at least one woman to Jesus in 2019, as the initiative entails.

“All of us are chosen because God needs us, and He has chosen us in spite of our strengths and weaknesses, so we can be a light in our communities,” General Conference Children’s Ministries

Women ministries leaders pray for persons they commit to reach and enrich for Jesus. (Photo: Abel Márquez/IAD)



director **Linda Koh** said. “You are chosen to be a disciple, chosen to bear fruits of mission, love, and service to make other disciples.”

Attendees listened to presentations on forgiveness, on being happy despite imperfections, on how to overcome stress and exhaustion, and more.

Edna Alvarado, former women’s ministries director in South Mexico (now Chiapas Mexican Union Mission), was honored for her leadership and service to the church in the IAD for more than 34 years. She spoke to the delegation on the importance of being a Christian woman and the will to serve.

“God calls us to grow in Him,” Alvarado said. “You will only grow spiritually if you are determined to serve others.”

Minelly Ruiz, Women’s Ministries director in the Chiapas Mexican Union Mission, said she was eager to pass along the training to the thousands of women across her region. With more than 97,000 active women throughout more than 3,000 congregations in Chiapas, the mission-driven initiative will propel committed women to reach and enrich the lives of so many more women.

“Women’s ministries is very strong in our territory,” Ruiz said. “Young girls

and adolescents are trained alongside their mothers and church members and get involved in the mission of the church.”

Henry said women are very active in prison ministries, community outreach, care of the elderly, helping single mothers, and public evangelism and will work closely together to focus on looking at the needs of women in the community.

Rivera agreed. “We are not just looking to add another number to our church membership but to nurture each life in Jesus,” she said. [Libna Stevens, Inter-American Division News]

► On International Women’s Day, ADRA Romania commemorates a decade of fighting domestic violence

Bucharest, Romania—The women housed at the Emergency Center for Victims of Domestic Violence, or Casa ADRA, were in for a surprise when the president of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International, **Jonathan Duffy**, along

with his wife, **Cathy**, attended an International Women’s Day event held on March 8 at Casa ADRA.

“For me, the topic of victims of domestic violence is a sad one,” said Duffy. “Over the years, nearly nine hundred people have been housed here. It is

sad to think that there are nine hundred victims of domestic violence, but I am grateful that ADRA Romania has found an experienced team that has given them hope, safety, blessings, a place where they can renew their life, and where they can rediscover human dignity.”



Photo: ADRA Romania



ADRA Romania executive director **Robert Georgescu** stated that ADRA Romania has been managing Casa ADRA since 2009. It focuses on the social reintegration of victims of domestic violence by providing them with shelter, social and psychological counseling, emergency medical assistance, food, and help finding a lawyer.

The women housed in the center experience a different way of living their lives—without physical, verbal,

economic, psychological, sexual, or religious violence. They rely on spiritual values and cultivate healthy eating, exercise, training, and recreational habits.

Casa ADRA is one of the first and few Romanian centers for victims of domestic violence. Since its inception 10 years ago, the shelter has constantly improved its response, adapting it to each and every situation of violence,” added **Valentina Sturzu-Cozorici**, ADRA Romania project manager.

Currently, the monthly expenses for each victim of domestic violence housed at Casa ADRA are of about RON 2,500 (about USD 600). During its 10 years of activity, the center has assisted more than 2,240 victims of domestic violence, while 896 of them were accommodated at Casa ADRA itself.

Those who would like to join the ADRA Romania team in the fight against domestic violence and help with Casa ADRA can do so through the ADRA Romania website at adra.ro/doneaza. [ADRA Romania]

► Social media-based initiative connecting women from Ghana to the world

Ghana—**Debbie Asamoah Antwi** formed Adventist Smart Women (ASW) in 2018. It has grown to more than 4,300 members from all over the world, including Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Tanzania, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, the United States, the Philippines, and Belgium. The group’s primary objective is to make an impact on the lives of others through education, networking, collaboration, socialization, and empowerment.

“The group is made up of professionals who help in resolving delicate issues as well as discussions based on Adventist beliefs, social issues, relationships, health, education, and many more,” group coordinators said. “Members with sensitive issues bring them onboard by using an anonymous link to hide their identity. To help the person, group members use professionalism, personal experiences, and biblical counsel.”

ASW planned and held the humanitarian activity in Ghana dubbed “Project Touch a Life” in December 2018 with the purpose of bringing people closer to

Debbie Asamoah Antwi, founder of Adventist Smart Women, is shown donating an item to the chief of Baako Ni Aba. Photo: West-Central Africa Division News





Jesus by meeting the physical needs of a community. Project leader Antwi and her coordinators contacted Nyinahin district pastor **Michael Boateng**. He welcomed the idea and made the necessary arrangements for the project to happen.

The group’s goal was to attend worship services with the church in Baako Ni Aba, provide for some needs of furnishing the facilities, and donate food, clothes, and toiletries to the surrounding community, Antwi said. Donations and fund-raising initiatives privately funded the project.

Schoolchildren in the area received exercise books and notebooks, pencils,

pens, mathematical sets, rulers, and pencil sharpeners.

Antwi said she was thankful to God for making it possible for them to achieve the dream of touching the life of someone in need. “It is the duty of every Christian, something that Jesus commissioned us to do,” she said. “We hope this project will bring some people closer to Jesus.”

She also invited other Adventist women to join the group to enlarge their sphere of influence, as she thanked current members. “Thanks for your prayers, support, and donations,” she said. “Thanks to everyone supporting this project.” [Bernard Adjare, Central Ghana Conference]  

Darlene L. Patton, MDiv, is an author and teacher residing in Atlanta, Georgia, United States.



The impact of Christian behavior


I pulled up to a local convenience store and saw a young man with long hair and tattoos standing up against a post. He looked downtrodden, so I asked him how he was doing. He responded, “Not very well.” I asked him what was wrong and whether there was something I could pray with him about. He told me that he was down on his luck and a recovering alcoholic. I prayed with him and asked whether he was attending church. He said that he

and many of the members then started treating him far differently than they had before his absence. He began to be ignored by the very people who had made him feel welcome, loved, and supported. He further shared that he overheard some people saying bad things about him. He returned to that church believing that Christians would treat him in the same manner they had before, but he was sadly mistaken. He said he left that day understanding

self-proclaimed Christians, and I assured him that the behavior he had been subjected to was far from Christlike. I told him that Jesus loves him just as he is—long hair, tattoos, and all.

After hearing this man’s story, I invited him to attend the church I attend and assured him he would feel welcome, loved, and supported because, as it says in Romans, we all sin and fall short of God’s glory. He thanked me for praying with him and inviting him to church but said that he did not think he would be going to church anywhere anytime soon and that, to be honest, he may never visit another church. I responded to him by saying, “I pray you change your mind, and remember you are always welcome at the church I attend.” I purchased what I needed in the store and returned to my vehicle heartsick that there are Christians out in the world treating people in the manner this young man had been treated.

The Bible tells the story of a woman caught in the act of adultery. The truth is, she was not the only one caught in the act of adultery. Jesus addressed those who were willing and ready to stone the woman to death before He ever spoke a word to her. And when He did address the woman, Jesus did so in love, with few words, and forgiveness.

When we hear of treatment such as this young man experienced, we may cry out, “Terrible!” Yet, if the prophet Nathan were around, he may well look at your church and declare, “Thou art the man” (2 Sam. 12:7, KJV). We can treat persons according to our feelings or according to Jesus’ model. Our choice to reach out, or not, has eternal consequences. Inasmuch as we do it to the least of God’s children, we do it to Him. 

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had been attending a church where he felt welcome, loved, and supported but that he no longer attends services there.

I asked him why he left that church. “Well, I have to be honest; I left because I started drinking again. I went on a binge and drank for about three months.” After the binge, he ceased drinking and returned to church one Sunday morning. When he returned, he was honest with the pastor and some of the church members about the reason for his absence. The pastor

why some people label Christians as hypocrites.

This young man went on to share with me that a couple of weeks after he had left the church for the second time, a gentleman from another church approached him and invited him to attend his church. He said the man handed him a business card with his church address on it and said, “Get a haircut, and come visit us.” I told the young man that I was sorry he had experienced such treatment from

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