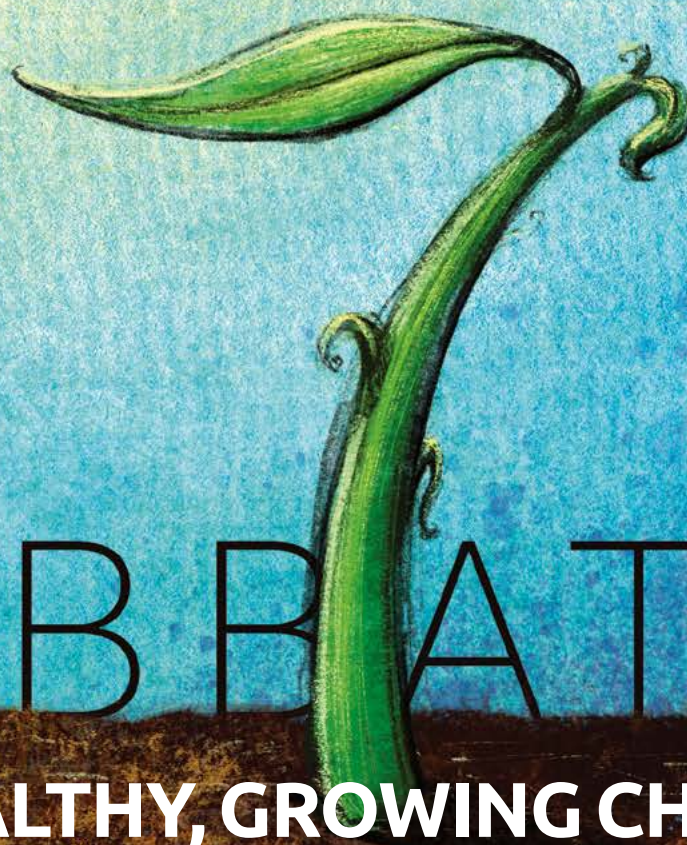


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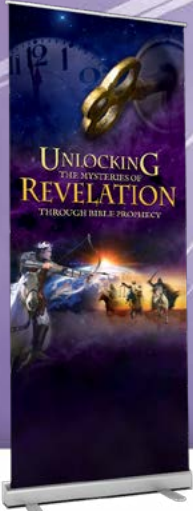
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MINISTRY®

International Journal for Pastors
12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring,
MD 20904-6600 USA
www.ministrymagazine.org
ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org

EDITOR

Pavel Goia

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Jeffrey O. Brown

CONSULTANTS TO EDITOR

John Fowler, Clifford Goldstein,
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EDITORIAL SPECIALIST

Sheryl Beck

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Ivan L. Williams, Ted N. C. Williams

LEGAL ADVISOR

Todd R. McFarland

ADVERTISING

advertising@ministrymagazine.org

SUBSCRIPTION ASSISTANT

Kathleen Burton

SUBSCRIPTIONS/ RENEWALS/ADDRESS CHANGES

subscriptions@ministrymagazine.org

+1 301-680-6511

+1 301-680-6502 (fax)

COVER

316 Creative

LAYOUT

316 Creative

SUBSCRIPTIONS

12 issues: United States US\$32.99; Canada
and overseas US\$47.00. To order: send

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Subscriptions, 12501 Old Columbia Pike,

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Ministry® has been published monthly since 1928 by the Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists®
Ministry is a peer-reviewed journal.

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PRINTER Pacific Press® Pub. Assn.,
1350 N. Kings Rd., Nampa, ID 83687
Standard mail postage paid at Nampa, Idaho.
(ISSN 0026-5314)

Member of Associated Church Press.

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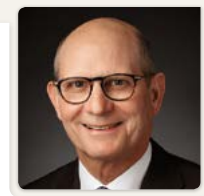
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Ted N. C. Wilson, PhD, is president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Where is your heart?

Church growth, discipleship, and retention are topics of vital interest today. As a pastor, you continue to look for ways of growing your church as well as discipling and retaining the members you have. While much helpful material is available on these topics, I believe one of the best, most effective (but often overlooked) tools in growing and maintaining a vibrant, healthy, missional, active church is the Sabbath School.

Sabbath School offers a time of growing together unlike any other. It's a time for singing, sharing, learning about mission both in our local communities and abroad, fellowship, and studying the Bible together. It should be a time of interaction, encouragement, and growth for everyone—from the youngest to the most senior member or guest.

One of my fondest memories of Sabbath School was when I was in the junior class at the Seventh-day Adventist church in Takoma Park, Maryland. I remember numerous people who invested so much time into our young lives. We had people assisting us with investment projects and donating money to help us. We had a Sabbath School orchestra in which many of us participated every Sabbath morning.

My favorite time was the Sabbath School lesson study, taught by a superb teacher, Harry Baerg. Mr. Baerg was an artist at the Review and Herald who specialized in nature and illustrated animal stories. He always had wonderful illustrations from nature for us during our lesson study, and he made a strong impact on my young life.

I thank God for dedicated Sabbath School teachers who are investing in both young and older lives. Their investment is not forgotten, and we thank the Lord for these wonderful teachers who are sharing their talents each Sabbath.

Sabbath School is a vital aspect of evangelism and is of benefit to all ages.

"The Sabbath school," we are told, "should be one of the greatest instrumentalities, and the most effectual, in bringing souls to Christ."¹

If you have not already done so, I encourage every pastor to have a pastor's Sabbath School class for those who are preparing for baptism or were recently baptized. The blessing of such a class can be tremendous.

Furthermore, we are reminded that during Sabbath School, we have a special privilege of cooperating with heavenly angels.

"There is a broad field in Sabbath school work, that needs to be diligently cultivated, and that is to inspire our youth to give themselves wholly to the Lord, to be used by Him in His cause. There should be zealous, faithful workers in our Sabbath schools, who will watch and discern upon whom the Spirit of God is moving, and cooperate with the angels of God in winning souls for Christ. There are sacred responsibilities entrusted to Sabbath school workers, and the Sabbath school should be the place where, through a living connection with God, men and women, youth and children, may be so fitted up that they shall be a strength and blessing to the church."²

I am delighted that *Ministry* magazine is publishing this special issue focusing on the role of the pastor in Sabbath School. You, as a church leader, have the wonderful opportunity of guiding your church into recognizing the value of developing meaningful, inspiring, relevant Sabbath Schools filled with fellowship, interactive Bible study, mission, and more each week.

This, of course, is not always easy. It takes time, consistent effort, and dedication, but the rewards are well worth the investment! And throughout this special issue of *Ministry*, you will find a solid, biblical foundation,

meaningful articles, and practical tools in helping you as a pastor to encourage your church in participating in this God-given way of learning, fellowshiping, and growing together as the family of God.

It should be a time of interaction, encouragement, and growth for everyone—from the youngest to the most senior member or guest.

May the Lord bless you as you lead and encourage His flock to learn and grow in Him through the study of His Word, and the powerful influence of Sabbath School—it's the heart of the church! "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, NKJV). So, pastor—where is your heart? 🙏

¹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, Pub. Assn., 1938), 10.

² White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, 11.

Ramon J. Canals, DMin, serves as the director of the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Return to basics and renew your church

I was invited to speak at a church of more than a thousand members in Los Angeles. As the Sabbath School superintendent gave her opening remarks, I noticed that a couple hundred people were in attendance. A few hundred more trickled in toward the end of Sabbath School. As we began the divine service, I had my offerings ready; however, the deacons did not come to the platform. I asked the senior pastor, “Did they forget to pick up the tithe and offerings?” To which he replied, “No, we usually pick up the tithe and offerings after the sermon because that is when the most people are in church.”

Maybe your situation is similar. Your members are not coming to church early—or are not showing up at all. Why is it that churches are packed for Sabbath School in some places, and empty in others? The reality is nothing new; but it still cries out to be addressed: Sabbath School particularly in the “developed” world, has been in decline for years. As we look at successful Sabbath Schools across the world, the answer may be as simple (and difficult) as this: *An intentional return to basics that begins with me.*

Revelation 2:5 contains these nonnegotiables: (a) “remember the heights from which you have fallen”; (b) “change your inner self—your old way of thinking”; (c) “seek God’s will . . . and do the works you did at first”; (d) “otherwise, I will visit you and remove . . . your church’s impact” (AMP).

How is your church’s impact? Studies show that there is a direct correlation between languishing Sabbath Schools and church growth.¹ So here are four keys to bring life to your Sabbath School and growth to your church.

1. Growth happens in a church when the members are involved in fervent, constant prayer

Every study of the history of church revival and church growth shows that prayer played a central role. Jesus realized that in order to accomplish His mission, He needed to be in constant connection to the Father and in tune with the Holy Spirit. Jesus would get up before sunrise to pray. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35).² Jesus not only got up early to pray but also often spent whole nights in earnest prayer (Luke 6:12).

The disciples followed Jesus’ example. They prayed for 10 days between Jesus’ ascension and the receiving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). “They devoted themselves to . . . prayer.” “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42, 47). These Bible texts show a clear connection between a strong commitment to prayer and kingdom growth. Prayer is an essential element in the life of a Christian. A life without prayer is not spiritual because prayer

is how people connect with the Holy Spirit. Churches that neglect prayer will languish and die.

Practical steps: Begin Sabbath School with a strong emphasis on prayer. I have seen many churches grow just by focusing on their prayer life. Some call for a special prayer meeting 30 minutes before the beginning of Sabbath School. Make it happen in your church, and you will experience growth as never before.

2. Growth happens in a church when the members worship God together

I baptized a young woman named Rosy. The day of her baptism, she said to me, “The reason I like to come to this church is that you teach the truth as it is in the Bible. I learn a lot in Sabbath School and as I study my Bible lesson every day. I love to learn from the Bible.” Effective Sabbath Schools have all of the elements of worship: (a) Bible study, (b) prayer, (c) praise, (d) singing, (e) fellowship, (f) offerings, (g) mission. Should we not, then, consider Sabbath School as a worship experience instead of just a place to discuss the Bible lesson for the week? Sabbath School is revived when it is viewed from a different perspective—as an opportunity to worship.

Practical steps: Encourage members to prepare for this weekly corporate worship experience through individual study, using their Sabbath

School lesson, reading the Bible daily, and prayerfully meditating on it. The teaching time is not the preaching time. The teacher should facilitate the study and understanding of the Bible. He or she should make study of the Bible in Sabbath School interesting, engaging, and participatory, and even introverted members can be encouraged to read a text.

3. Growth happens in a church when the members are involved in fellowship

Research conducted among former prisoners of war reveals that the most effective method the enemy used to break the spirit of prisoners was iso-

cannot have real, genuine fellowship unless we have real, honest relationships with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Most of what we consider to be fellowship is just a superficial encounter rather than the communion of heart and soul. Real Christian fellowship goes beyond a mere “Hello, how are you?” *Koinonia* is a participative fellowship. It is a partnership in the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ.

Practical steps: The Sabbath School teacher should use a few minutes during class time to plan a fellowship meeting outside of class. Meet for one hour to pray, to plan, to eat, and to talk about how to reach the community

I was invited to hold evangelistic meetings in San Antonio, Texas. I visited the church one month ahead of the meetings to find out what kind of preparation was being done. I attended a Sabbath School class and participated in a healthy discussion of the Bible lesson.

After the worship service, I was invited to a fellowship meal. As I waited for the meal to begin, one of the church elders approached me. “Pastor, I want you to meet the members of my Sabbath School class.” He proceeded to introduce me to each one of his class members. Then he said, “The pastor is teaching us how to visit homes, knock on doors, pray for people, and give Bible studies.

The teaching time is not the preaching time. The teacher should facilitate the study and understanding of the Bible.



lation. Worse than torture or lack of food and water, what really penetrated their psyche was separation from other people. Similar experiments were conducted on monkeys, with the same results. These studies show why social interaction is so crucial for our overall health and survival.

While the same is true for Christian growth, Christian fellowship goes deeper than just social interaction. It is based on a close relationship with God, and as we fellowship with God our fellowship with others increases. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). We

for Christ. In addition, this will be an opportunity to find out who has been missing from class for two consecutive Sabbaths and plan to get in touch with these people. Pray for missing or hurting members, and make specific plans on how to care for them.

4. Growth happens in a church when the members are involved in daily soul winning

The best gift a pastor can give the members of the church is to teach them how to work for Jesus.³ Make members fishers of people. Nothing will make them stronger than using their talents and gifts to bring someone else to Jesus.

Every Sabbath afternoon, we go out in pairs as Jesus sent His disciples. We divide up the neighborhood, and each couple takes a street. We pray for the people who live on that street and begin knocking on doors. With this methodology, we found several families interested in Bible studies. Some of those families were here today, and others will come for your meetings in a few weeks.”

I was delighted to hear this and knew that my evangelistic meetings were going to be successful, not because of my preaching but because of what the Holy Spirit was already doing in the life of each church member involved in sharing Jesus in their community. And indeed, the

Lord blessed those meetings with an abundant harvest in a city believed difficult for winning souls.

Practical steps: Each Sabbath School class should pray about and discuss ways they can be involved in fulfilling the gospel commission. This should comprise all ministries in the church. Plans should be made and implemented in every phase of the discipleship process: preparing the soil of the heart, planting the seed, cultivating spiritual interests, harvesting decisions for the kingdom of God, and keeping people in the church by making them disciples of Jesus. Youth can be involved in sharing their faith by passing out tracts, praying for neighbors, prayer walking, and preaching at home or abroad. As you organize mission opportunities for your church, remember that the best help we pastors can give our youth and church members is to teach them to work for the Master.

Back to basics

Charles Bradford says to pastors, “A good sundown family worship on Friday night is of inestimable value to the Sabbath sermon.” He also stated, “Rise early in the morning. Let nothing keep you away from Sabbath school. Remember, a good conscience helps a [person] to speak with greater authority. It also helps you with your people, when they see you on time and involved in the study of the lesson.”⁴

These four keys can help bring revival and growth not just to Sabbath School but to your church as a whole. This was the disciples’ lifestyle: “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah” (Acts 5:42). The very next verse says, “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing . . .” (Acts 6:1). Growth happens when we do our part

and allow the Holy Spirit to do His. It is God who gives the increase.

Sabbath School will never be revived if the pastor sees it as the task of the superintendent alone. Getting back to basics begins with me. I am the pastor, yes, but I am also a church member and, as a church member, I am a Sabbath School member. Pastor, what change in your Sabbath morning practices might God be calling you to? ❏

- 1 Laurentiu A. Serban, “Factors Related to Declining Attendance at the Adult Sabbath School in the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventist Church” (PhD dissertation, Andrews University, 2014), digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/690.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this article are from the New International Version.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 82.
- 4 Charles E. Bradford, *Preaching to the Times* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1975), 118, 65.

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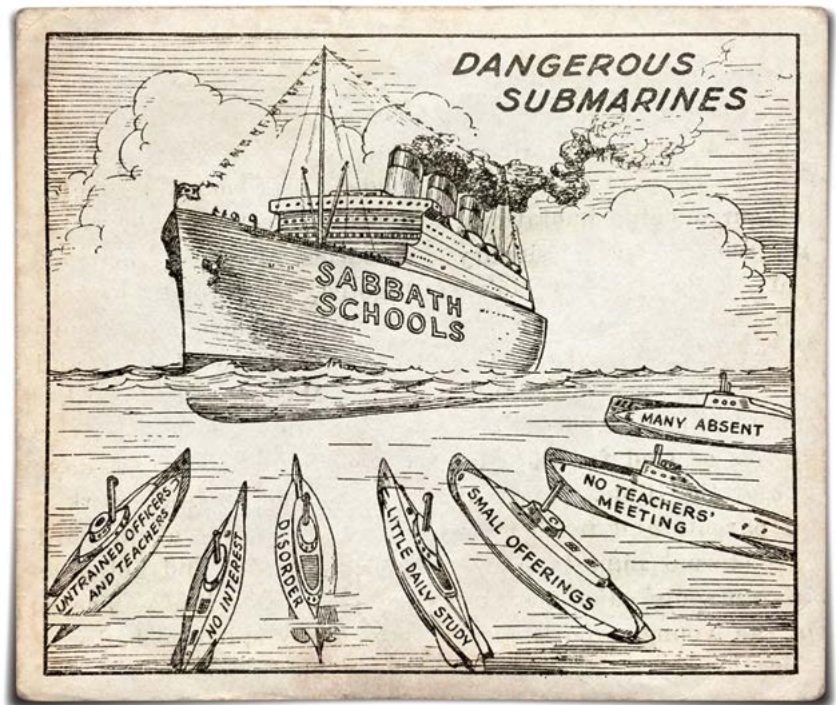
Alberto R. Timm, PhD, is associate director of the Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



“Dangerous submarines” *attacking the heart of the church*

In 1948 Robert H. Pierson warned, “Just as the physical body cannot live without the heart, just so a church without a smoothly functioning Sabbath School will inevitably, sooner or later, (and probably sooner) become a dead church.”¹ And in 1966, James J. Aitken affirmed, “The Sabbath school is the heart of the church, and good Sabbath school members make good church members because the Sabbath school is the church at study.”² By contrast, some church leaders had warned of the dangers that could destroy the Sabbath School efficiency.

The gloomy memories of World War I were very much alive. During the war, German U-boats (military submarines) had attacked and sunk several military ships and some commercial ships of the Allied forces. Within that setting, Mrs. Blanche E. Griggs (wife of Frederick Griggs) published in the *Sabbath School Worker* for November 1934 an insightful article titled “Dangerous Submarines.” She compared the Sabbath School to a ship sailing over the sea, with the new earth for its destination. The “dangers continually confronting the Sabbath school” were symbolized by the following seven “submarines sent out to injure the ship and destroy its efficiency”: (1) untrained officers and teachers, (2) no interest, (3) disorder, (4) little daily study, (5) small offerings, (6) no teachers’ meeting, and (7) many absent.³



A further study

The disruptive effect of the Great Disappointment in October 1844 challenged the founders of the emerging Seventh-day Adventist movement to further study the Scriptures for biblical answers to the disappointment. In that endeavor, they ended up finding answers not only to that specific question but also to several others they were not even initially concerned about. This

generated a major process of (1) breaking away from the credal traditions of the churches and (2) searching for a deeper understanding of God’s Word.

Initially, scattered Bible study groups helped define the basic doctrinal components of the “system of present truth.” Then, the 1848 Sabbatarian Bible Conferences assisted the founders of the Sabbath-keeping Adventist movement in sharing their

new Bible-based convictions with other former Millerites.⁴ Shortly after, James White wrote and published in 1852 the first issue of the *Youth's Instructor* as a Bible study guide for those age groups. He encouraged parents to “establish Sabbath Schools, even where there are but two or three children in a place.”⁵

Improvements and consolidation

One of the most influential tools for preserving the identity of the Sabbath School and improving its quality was the publication of the *Sabbath-School Worker*, a monthly paper. The *Worker* suggested many helpful strategies. A crucial one was the establishment of weekly classes for Sabbath School teachers. According to C. H. Jones, the teachers should meet regularly every week to (1) review the content of the Sabbath School lesson, and (2) “consult together in regard to methods of teaching, the management of the school, and plans for the future.”⁶

Another useful strategy was the establishment of family Sabbath Schools and branch Sabbath Schools. The *Worker* for January 1886 suggested that the “many scattered families of Sabbath-keepers who cannot meet with others on the Sabbath day” could “hold a Sabbath-school, consisting of the members of their own household.”⁷ In the April 1886 issue of the magazine, J. E. White proposed that a Sabbath School branch should be established in new fields “as soon as there were from two to four to join in the lessons.”⁸

A quite innovative strategy for Seventh-day Adventists was the opening of Sunday Schools to reach out to non-Adventists who were used to going to church only on Sundays. At the Eighth Annual Session of the General Sabbath-School Association (1885), J. E. White spoke of calls from the South of the United States for Sunday Schools. D. M. Canright, J. M. Rees, and A. J. Cudney mentioned the positive results from Sunday Schools held in their own conferences. So, the session voted “to assist in establishing Sabbath and Sunday schools in home mission fields.”⁹

Sabbath School members were not only informed weekly about the growth

and expansion of the church but were also themselves expected to engage in effective missionary activities and support the missions overseas with their offerings. So, the Sabbath School offerings of the first six months of 1889, throughout the world, were destined “to build and equip for service, or buy, a vessel of suitable size and construction for missionary operations among the islands of the Pacific Ocean,”¹⁰ which was named *Pitcairn*.¹¹ Adventist children were asked to raise money to support the *Pitcairn* endeavor, developing in them financial generosity and a passion for missions.¹² This successful experience set the trend for Sabbath School offerings to be sent to support missionary projects around the globe.

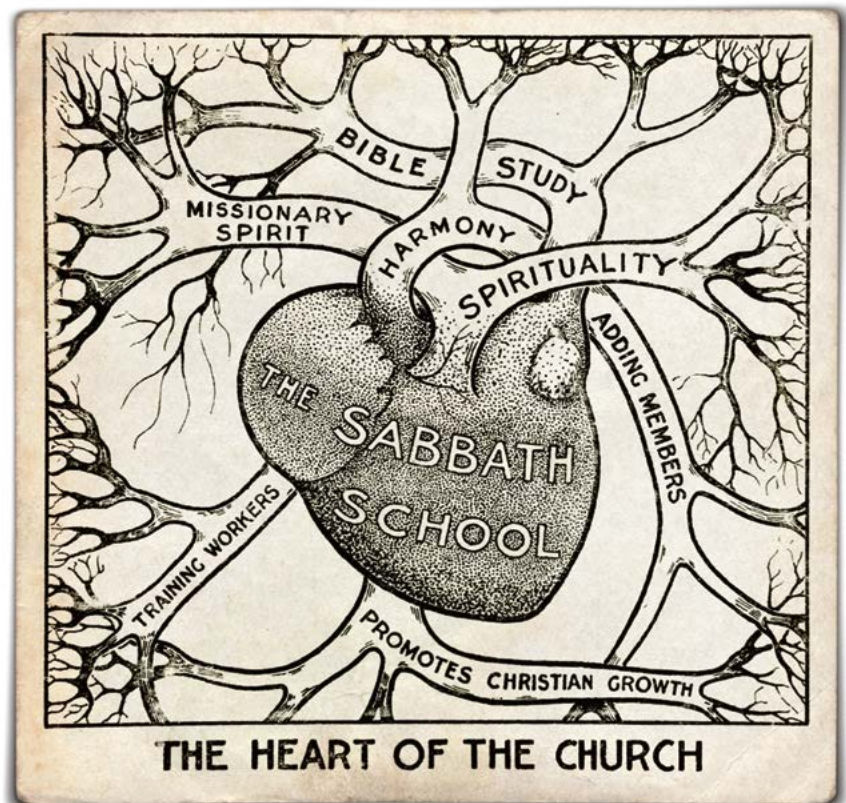
“The Heart of the Church”

The Sabbath School work received a renewed emphasis under the dynamic leadership of Mrs. L. Flora Plummer, who was in charge of the General Conference Sabbath School Department from 1913 to 1936. At the May 1922 General Conference Session

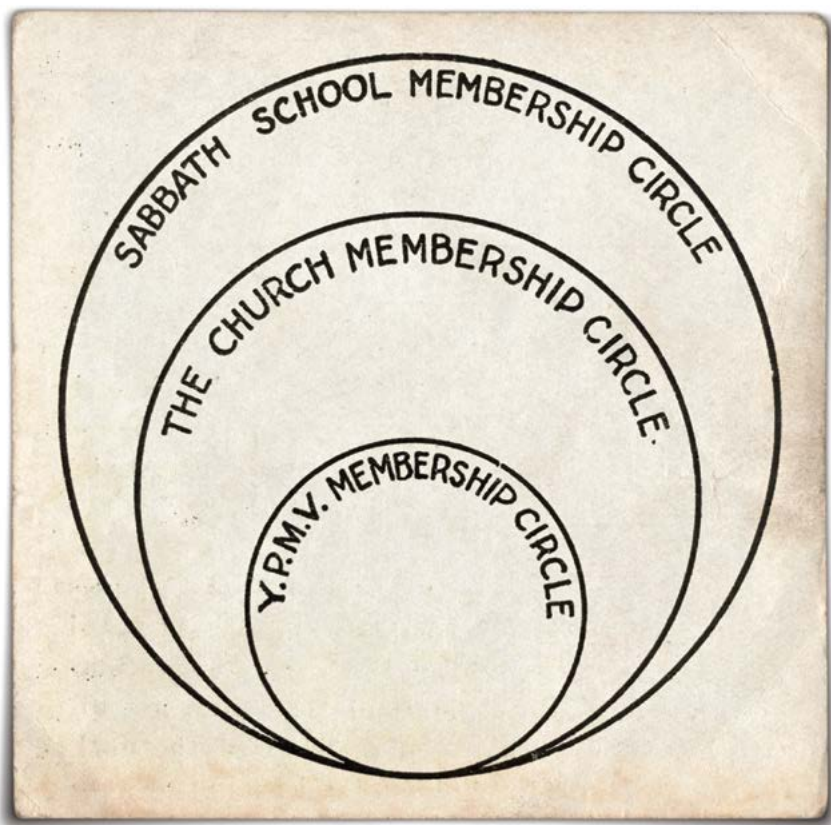
in San Francisco, California, one could visit a special room set apart for the Sabbath School Department, with several goal charts on the walls. The most catching one had a large red heart with the expression “the Sabbath School” written in white letters. The arteries and veins that branched from the heart were identified as “Bible study,” “spirituality,” “harmony,” “missionary spirit,” “adding members,” “training workers,” and “promotes Christian growth.” At the bottom of the illustration, in bold print, appeared the expression “The Heart of the Church.”¹³ The same illustration also appeared in the *Sabbath School Worker* for June 1922.¹⁴

The notion of the Sabbath School as “the heart of the church” became the most catching and popular nickname for that department through the decades around the globe.¹⁵ It expressed the crucial role that department played in keeping both the church and its mission much alive.

For Stemple White, “the importance of the Sabbath school cannot be overestimated. Since every member of the church should be a member of



the Sabbath school, and since children and interested outside adults who are not baptized believers may also be members, it is at once clearly seen that the Sabbath school circle should be the largest circle in all our denominational activities.¹⁶ This was illustrated by the following graphic.



In early 1923 General Conference vice president Oliver Montgomery declared, "Second to none, the Sabbath School Department is filling its place and doing splendidly its part in the advancement of the message everywhere. Not only is it a mighty pioneer agency, touching as it does the most remote and far-flung points of interest, and establishing there the first form of organization; but it stands as one of the mighty bulwarks of the church, uniting in study and character building every living soul in the church, from the toddling infant to the white-haired patriarch."¹⁷

Evangelism and nurture

Over time, many local Sabbath Schools for adults and children flourished in North America and, later, in

Europe, Australia, and around the globe. On March 4, 1878, the delegates to the Third General Conference Special Session in Battle Creek, Michigan, organized a general Sabbath-school Association, with the recommendation that state associations should be established as well.¹⁸ Because Sabbath

Schools were already present in several countries outside North America, W. C. White suggested in 1886 that the association should be renamed the International Sabbath-school Association.¹⁹ In reality, Sabbath School played a crucial role in the outreach and confirmation of new members in the Adventist message.

In the reorganization of the denominational structure that took place at the 1901 General Conference Session in Battle Creek, the International Sabbath-school Association became the "Sabbath-school Department," with W. A. Spicer as its chairman.²⁰ In many congregations, the Sabbath School work was so alive and dynamic that there were more Sabbath School members than actual church members. In 1924

Rosamond D. Ginther stated, "The influence of the Sabbath school may be likened to the effect of a pebble thrown into a lake. A wave is formed, and then another, and another; and as the waves increase, the circle widens, and eventually reaches the shore. Even so is the influence of the Sabbath school."²¹

In 1933 Mrs. Plummer declared, "The Sabbath school is the church organized and equipped for the systematic study of the word of God. By its form of organization, it is fitted to impart spiritual instruction to the entire flock. It may be likened to a table in a home, bountifully supplied with nourishing food adapted to the needs of each member of the family. The babes of the flock often receive their first impressions of God and His word from the Sabbath school service, and no one is so old or so experienced that he no longer needs the blessing of the Sabbath school in his life and in his study of the Bible. There is no other church service so organized that it can feed all the flock at the same time."²²

In 1938 E. K. Slade stated, "During all these years wherever churches have existed we have had our Sabbath schools. . . . It is impossible to estimate the good results coming from our Sabbath schools. Our strongest financial support of foreign mission work has been by the Sabbath schools."²³ J. K. Jones added that "the Sabbath school is the greatest single unifying agency there is among Seventh-day Adventists."²⁴ Ellen White affirmed, "The Sabbath-school should be one of the greatest instrumentalities, and the most effectual, in bringing souls to Christ. Our Sabbath-school workers need to be especially imbued with the spirit of Christ."²⁵

As time went by, often the Sabbath School ended up no longer being seen with the same enthusiasm. In early 1980 Bernard E. Seton acknowledged that "there was a time when the Sabbath school was known as 'The Heart of the Church.' . . . But in an increasing number [of churches] it is sadly out of date."²⁶ No wonder that a decade later (1990), William G. Johnsson would suggest, in more existentialist terms, that the heart of the church is "the people."²⁷

In an editorial in *Adventist Review* for September 22, 1988, Myron Widmer declared that “a growing number of Sabbath schools across North America are experiencing an increasingly difficult time in generating enthusiasm for their programming and in attracting members.”²⁸ The following year (1989), the North American Division Church Ministries Department began an extensive evaluation of the adult Sabbath school, culminating with the four-part series titled “Sabbath School: Diagnosis and Cure,” published in the *Adventist Review* in May 1991. Part 1 of the series presented the results of that study, showing that those who attended Sabbath School did so for the following reasons: 0 percent to learn more about the teachings of the church; 14 percent to learn more about the Bible; 14 percent for Christian fellowship; and 72 percent for spiritual growth.²⁹ The follow-up articles proposed strategies to revitalize the Sabbath School.³⁰ These and other articles can also be helpful for us today.

Planning for the future

So, where do we go from here? The Sabbath School used to be one of the most well-organized and successful agencies of the church. As stated above, it effectively combined social engagement, Bible study, spiritual nourishment, and mission outreach. But in many churches, it is no longer as healthy and well-attended as it used to be. Many church leaders are convinced that the time has come for us to revitalize our Sabbath Schools. In doing so, the following basic questions should be addressed thoroughly:

In our churches today, why do far fewer people come to Sabbath School than attend the Sabbath-morning divine service?

Which Sabbath School characteristics from the past could be still rescued and effectively implemented today?

Could our Sabbath School outreach strategies combine the modern small-group program with the classical Sabbath School branch plan?

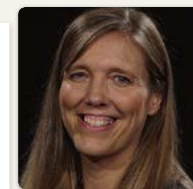
What creative ideas, if implemented, could help us transform our modern Sabbath Schools again into “the heart of the church”?

If our generation needs fellowship and acceptance, Sabbath School can provide it. If people want to grow in their spiritual lives, Sabbath School can foster it. If we are expected to become “giants in the understanding of Bible doctrines and the practical lessons of Christ,”³¹ then we should not miss what we can receive from a well-organized and efficient Sabbath School. And if all of us should be engaged in the task of preaching “the everlasting gospel . . . to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6, NKJV), Sabbath School is unquestionably the right place to be.

Over the years, the institution of Sabbath School has written one of the most amazing chapters in the history of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. The vitality of our Sabbath Schools can still be rescued if we make this a top-priority task, put into it our best efforts, and use the right strategies. ❏

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Melody Mason, an author, is the coordinator for United in Prayer for the World Seventh-day Adventist Church, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Does your church pray enough?

Mark Finley tells the story of how he and his wife attended one of the largest Seventh-day Adventist congregations in the world. It had started with only nine members and spread to more than 300 church plants. There were as many as 50 to several hundred in each plant. The church's membership was now more than 6,000. When Pastor Finley asked what the secret strategy was to their amazing growth, the pastor replied simply, "It's prayer! We meet each morning from four-thirty to six o'clock to pray. And one hundred and fifty or so people come every day for this prayer meeting. These seasons of prayer are the key to unleash God's power for growth and revival." That's what I read—but let me tell you what I've seen.

The name was the Cuza Voda Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bucharest, Romania. The church had existed for nearly 20 years, but a few years ago members recognized that they desperately needed God's blessing if their church was going to grow. Cuza Voda was one of the smaller congregations in Bucharest at the time and those members who did attend were mostly elderly. There were very few young people and Sabbath School and church attendance seemed to be declining. That's when it happened.

Believing that God answers prayer, a group of approximately 15 Sabbath School members began meeting every morning at five o'clock to pray for their

own spiritual growth, for the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon the Cuza Voda church, and for all the seats in the church to become filled. Two months after starting those early morning prayer meetings, they had the first baptism that the church had seen for a while—10 individuals, all young adults in their early 20s.

They said, "This is too good to stop." They continued praying each morning for nearly a year. I visited a year and a half after their prayers had started. The church was bursting at the seams, with attendance of more than 200 each weekend. The majority of the congregation comprised young adults—students and young professionals, passionate about serving Christ.

A Holy Spirit revival

We could learn valuable prayer lessons from our international brothers and sisters. It makes me ask, How desperate are we to see the Holy Spirit poured out in our lives and churches? How much do we long for personal revival today? Enough to step out of our comfortable routine to join together and really pray?

I heard of a man who asked his pastor what it would take for a true Holy Spirit revival to come upon his life and ministry. His pastor explained that he would have to baptize him in order to show him. The man thought the reply a bit strange, but agreed, so they proceeded to the baptism. After

lowering themselves into the baptismal tank, the pastor covered the man's nose and proceeded to gently lay him back under the water as expected. However, rather than immediately lifting the man back up, the pastor continued to hold him under the water. Not sure what was happening, the man began to struggle. But the pastor's grip was firm.

After a few moments, panic seized the man. Thinking that perhaps the pastor was trying to drown him, he began to thrash about violently, trying to get free. The pastor then brought him to the surface. Visibly shaken and gasping for breath, the man stuttered, "What in the world are you trying to do? Do you want to drown me?"

Calmly, the pastor replied, "When you are as desperate for revival as you were for that next breath of air, then the Lord will send revival."

A true priority

Unfortunately, church records, surveys, and statistics, especially in the West, seem to indicate an all-time record low for Sabbath School and church attendance. People seem to be walking out the back door as fast as they enter the front. But such dismal statistics do not need to remain our reality. Imagine how things would change, how former members would be reclaimed, and how our Sabbath School, church, and prayer meetings would thrive again if fervent prayer became a true priority in the

congregation—and not just as sandwich ends to the worship service.

A few years back, Lloyd Perrin, then pastor of the Linwood Seventh-day Adventist Church in Spokane, Washington, discovered that he had many members who were not attending church. He began going through the membership records, looking for the whereabouts of these inactive members. He compiled a list of 30 names and shared it with church officers, leaders, and Sabbath School members. They began praying for miss-

the world apart from united prayer—Christians persistently praying for the revival.”³ Ellen White asked, “Why should the sons and daughters of God be reluctant to pray, when prayer is the key in the hand of faith to unlock heaven’s storehouse where are treasured the boundless resources of Omnipotence?”⁴ The Bible states, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7).⁵ “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that

spirit of prayer and fellowship. Before any Bible is opened, before any lesson is discussed, we take time to share prayer needs and pray. No one wants to be late for Sabbath School because it’s a time of refreshment, fellowship, and caring, and the Holy Spirit is there.

Is this not the way Sabbath School should be each week? Do we recognize the value of the key of prayer that God has placed in our hands? Do we really believe His Word when He tells us that He will answer when we pray? Do we actually understand that if we

Prayer should not be just a 30-second routine to open and close our weekly study; Rather, it is to be the launching pad, the heart, and the power that gives breath and life to everything that follows.



ing members and ways to reconnect with them.

“Within days,” said Perrin, “a church officer called me to say, ‘I was down at the supermarket and guess who was in line with me? It was one of the missing members. I got a telephone number and address.’” Not long after that, another member who had been absent for 15 years called Pastor Perrin. One by one, God reconnected lost or estranged church members with the church. Within three months they found about two-thirds, invited them to return to church, and many did so.²

J. Edwin Orr, a historian of worldwide revivals, wrote, “No great spiritual awakening has begun anywhere in

they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:19, 20).

A praying people

I have the privilege of being part of the thriving Sabbath School of Triadelphia Seventh-day Adventist Church in Clarksville, Maryland. In fact, finding a seat in our Sabbath School class is not always easy, for we often have full attendance as well as active participation each week. Besides an engaging lesson study, what makes our Sabbath School so special? It’s the community fostered in it through the

want to see revival in our church; in our Sabbath School attendance; and, most importantly, in our own hearts, we must become people of prayer?

Prayer should not be just a 30-second routine to open and close our weekly study. Rather, it is to be the launching pad, the heart, and the power that gives breath and life to everything that follows. Instead of settling for superficial blessings each week in Sabbath School, step out into the deep and start praying big—upholding the arms of our pastor and local leaders, praying for missing members to return, and praying for our world church. Wouldn’t God be pleased to answer such prayers?

Ellen White wrote, “We are encouraged to pray for success, with the divine assurance that our prayers will be heard and answered. . . .

“The promise [of Matt. 18:19, 20] is made on the condition that the united prayers of the church are offered, and in answer to these prayers there may be expected a power greater than that which comes in answer to private prayer. The power given will be proportionate to the unity of the members and their love for God and for one another.”⁶ If ever there was a time when we should be pressing together in a community of prayer and love, it is now. Ron Clouzet tells of how corporate prayer powerfully affected his church.

A powerful testimony

Clouzet had just started to pastor a new congregation, and things were extremely discouraging. Although the sanctuary of his new church could seat 400 people, barely 100 showed up each Sabbath morning for church services and even fewer for Sabbath School. But he believed God could work, so he began spending hours studying Scripture for better clarity on how to share the gospel. He spent so much time studying Scripture that he had little time left to actually compose his sermons. Knowing that only the Holy Spirit could make up for his personal deficiencies and convict hearts, he began to get up early every Sabbath morning to pray that God would pour out His Spirit on the congregation. The Lord began to answer Clouzet’s private prayers, and as a result, more and more people began to attend church. By the end of his first year, Sabbath attendance had tripled. But that was only the beginning.

Fifteen months into his time at the new church, Clouzet decided to do a series on prayer. “A whole new world opened up for me. Prayer and communion with God became much more real and concrete. My relationship with Jesus grew much closer than ever before. I finally realized how most of us seem to live our lives three inches below the water-line: we know we’re drowning, but we assume this is our lot in life, ignorant of the fact that just above us is a whole new world.”⁷

As a result of the prayer series, the Holy Spirit began to move on his church *even more powerfully*, and the members began to really pray. They were not only praying during the midweek prayer meeting but during Daylight Saving Time they prayed together every Sabbath afternoon and during the period of Standard Time they prayed together every Friday evening. But that wasn’t enough. Realizing that some of his church members were under demonic attack, Pastor Clouzet invited his elders to join him at five o’clock in the morning for a time of special intercession. Seven of his 10 elders came, and the time of prayer was so powerful that they decided to meet and pray together once a week. They added Fridays, then Sabbath mornings, then Sunday mornings. The deacons asked if they could join in. Before long, the members asked started asking as well. The group was now praying every morning of the week.

During his second year, Pastor Clouzet felt convicted to do a series on the Holy Spirit. More blessings followed. Small groups were formed, and a church plant was started.

As God’s Spirit was poured out, Pastor Clouzet saw spiritual victories take place among the church members. A “testimony time” was added to the regular Sabbath service so that people could share. Members would drive hours just to hear what God was doing in the lives of their fellow members.

Evangelism resulted naturally, as a result of the Holy Spirit’s blessing. The church transformed the fellowship hall into the Better Living Center to host health, finance, and family life seminars for the community. More and more baptisms resulted. Church leaders who had not been overly interested in prayer, now did not want to be late even for board meetings because the first 30 minutes were devoted to prayer.

During the five years Clouzet spent in that congregation, tithe quadrupled, and giving for evangelism rose 5,000 percent. The church tripled in size as almost 200 people were baptized, and most of the members became active in some type of ministry or service. Clouzet concluded, “This may not be unusual for some places in the world,

but for us here in the comfortable Laodicean communities of the West, this was truly an act of God.”⁸

An incredible promise

Reflecting on this amazing testimony, I am reminded of what Ellen White’s words, “The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the church is looked forward to as in the future; but it is the privilege of the church to have it now. Seek for it, pray for it, believe for it. We must have it, and Heaven is waiting to bestow it.”⁹ What God did for Pastor Clouzet and his congregation, for the Cuza Voda church in Romania, and for Pastor Perrin and others, He can do for each church and Sabbath School that will claim His promises and take the power of prayer seriously. While things may start small with our Sabbath School class, let’s make it a priority to be intentional with our praying. Eventually, others will join, and attendance and love will grow.

Inspiration tells us, “Could we see all the activity of human instrumentality, as it appears before God, we would see that only the work accomplished by much prayer, which is sanctified by the merit of Christ, will stand the test of the judgment.”¹⁰ Let’s get on our knees and learn what it means to persist in prayer because we serve a God that is just waiting to answer our prayers. ❧

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James Howard is associate director of Sabbath School and Personal Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Pastor, be an example—embrace Sabbath School

In some churches, Sabbath School is thriving. Members are growing spiritually, visitors are attending regularly, and consistent mission activity is springing from every class. But in many churches, Sabbath School attendance is languishing, with no sign of improvement in sight. Is there anything pastors can do to turn the tide?

A vital resource that will encourage and inspire every pastor regarding Sabbath School is *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*. In it, Ellen White states, “The influence growing out of Sabbath school work should improve and enlarge the church.”¹ This should be music to the ears of pastors—Sabbath School can improve and enlarge your church! Now let’s consider how pastors can improve and enlarge their Sabbath Schools.

1. Model the ministry

Leadership 101: if you want any chance of increasing Sabbath School attendance, you need to attend yourself. Yet it seems more and more common for pastors to opt out of Sabbath School, even when in the building. While the superintendent is leading a program in the sanctuary or Sabbath School classes are meeting throughout the church, the pastor can often be found reviewing the sermon or engaging in a conversation in the foyer. Before long, members begin following the pastor’s example and

congregate in back rooms and hallways of the church rather than joining in Sabbath School. An unspoken message is conveyed—Sabbath School is not that important.

Of course, pastors cannot *always* attend Sabbath School. But just as Jesus worshiped in the synagogue every Sabbath, “as His custom was” (Luke 4:16),² so the custom of every pastor should be to attend Sabbath School whenever possible. Show by example that Sabbath School is a vital part of the Sabbath worship experience, not an optional preliminary.

In many churches, Sabbath School attendance pales in comparison to the worship service. Pastors should take advantage of this fact and communicate the importance of Sabbath School in the preaching service. Schedule sermons on subjects such as the history and purpose of Sabbath School, the value of fellowship in Sabbath School, and the role of mission in Sabbath School. Be sure to incorporate some of the many powerful prophetic insights from Ellen White regarding the value and importance of Sabbath School.

2. Clarify the ministry

Pastors should emphasize to their members the importance of attendance, not merely as a personal benefit but as a ministry. The apostle Paul admonished: “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the

assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24, 25). Notice the purpose of attendance, or assembling together, is to consider and exhort “one another.” It is not merely for our own spiritual gain that we should attend Sabbath School but also to support one another, pray for one another, and stir up love and good works in others.

When few attend a meeting, it tends to discourage; when many attend, it gives strength and encouragement to everyone. Many people simply do not realize that the life and strength of the church depend, to a great degree, upon the consistent attendance of its members. This is why attending important church services and functions should be taught as a spiritual habit. We may not always *feel* like attending Sabbath School, but we can still choose to attend by *faith*. “With your heart softened by the love of Jesus, go to the meeting, feeling that you are personally responsible for its success. If but few attend, you should feel under double responsibility.”³

3. Improve the quality

This may be hard to swallow, but maybe the reason some people do not attend Sabbath School is that they think it’s boring. Not that this is a good excuse not to attend, but a boring class certainly does not help

matters. “Our Sabbath schools should be made more interesting.”⁴

Sometimes we can be our own worst enemy. When Sabbath School attendance begins to dwindle, we choose members with lesser gifts in communicating and teaching to serve as superintendents and teachers in Sabbath School. Then we take the most important and interesting elements out of Sabbath School and stuff them into the worship service. The logic is understandable. We want the most talented people and exciting features to be in the worship service when everyone is there to see and hear what happens. But if we always take the *best* for the worship service and leave the *rest* for Sabbath School, we give people no incentive to attend and only exacerbate the problem.

Do not wait until attendance increases to begin focusing on excellence in your program. Put your efforts toward making Sabbath School something members will not want to miss; then be patient as the positive reports travel around the church. As a general rule, you can shift stronger elements into Sabbath School and not see a decrease in worship service attendance.

4. Visit the children

One of the most important factors in Sabbath School attendance is the quality of the program for children and youth. Adults can be hard to figure out. Even when they fail to see the need for their own spiritual growth, many parents still want their kids to have the very best Sabbath School experience available. But this gives pastors a double motivation for investing in children and youth. First, they can make a lasting impression and guide young minds to a life of committed service to Jesus. Second, by ensuring that there is a strong program for the children, they can connect with parents and often discover higher attendance in the adult classes too.

Pastors should periodically visit the children’s and youth Sabbath School divisions to show appreciation and support for the young people and teachers. Be warm and friendly. Get to know the children and youth as much

as possible, starting with their names. Showing an interest in what is happening in these Sabbath School divisions will not be lost on anyone—children, youth, parents, or teachers.

5. Revive the mission

Either before or after the Sabbath School class study, most churches hold a short service for the whole church that is often called the “preliminary program” or “superintendent remarks.” Neither of those sounds very exciting. A “preliminary” program sounds like optional, unimportant stuff that happens before the *real* program. “Superintendent remarks” sounds like a mini sermon before the *real* sermon. In place of these not-so-inspiring programs, pastors should promote a vibrant “mission program.”

For many churches, a short study of the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is all that is left of Sabbath School. But though the *foundation* of Sabbath School is Bible study and prayer, the *focus* of thriving Sabbath Schools has always been mission—both world mission and local community outreach. The mission program can incorporate inspiring testimonies and mission reports, top-quality training, Bible school graduations, or even an occasional baptism. No need to bog down the program with preliminary features or commentary. The key is to streamline the program and stay focused on mission. Consider the following sample order of service:

1. Welcome, opening song, and prayer (5 min.)
2. World mission report (5 min.)
3. Local testimony or ministry highlights (5 min.)
4. Personal ministries training (5 min.)

After opening with a song and prayer, the focus turns to global mission and what the church is doing around the world. Adventist Mission produces weekly videos that fit perfectly into this slot if no live testimony is available.⁵ The second segment is for local ministry testimonies or reports. The final segment is for personal

ministries training.⁶ The program moves from *their* work (global mission) to *our* work (local church mission)—and, finally, to *my* work (individual mission). You may not have all three segments every week, but keeping this schedule for most Sabbaths will ensure a well-rounded mission focus.

“Every church should be a training school for Christian workers.”⁷ Within the structure of our churches, we already have a school we can utilize for training Christian workers—the Sabbath School! Do not make the mistake of thinking our members are turned off by mission education and training. Perhaps that would be true if we were scolding them for what they have failed to do. But that’s not the spirit or purpose of the mission program. This program is based on the premise that “many would be willing to work if they were taught how to begin.”⁸ If the world mission reports are inspiring, the local testimonies and reports short and interesting, and the individual training practical and encouraging, it will be a blessing to all who attend.

6. Warm the church

If attendance is struggling, it could be because the vital element of *fellowship* is not receiving the attention it needs. Many pastors looking for church growth and discipleship ideas have been taught that small groups can nurture their members, provide spiritual guidance, meet social needs, and create lasting bonds of friendship. But what many fail to capitalize on is the small group structure that already exists in Sabbath School.

Pastors should ensure that a format of fellowship is truly in place. If possible, organize Sabbath School classes into small groups where members can easily interact with one another rather than maintaining a large, lecture-style class in the sanctuary. While some may initially prefer the anonymous nature of a large class with little to no participation, such a format rarely brings them back. Deep down, most people appreciate it when others take an interest in them and exhibit genuine love and care. Pastors should preach and train on the importance

of warmth and hospitality toward those who attend Sabbath School and church.

In addition, pastors should encourage church members to join one Sabbath School class rather than bouncing around from week to week. Sabbath School is the best place for members to share together, pray together, ask questions, get clarification on difficult subjects, and grow spiritually. Ensure that a system is in place to contact and encourage those who are unexpectedly or consistently missing. Many people will never attend Sabbath School consistently if they feel no one would really care or miss them if they stayed home.

7. Invite the people

It should go without saying, but to increase attendance, pastors should encourage both teachers and members to be intentional about inviting people to Sabbath School. When a quarter is coming to an end, every teacher should begin by inviting the class back next quarter. Then, both the teacher and members should serve as Sabbath School evangelists inviting others to their class.

Go to the foyer just prior to the worship service. When church members come in who do not normally attend Sabbath School, give them a printed flyer or a copy of the next quarter's *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* and invite them to your class. Be warm and personal, showing a genuine interest in having them attend.

Classes can do this as an ongoing mission project. Ask each member to find at least one person to pray for daily and to invite to Sabbath School leading up to the start of the next quarter. Invite former church members, current but nonattending members, or friends in the community.

8. Train the teachers

Churches with great preachers generally have great attendance. It may not be the noblest reason to attend, but it's a reality, nonetheless. People love good preaching and teaching. So, one reason people do not attend Sabbath School—if we are

honest—is that they are dissatisfied with the quality of teaching. Pastors can help by conducting a training class for teachers.

Train teachers to (1) maintain a living connection with God in prayer; (2) never teach without preparation—study the Bible for fresh understandings; (3) be a teacher, not a preacher, by encouraging discussion and interaction; (4) know where you are going and stay on track; (5) draw insights from the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* but read and teach primarily from the Bible; (6) be sure the main points and practical lessons are clear; (7) pray for and with class members; (8) be warm, kind, and thoughtful—never rude or condescending; (9) visit and personally labor for those attending; (10) encourage class members to be soul winners and share what they learn.

The goal is not to transform all our teachers into crowd-pleasing attractions but to help them develop their gifts and potential and to eliminate common mistakes. By ensuring that every teacher receives simple training in key areas, pastors can significantly improve the quality of Sabbath School and may also see an increase in attendance.

9. Organize for service

In addition to the mission program, in which the entire church joins together for inspiration and training, the classes themselves should engage in mission. The small-group format is perfectly suited for effective outreach: "The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err." "Let there be in every church, well-organized companies of workers to labor in the vicinity of that church."⁹

Pastors should work with the Sabbath School leaders to ask every class to adopt a quarterly mission project. Keep it simple. Choose a tract or piece of literature and set a distribution goal as a class. Identify struggling families and plan intentional acts of kindness by class members. Develop a list of those unable to leave home due to age or health concerns and have a few class members visit each one. The

possibilities are endless. Then, have each class share a report during one of the weekly local testimony segments of the Sabbath School mission program.

It is important to remember that people attend more faithfully when they are invested—when they feel a part of something. By not only meeting together weekly but also engaging in other opportunities for mission and fellowship, members will attend more consistently, and the purpose of Sabbath School will be more fully realized: "The object of Sabbath school work should be the ingathering of souls."¹⁰

Robert H. Pierson, former General Conference president, wrote: "From children we as Seventh-day Adventists have been told that the Sabbath School is the heart of the church, and so it is."¹¹ Just as the heart gives life to the body, so a vibrant Sabbath School gives life to the church. If Sabbath School attendance has been a weakness in your church, go to the Life-Giver. Pray and ask God to increase your Sabbath School attendance. Then, with Jesus by your side, go to work using the ideas in this article and others that the Lord will give you. May the Lord bless your efforts and may the influence of your Sabbath School improve and enlarge your church. ❏

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- 1 Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1938), 9.
 - 2 Scripture quotations in this article are from the New King James Version.
 - 3 Ellen G. White, *Pastoral Ministry* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Ministerial Association, 1995), 184.
 - 4 White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, 114.
 - 5 For Adventist Mission videos, visit the Adventist Mission Videos page at am.adventistmission.org/videos.
 - 6 For videos that can be used in personal ministries training segment, visit the GROW Videos page of the GC Personal Ministries website at GROW.adventist.org/videos.
 - 7 Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1947), 59.
 - 8 White, *Christian Service*, 59.
 - 9 White, *Christian Service*, 72.
 - 10 White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, 61.
 - 11 Robert H. Pierson, "The Heart of the Church," *British West Indies Visitor* 5, no. 6 (June 1948).

The infusion of fellowship

Revival & REFORMATION

After the typically long list of ambiguous and awkward terms at last year's Scripps National Spelling Bee championships, the final word rang familiar to Christian viewers. The winning word for the bee's champion, 14-year-old speller Karthik Nemmani, was *koinonia*.¹

Koinonia is a Greek word defined as "spiritual community." We have discovered that fellowship is not just one of the four goals of Sabbath School; fellowship infuses all the other goals.

Fellowship—Embrace the Lord's church

John does something rather strange in 1 John 1:3–6. He mentions human fellowship before he proceeds to fellowship with God. Why? Maybe he begins where most of us would start—feeling the love of people from the church even before experiencing the love of God. Beth, a Sabbath School class member, confesses that the Sabbath School is a "safe place to share her suffering and receive prayer and compassion."

It is especially true of those who have experienced broken relationships in their lives. They sense love and acceptance. It's such a new experience that they are overwhelmed. Then they learn that love does not originate with us as church members, love comes from God, sent to us through Jesus Christ, and we enjoy fellowship with Him.

Bible study—Read the Lord's Word

Rosie, one Sabbath School class member, said it this way: "My faith in God is greatly fortified as I spend time with other members of the class. When I hear their real-life stories and bless them with my own daily experiences, my spiritual life is bolstered."

Studies have shown that 48 percent of the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church read their Bible daily, and 51.7 percent have daily personal devotions. When asked how often they study the Sabbath School lesson, more

than a third of respondents shared that they studied the Sabbath School lesson daily or more than once a day. A little more than a quarter responded that they study their Sabbath School lesson more than once a week, while 17 percent studied the lesson about once a week. One-tenth of respondents study the lesson less than once a month, and another tenth admitted that they never open the Sabbath School quarterly.²

Outreach—Touch the Lord's community

Sam, a Sabbath School class facilitator, shared, "We are intentional in showing that our class has not grown indifferent to the defections from its fellowship. We visit members and visitors in their homes and give them the gift of fellowship." When asked what brought him back to church after 10 years, Jimmy, who was recently rebaptized, identified two things: the church literature he continued to receive in his mailbox and the regular visits (and text messages) he received from a long-time Sabbath School friend. When our local church detects the first sign of frequent absence, a Sabbath School member is assigned to phone the individual. We really miss the "missing member." Should the person continue to be absent, we will visit the person and pray with him or her.

Mission—Feel the Lord's pain

Laura, a prayer group participant, testifies, "We need each other now more than ever before. The pain and heartache of this world should be even more of a reason to enjoy this fellowship." Some Sabbath School classes at our church meet for Sabbath lunch and prayer meeting. We are living organisms, dependent on each other. The Bible commands, "Pray for that country, because if it prospers, so will you" (Jer. 29:7, *Clear Word*).

Fellowship has to be with God's people! And who are they? Ellen

White says, "His followers are not to feel themselves detached from the perishing world around them. They are a part of the great web of humanity; and Heaven looks upon them as brothers to sinners as well as to saints."³ We are our brother's keeper.

Appeal

Sabbath School should be a time when we help each other to mature spiritually. Through testimony, prayer, and meaningful discussion of the lesson study, we can strengthen the Sabbath School class.

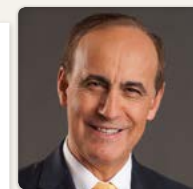
We, therefore, encourage our pastors and administrators to (1) study the quarterly, (2) promote Sabbath School in your church, and (3) attend Sabbath School. "The Sabbath school work is important, and all who are interested in the truth should endeavor to make it prosperous."⁴ What can you do to make Sabbath School prosperous in your church?

As followers of Jesus, the more time we spend getting to know each other and our community, the better. That is what genuine fellowship with one another is all about. 🙏

—Written by Arnaud C. Mooroooven, a local church pastor in Mauritius Island and Hensley M. Mooroooven, the Undersecretary of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.

- 1 Janice Williams, "Who Won Scripps National Spelling Bee Last Year? Karthik Nemmani Named 2018 Champion After Spelling 'Koinonia,'" *Newsweek*, May 30, 2019, [newsweek.com/karthik-nemmani-spelling-bee-2018-winner-1439950](https://www.newsweek.com/karthik-nemmani-spelling-bee-2018-winner-1439950).
- 2 "Global Survey: Sabbath School Habits," ASTR, <https://www.adventistresearch.org/blog/2019/02/global-survey-sabbath-school-habits>; "Global Trends on Bible Reading and Devotional Practices," ASTR, <https://www.adventistresearch.org/blog/2018/12/global-trends-bible-reading-and-devotional-practices>.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 638.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1938), 9.

Robert E. Costa, MA, is an associate ministerial secretary focusing on evangelism and church growth, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



Evangelism, Sabbath-morning style

For years it has been my privilege to help train ministers to develop effective soul-winning methods that best suit their own talents and situations. God has given His church a special end-time message to proclaim. Especially during their internship, new ministers should partner with experienced pastors who have a clear evangelistic vision and can train them to present truth within the context of the everlasting gospel (Rev. 14:6–12).

The church also provides a marvelous context for the pastor to deliver the message. There is no venue that has more possibilities for decisions for Christ than the local church. There are three ways in which you can use the church as a powerful avenue for soul-winning.

Maximize evangelism through proclamation

Transform the pulpit in your church into an evangelistic center through the “Sabbath Morning Evangelism” plan. Much more can be done from the pulpit on Sabbath morning. Every Sabbath, thousands of visitors pass through the doors of our churches, and the evangelistic sermon is the most appropriate type to reach them. Every year, the General Conference Ministerial Association develops more and more beautifully illustrated, state-of-the-art, Christ-centered, prophetic, doctrinal sermons in PowerPoint® and Keynote®, freely available and fully editable into any language.¹

Every pastor and elder can take advantage of this flexible, inexpensive, and successful plan. They can

dedicate a quarter, a semester, or most Sabbaths of the year to do evangelism from the pulpit in their local congregations. Preaching doctrinal sermons has many benefits:

It accustoms congregants to evangelistic preaching on Sabbath morning. This exposes members and visitors alike to the distinctive doctrines of the everlasting gospel. Paul said, “For I have not shrunk from declaring to you God’s whole truth” (Acts 20:27, *Weymouth*). Declaring God’s whole truth (a) establishes believers upon a solid biblical foundation, (b) increases their faithfulness, and (c) reduces apostasy.

It encourages pastors to submit a yearly or quarterly preaching plan. This will include all the essential Bible teachings within one calendar year. In addition, the plan enables congregants to know in advance the subjects to be presented, encouraging them to bring friends and relatives to worship services on Sabbath morning.

It develops more pastor-evangelists and lay-evangelists. Allow the same sermon to be preached in multi-church districts. The pastor can assign the same sermon to all elders. The Word of God must be the best source for sermons. It is the message that comes from the heart of God to that of every person. The Bible and the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy must regain primacy in every pastor’s life. While working to complete the *Great Controversy*, Ellen White wrote in 1884, “I want to get it out as soon as possible, for our people need it so much . . . I have been unable to sleep nights, thinking of the important things to take place . . . Great things are before us, and

we want to call the people from their indifference to get ready.”²

It increases appeals for Jesus and Bible truths. Instead of allowing His disciples (and us) to select what we think we should preach or teach, Jesus told us that we must instruct others “to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20, NKJV). Not to do so is an act of open rebellion—we could say that it is pastoral malpractice. Sadly, there is more than one way to distort evangelism. While one of them is to present something that is not true, perhaps the most subtle misrepresentation involves proclaiming only part of the truth—or a half-truth. Be careful not to ignore the pillars of Christian faith—truths and doctrines that Jesus Himself taught and revealed—especially the message clearly described in Revelation 14:6–12. If we do not preach “all” that Jesus asked us to teach, what kind of disciples are we being?

It increases decisions for Jesus and His church. Baptisms will now take place year-round. Evangelism is a concept that covers much. The purpose of evangelism is to proclaim the message of God’s grace in such a persuasive way that individuals will embrace Jesus as their soon-coming Savior and Lord, unite their lives with His church, and dedicate themselves to service in God’s cause. More than an event, evangelism is a lifestyle for the believer. Charles Bradford states, “It is not for us to argue the question as to whether or not a person can be saved outside church fellowship, or to put it the other way, whether it is absolutely necessary to belong to the SDA Church to be saved. It is our task to pull them

into the lifeboat. We can't afford to be fuzzy in our thinking here. To remain outside is to be in definite peril.³

Organize evangelism through intercession

The most sacred task of the pastor or elder is to promote true revival and reformation among members that lead them to spend daily quality time in personal communion with God through prayer and study of His Word. Organize the church to be a center for fervent prayer and Bible study. Every great revival and missionary movement throughout history took place only after intense personal and public study of the living Word of God coupled with fervent and earnest prayer. Both elements are at the heart of soul winning—and both are at the heart of Sabbath School. What is special about Sabbath School? At least five things.

(1) *Bible study*—supplies an interactive, dynamic, systematic study of Scripture for spiritual growth from birth through adulthood; (2) *fellowship*—offers weekly spiritual nurture and communion for church members and visitors; (3) *sharing*—encourages class participants to share their experience and spiritual insights with other church members through prayer and testimony; (4) *world mission*—enables believers stay connected with the global church family through world mission education; (5) *service*—provides small-group classes, a structure for organized outreach to the community and a great preparation for giving personal Bible studies.

The church is a spiritual entity, and members expect their pastors and elders to be leaders filled with the Holy Spirit. A congregation usually never goes beyond where the pastor leads it by precept and example. The time spent with God will give each minister a clear vision of how to fulfill God's dream and help him or her to experience more vividly the reality that "the church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men [humanity]. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world."⁴ This will lead to the comprehensive mobilization of every believer, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Strategize evangelism through integration

A yearly outreach master plan, in which all departments of the church participate in an integrated way, is highly recommended. The pastor and the elders need to work hand in hand with every department to produce a comprehensive evangelism plan that will mobilize the majority of our members—children, youth, and adults alike. Such a flexible and bold master plan must include a cycle of revival, training and equipping, sowing, reaping, nurturing, and consolidation that allows every member and institution the opportunity to be involved.⁵

Those congregations that have employed this model are the ones at the top in (a) soul winning, (b) retention of members, and (c) discipleship.

Preparing individuals for baptism, planting new congregations, and developing disciples should be the main emphasis of every pastor and elder. We must view evangelism as a process leading to discipleship, not just an event that expands membership. While membership growth is a by-product of evangelism, the Great Commission envisions each believer becoming a mature, disciple-producing minister. The task of evangelism is not finished until new believers are nurtured, trained, deployed, and winning others themselves.


Disciple-making must be viewed as integral to the evangelistic process, not just a follow-up after the main evangelistic event. Gaining members without discipling them is ultimately self-defeating. A balanced evangelistic program calls for pastors and elders not only to promote evangelism but also to nurture new members and train them for service and then deploy them in reaching others. And by doing so, they place themselves at the center of God's activity. "There are possibilities for work to be done by you for Jesus that you have never dreamed of."⁶

Grand finale

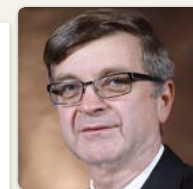
The fifth book of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, could truly be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. But if the beginnings of the church were glorious when, after Pentecost, the great evangelistic

explosion occurred, something bigger must take place in our day. Millions of believers, filled with the Holy Spirit, will proclaim within the framework of the "everlasting gospel" the last three messages of the mercy of Jesus "to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6, NKJV). We could almost say that the Acts of the Apostles is incomplete, because the most glorious chapters are about to be written. You and I are part of the events they will depict.

So, let us use every means at our disposal—Sabbath sermon, Sabbath School, Adventist Youth program, prayer meeting—to share the gospel with our communities. "Evangelistic work, opening the Scriptures to others, warning men and women of what is coming upon the world, is to occupy more and still more of the time of God's servants."⁷ What a privilege. What a responsibility. We can almost see the great finale as Jesus revealed it to John in Patmos: "After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory" (Rev. 18:1, NKJV).

And the glorious thing is that it will happen. Jesus has told us how things will end. The last generation will witness and participate in wonderful things: the descent of the Holy Spirit in its fullness and the rapid completion of the Great Commission. "The Lord designs that the presentation of this message shall be the highest, greatest work carried on in the world at this time."⁸ May God use us to make ours that last generation. 

- 1 For these free downloadable sermons, visit "Illustrated Sermons ETMEJ" page at www.gcevangalism.net/sermons.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 19 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 78.
- 3 Charles E. Bradford, *Preaching to the Times* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1975), 122.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 9.
- 5 For more ideas and resources, visit www.ministerial.adventist.org.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1955), 271.
- 7 Ellen G. White, "Aggressive Work to Be Done," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 2, 1906.
- 8 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 11.



Whatever happened to adult Sabbath School?

We surveyed 1,451 church members and 59 pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church from a cluster sample in all nine unions in the North American Division to determine the relationship(s) between Sabbath School attendance and the following five groups of factors: achievement, satisfaction, sociocultural factors, institutional factors, and general perceptions.

From its inception in the 1850s until the early part of the twentieth century, people flocked to the Adventist Sabbath School in North America. During those times, Sabbath School reached its highest attendance rate. In fact, Sabbath School membership was, sometimes, even larger than church membership. Since then, the attendance rate has significantly declined. It is estimated that less than 25 percent of Seventh-day Adventist Church members, at least in North America, now attend Sabbath School on a regular basis. And the statistics may be similar in many other divisions.

The decline

"If I were not a pastor, I would never attend Sabbath School." So stated a church leader interviewed for this study. Another admitted, "I am really ashamed of my Sabbath School. I would never invite anybody, especially non-Adventists, to attend my Sabbath School class." A seminary professor said, "I remember the

classes in only one Sabbath School that I truly enjoyed in my entire life." A Sabbath School leader acknowledged, "Sabbath School is dying if it is not already dead."

Instituted in the early 1850s, prior to the official establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Sabbath School is one of the oldest organized ministries in the movement. As an educational institution, it was established as a platform for fulfilling the church's mission of teaching the gospel and nurturing the spiritual growth of its members. From its inception, Sabbath School was intended to be "one of the greatest instrumentalities, and the most effectual, in bringing souls to Christ."¹

For many decades until the early twentieth century, the Sabbath School mission and goals were maintained. The early history of Sabbath School shows that the adult Sabbath School was growing and its members were spiritually enriched. Referring to the early history of Sabbath School, William Covert, an early Sabbath School member, wrote: "I enjoyed my Sabbath School study then as much as ever in my life."²

Originally, the Sabbath School had one objective: to instruct the youth of the church through a systematic study of the Word of God. Writing about the origins of Sabbath School, Flora Plummer mentions that Elder James White "was deeply impressed with the need of some regular system or plan

of Bible lessons especially adapted to the youth."³ As the Adventist Church grew, the objectives of Sabbath School gradually increased. An independent research study done on the history of Sabbath School objectives, conducted by Sherman McCormick, suggests that Sabbath School should be responsible for six "tributary" objectives:

1. Bible study
2. Community evangelism and soul-winning
3. Fellowship and support
4. Nurture and character development
5. Training for Christian service
6. World mission promotion and funding⁴

Based upon this, the *Sabbath School Handbook* states: "Sabbath School has four specific objectives: Study of the Word, Fellowship, Community Outreach, and World Mission Emphasis. These four objectives are the basis for every activity of the Sabbath School in all divisions."⁵

The annual statistical reports of the North American Division show that for a number of decades from its time of inception in the 1850s, the attendance rate at the adult Sabbath School in the Seventh-day Adventist Church was continuously growing. Then things started to change.

Prior to the 1930s, Sabbath School was the main evangelistic ministry in the church. In an article titled "Sabbath

School Evangelism,” Louis Dickson (1932) remarks on the important role played by the Sabbath School in evangelism. “It is stated that 85 percent of church membership comes directly from the Sabbath school.”⁶

Over the succeeding decades, Sabbath School attendance, as well as offerings, dramatically declined. Although Sabbath School attendance reports are no longer formally taken, it is estimated that typical adult Sabbath School attendance is lower than 25 percent of the church membership in the Adventist churches in North America. This proportional drop of more than 75 percent in Sabbath School attendance is in comparison to about 75 years earlier. Based on the annual financial reports in the *147th Annual Statistical Report*, Sabbath School offerings currently represent only 2.55 cents (3 percent) for each tithe dollar.⁷ Benchmarked against tithe, this is proportionally a decline of over 90 percent in a period of about 75 years.

The data

There is no single cause for or simple answer to the declining attendance at adult Sabbath School in North America. The phenomenon of declining attendance encountered for almost a century is related to numerous factors, which cannot be easily and entirely identified. The literature, however, reveals the following aspects related to Sabbath School:

1. Sabbath School attendance has been related to the multiplicity of Sabbath School objectives. According to the literature, a single and clearly defined objective was an important factor in maintaining a high rate of Sabbath School attendance for the first several decades of its history. Based on the history of Sabbath School, it has been observed that attendance started to decline when multiple objectives were attributed to Sabbath School.
2. As a culturally sensitive entity, the dynamic of Sabbath School has been affected by the numerous sociocultural changes encountered throughout its history. Secularism has been attributed with the loss of vitality in Sabbath School, with its natural by-products of materialism and religious pluralism reinforced by a postmodern worldview.
3. Sabbath School is an educational institution, although not formal, so Sabbath School attendance is influenced by the quality of its teaching and learning process. Cultural and technological changes have dramatically impacted teaching and learning strategies over the past century, and these may not always have been reflected in the way Sabbath School classes are conducted. An adequate teaching and learning method, carefully and culturally contextualized, could result in better attendance at Sabbath Schools.

The level of achievement and satisfaction with Sabbath School is highly related to Sabbath School attendance. Based on the findings of this study, a balance between the cognitive component (achievement) and the affective component (satisfaction), along with active involvement in some form of ministry (psychomotor), appears to stimulate members to regular attendance at Sabbath School.

Other characteristics associated with regular Sabbath School attendance are these:
1. The Bible is used as the primary teaching resource.
2. An interactive teaching style is predominantly used by the Sabbath School teachers.
3. Fellowship opportunities are provided.
4. The local Sabbath School is engaged in community outreach projects.
5. Worship is the reason for coming to church.
6. Learning biblical truths is the reason for coming to church.
7. The participants believe that biblical truths enhance their relationship with God.
8. Sabbath School does not duplicate the features of the church worship service.
9. There is involvement in other ministries.
10. Sabbath School is considered necessary to the experience of “going to church” on Sabbath.
11. Sabbath School is considered relevant for the twenty-first century.
12. The Sabbath School lesson is studied during the week.

The diagnosis

This study reveals that even in a postmodern culture such as twenty-first-century North America, adult Sabbath School is better attended in those places where the Bible is used as the primary teaching resource. No other resources, as relevant as they might seem to be, were perceived as a replacement for the study of God’s Word. The Bible was and continues to be the foundation and driving force for a successful Sabbath School.

An interactive teaching style employed by Sabbath School teachers makes a significant difference in Sabbath School attendance. When this teaching style is used, the Sabbath School participants feel encouraged to express their beliefs and develop their own well-considered theological identity.

A teaching style that takes into consideration the differences in learning preferences will enable the Sabbath School members to learn faster (achievement), enjoy what they are learning (satisfaction), and become more likely to put what they have learned into practice (psychomotor). These types of Sabbath Schools are more likely to grow their attendance. The art and science of teaching and learning seem to play an important role in achieving the goals in Sabbath School, but the most important attribute of the Sabbath School teacher is having a relationship with and dependence on God.

A friendly and welcoming environment where the Bible is taught becomes a binding force that attracts people to attend Sabbath School more frequently. An open and supportive Sabbath School class sets the tone for a growing Sabbath School.

A well-conducted Sabbath School provides the necessary ground for

growth in discipleship—that is, personal spiritual sanctification and a desire to witness. Higher levels of achievement and satisfaction with Sabbath School in the area of personal spiritual development lead to better Sabbath School attendance.

In addition, Sabbath School attendance is significantly related to a fundamental attitude or worldview in which worshiping God is associated with coming to church. A genuine corporate worship experience has the potential to lead people to a stronger desire for an in-depth study and understanding of God's Word.

In the same way, a fundamental attitude in which learning is associated with coming to church is significantly related to Sabbath School attendance. As the primary nonformal educational ministry in the Adventist Church, Sabbath School can satisfy the needs of those who value biblical truth and view this truth as essential to the enhancement of their relationship with God.

Keeping the features of a Sabbath School distinct and relevant and avoiding duplication with the features of other church services, mainly with the worship service, could have a positive impact on Sabbath School attendance. If Sabbath School mirrors the exact features of a typical worship service, it is more likely that members will be tempted to choose one of the two services instead of attending both.

A culturally contextualized Sabbath School meaningful to the twenty-first-century generation is more likely to be frequently attended than an outdated Sabbath School that is not sensitive to members' needs. This identifies an important responsibility for Sabbath School leaders and teachers. They must remain relevant to the culture as well as true to the Bible—identified by this research as the best study resource for Sabbath School.

The study of the Sabbath School lesson during the week is significantly related to Sabbath School attendance. Commitment to the daily lesson study appears to motivate Sabbath School attendance rather than being seen as a chore that decreases attendance.

The dilemma

Sabbath Schools in the twenty-first century face unprecedented challenges. The most significant of these is the paradigm shift to the post-modern era, manifested particularly through religious pluralism and cultural diversity. Sabbath Schools must deal with these new challenges in order to be effective. The study shows that a Bible-based teaching experience that is culturally contextualized and relevant is a vital ingredient for the twenty-first-century generation. In response to what has been revealed by this study, it is my personal conviction that one clearly defined and culturally contextualized Sabbath School objective, passionately and diligently pursued, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, may potentially set the grounds for a new and more productive phase of adult Sabbath School.

Overall, most authors who have written about Sabbath School consider the soul-winning objective to be the main objective or the supreme objective of Sabbath School. As profound as it may sound, this objective does not provide the parameters or the specifics of a soul-winning agency. In my opinion, this goal is more like the overarching goal of any church effort. Sabbath School needs to focus on a unique, clearly defined, tangible, and culturally contextualized objective that will enhance the Adventist Church in its ability to fulfill its mission. A diligent study of God's Word was, is, and should remain the fundamental objective for any Sabbath School effort in the Adventist Church.

Is there a future for Sabbath School in this postmodern world infused with relativism and materialism? My answer is yes. Sabbath School still has its unique mission, a mandate that no other church ministry or church institution is able to fulfill as efficiently. In addition to what this study has revealed, I personally believe that the following four major outcomes of a properly conducted Sabbath School cannot and will not be fulfilled to the same extent by any other church entity:

1. Sabbath School was and continues to be the most effectual binding

tool in keeping the Adventist Church theologically and doctrinally united.

2. Sabbath School provides a unique educational model that has the potential to guide the church membership, individually and collectively, in searching and studying the truths of the Bible at home and in Sabbath School on a weekly basis.
3. Sabbath School provides valuable mentoring and opportunities for young, aspiring leaders to practice and develop their talents.
4. Sabbath School provides important opportunities for members and nonmembers of the church to voice their beliefs and opinions. As individuals are encouraged to consider and express their beliefs in Sabbath School, they naturally internalize biblical values and take ownership of their beliefs.

Even with the unprecedented challenges of the twenty-first century in North America as well as around the world, a properly designed and conducted Sabbath School has the potential to become what it was originally intended to be—one of the most effective tools in bringing people close to God. ¹

1 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies on Sabbath-School Work: A Compilation Approved by the Sabbath-School Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), 20.

2 From a letter by William Covert published in Flora Plummer, *Early History of the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath-School Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1911), 8.

3 Flora Plummer, *From Acorn to Oak: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath School Work* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1922), 19.

4 Sherman McCormick, *The Seventh-day Adventist Adult Sabbath School: Its Purpose as Described and Perceived* (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1922), 147, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=745218531&Fmt=7&clientId=1898&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.

5 *Sabbath School Handbook* (Silver Spring, MD: North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 2004), 6.

6 Louis Dickson, "Sabbath School Evangelism," *Ministry*, October 1932, 18.

7 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *147th Annual Statistical Report* (Silver Spring, MD: Office of Archives and Statistics, 2009), 87.



► Adventist Church in Costa Rica and Nicaragua commits to reaching former members

Alajuela, Costa Rica—The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Central American Union Mission, which comprises Costa Rica and Nicaragua, officially launched the Inter-American Division's territory-wide initiative to seek out former church members during a special training throughout its six regional church fields. More than 1,300 church elders, pastors, and Sabbath School leaders gathered earlier this month to be trained in how to reach former members and bring them back to the church.

More than 100,000 members have left the church or are unaccounted for across Costa Rica and Nicaragua during the past two years, reported Pastor **Ricardo Marín**, executive secretary of the South Central American Union Mission. "That means that there is more than a 45 percent decrease in total membership in the union," said Marín. The current membership stands at 121,440.

Samuel Telemaque, Sabbath School director for the Inter-American Division, traveled throughout Costa Rica and Nicaragua to emphasize the importance of building relationships in retaining and seeking members through Sabbath School classes.

It's about being a community of grace while searching for former members, inviting them to be reconciled to God through a process of appealing to the hearts of the members, said Telemaque. He pointed to Ezekiel 34 and 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19, highlighting the need to ensure that the proper ministry of reconciliation is followed.

The training focused on the stages of reconciliation and provided practical instructions on how to implement a ministry of reconciliation, discipleship, and reintegration into the fellowship life of the church.

Delegates also were taught how to make an effective visit to a former member and how to help former members manage feelings of anger and hurt that

many hold regarding the church and its leaders. Emphasis was made on being more empathetic and caring and listening more to former members.

"We need to organize a huge army in the church with children, young people, adults, men, and women to further the ministry of reconciliation, just [as] Jesus taught in the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son," said **Leonardo Godínez**, district pastor of the Northwestern Nicaragua Mission. "That is the purpose of Sabbath School."

At the close of each regional training, church elders and leaders were challenged to be actively involved and to double their evangelistic efforts as the church in Costa Rica and Nicaragua prepares for a massive baptismal ceremony on April 4, 2020, in Alajuela. The celebration will highlight the Inter-American Division's territory-wide evangelism efforts next summer, which marks the end of the current quinquennium. [Tomas Saez/IAD News Staff]



Photo: Milton Martínez

It's about being a community of grace while searching for former members, inviting them to be reconciled to God through a process of appealing to the hearts of the members, said Telemaque.

► North American Division Asian-Pacific pastors meet

Ontario, California, United States—Pastors from across the United States, Canada, Guam-Micronesia, and Bermuda gathered for the North American Division (NAD) Asian-Pacific Pastors' Convention. About 400 pastors and spouses registered for the event.

"The convention brought our pastors a renewed passion for the study of the Bible and helped them embrace the relevance of planting and growing healthy churches," said **VicLouis Arreola**, director of Asian-Pacific Ministries for both the NAD and the Pacific Union Conference. "This gathering was an upper-room experience that prepared them to meet the challenges of these end times."

"It was a wonderful experience to bring the [pastoral] team together," said **Tony Anobile**, NAD vice president for multilingual ministries. "The speakers were focusing on the journey that pastors have and their relationship with Jesus. [Arreola] and [his team] brought in people to provide training seminars and education on how to better their personal life, their ministries, and their families. The event showed that, in the NAD, there is diversity but also unity of purpose and spirit."

For Arreola and his team, who work to provide this opportunity for those in ministry, the NAD convention is a time to celebrate the diversity of and ministry to 33 different cultural language groups. The convention is also an opportunity for the Asian-language advisories to meet, plan, and renew



Photo: Pacific Union Conference

their mission and vision for reaching the communities in this division.

Pastors attended courses on New Testament theology, Old Testament theology, archaeology, pastoral care and counseling, systematic theology, and church growth and evangelism. Course curricula included Seventh-day Adventist foundational studies, interpersonal ministry, outreach in the community, applied pastoral skills, and concepts of church growth.

This year's convention was themed "Redeeming the Time." Guest speakers included NAD president **Dan Jackson**, Pacific Union Conference president **Ricardo Graham**, and Loma Linda University Church senior pastor **Randy Roberts**.

Pastors in attendance represented many of the 820 Asian-Pacific churches across the United States, Canada, Bermuda, and Guam-Micronesia. For these pastors, the fellowship, continuing education, and time for spiritual renewal make these conventions significant both professionally and spiritually.

"The reality in North America is that minority groups are going to continue to grow. I'm grateful to Vic for coordinating this event and for his commitment to continued [ministry] growth," Anobile said. "At the NAD, our commitment is to support the growth of immigrant and refugee ministries in North America in any way we can." [Faith Hoyt/North American Division News]

► Inter-American Division leaders unveil soul-winning plan

Miami, Florida, United States—The passion of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Inter-American Division (IAD) is for all of its administrators, pastors, lay preachers, Bible instructors, church members, Sabbath

Schools and small groups to contribute to a comprehensive plan to baptize more than 200,000 new believers by the end of this quinquennium, which ends in June 2020. For that to take place, the church at all levels needs to stay focused

on evangelism initiatives and activities in the weeks and months to come, top church leaders said during an online evangelism summit held June 4, 2019.

"As members, we have to preach and teach to win souls for Christ. That's



what God put in our hearts to do,” said Pastor **Elie Henry**, president of the Inter-American Division.

“We stand together in soul-winning in the Inter-American Division,” said Pastor **Balvin Braham**, assistant to the IAD president for evangelism and the main organizer of the online event. “We have to conquer in the name of Jesus, for there are too many people out there who have not accepted Christ as their personal Savior in our local church communities,” said Braham.

Sharing the gospel with others means baptizing and discipling them as part of the church flock, said Braham. It means bringing in more believers to reach the goal set out mid-2015 of one million new members by mid-2020. And it means looking at numbers reached so far.

Since July 2015, when the current quinquennium began, 732,256

new members have been baptized, reported Pastor **Leonard Johnson**, executive secretary for the IAD. To reach the goal of one million, we would have to reach 267,744 new members, which is at least 53,548 new members added for each of the next five quarters, said Johnson.

Efforts will need to see the 3,200 pastors in the 24 major church regions in the IAD on board with a comprehensive evangelism plan that will seek to train 100,000 lay preachers and 300,000 Bible instructors. The goal is to hold 104,000 evangelistic campaigns throughout the territory from January to April in 2020. The vision corresponds to what church leaders voted recently during IAD’s Mid-Year Executive Committee meetings, where 2020 was voted in as the Year of Discipleship and Evangelistic Mega Reaping.

Unions, or church regions, will set their own evangelistic goals before the end of the year and unite efforts to not only reach new believers but also to work hard with discipleship or retention initiatives to get more members involved and committed to the mission, Braham said.

“Our intention with this summit was to create an understanding among pastors in terms of where we are headed in church growth and retention of members,” said Braham. It’s about mobilizing and inspiring all pastors to maximize their potential in equipping members to continue equipping members in soul-winning. “With the help of the Holy Spirit, and much prayer, we will experience a rich harvest of souls,” Braham said. [Libna Stevens/IAD] ▾

To view the Inter-American Division’s Online Evangelism Summit for Pastors, visit bit.ly/zZNDayW.



Photo: Libna Stevens/IAD

Perceptions of the Protestant Reformation in Seventh-day Adventism

edited by Rolf J. Pöhler, Möckern-Friedensau: Institute of Adventist Studies, Friedensau Adventist University, 2018

Perceptions of the Protestant Reformation in Seventh-day Adventism is one book that draws the attention of Adventists. Edited by Rolf Pöhler, professor of Systematic Theology at Friedensau Adventist University, the book brings together notable contributions from a team of Adventist scholars along with one non-Adventist scholar.

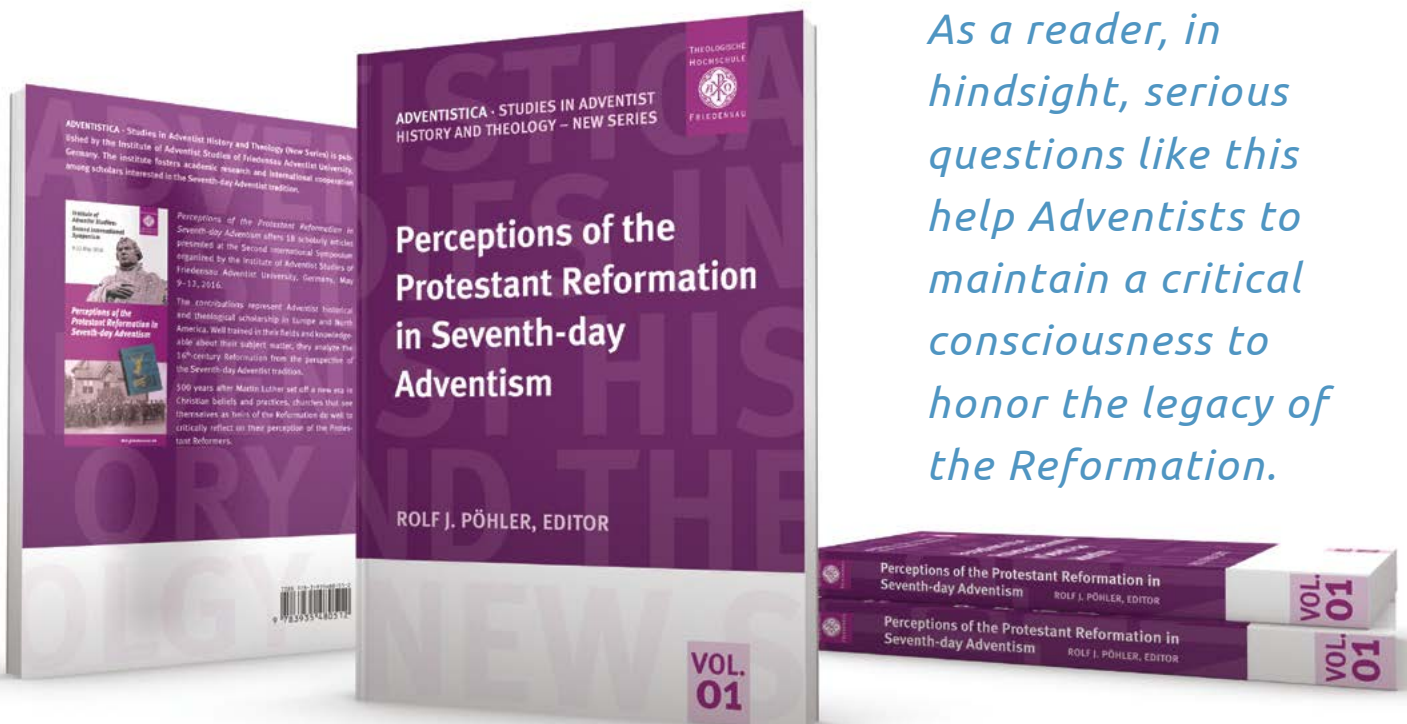
The book's main burden is, How have Seventh-day Adventists perceived the Protestant Reformation in the past, and how do they see their relation to it today? (7). According to Pöhler, this is a timely question and is well demonstrated by using three parts to answer the question. Two introductory essays, one by Stefan

Höschele (13–29) and one by Nicholas Miller (31–46), examine how Adventists have understood the concepts of “Protestantism” and “Reform” as well as how the works of some Reformers influenced distinctly Adventist beliefs, such as the great controversy motif and the sanctuary doctrine.

The first part of the book then addresses Martin Luther from the Adventist perspective. Essay authors consider how the Adventist Church cofounder Ellen White understood and portrayed the life of Martin Luther and how Luther's eschatology was received. They explore differences in perceptions of the antichrist and the principle of *sola Scriptura* (99–135). Authors also sought to offer new

perspectives on Reformation studies in relation to Adventism. For instance, Daniel Heinz argues perceptively that Luther's end-time orientation “makes him a true” Adventist. While this may be considered an overstatement by others, Heinz bemoans the fact that Christians, especially Adventists who call themselves the heirs of the Reformation, have not given more attention to Luther's eschatological worldview (77). Instead, they have focused more on the historical battle between the Reformer and Rome as well his theological interpretation of the pope as antichrist.

Perspectives of the Magisterial and Radical Reformation constitute the second part of this book. In this





section, contributors portrayed how these traditions influenced ecclesiology (i.e., the Lord's Supper, liturgy, and church governance), soteriology, hamartiology, religious freedom, and social engagement of Seventh-day Adventists.

The essay of Charles Scriven (239–249), which focuses on James William McClendon, a systematic thinker for Neo-Anabaptism, explored four leverage points for renewal and transformation in Adventism. Scriven argues that McClendon's corrective or transformational understanding of theology and his practical understanding of doctrine demonstrate that doctrine is both content and practice. If rightly conceived, it aids community (church) transformation.

The last part of *Perceptions of the Protestant Reformation in Seventh-day Adventism* is an apt portrayal of the impact of the Reformation on Adventism using historical case studies. Woodrow Whidden's exposition (253–262) on the 1888 Minneapolis Conference draws readers' attention to the role of Ellen and James White's predilections of *sola Christus* and *sola Scriptura*. Johannes Hartlapp (263–286) explored Ludwig Richard Conradi's one-sided understanding of Luther's Reformation, which focused exclusively on the biblical prophecies of Daniel and Revelation in addition to the perspective of Sabbath observance rather than on the core concepts of *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, or *sola Christus*.

Gilbert Valentine (287–309) demonstrates how the perceptions of the sixteenth-century reformers and the forensic emphasis on justification provoked and shaped the debates of the meaning of righteousness by faith that rocked Adventism from 1960 to 1978. Finally, Pöhler's concluding essay and pastoral reflection (311–318) asks whether Adventists are the "Heirs of the Reformation." The answer according to Pöhler is a straightforward yes. "However, upon closer examination, additional questions arise that cannot

be answered as easily by a simple Yes or No" (312). Why? The reason is that Adventists have not adopted everything the Reformers believed or taught. Take, for example, the teaching on eternal hellfire and the practice of infant baptism.

Hence Pöhler thinks a reformulation of the question will make more sense: "Are Seventh-day Adventists in agreement with the key biblical insights and fundamental theological concerns of the Protestant Reformation?" Adventist self-understanding claims the obvious. With this claim, more questions follow: "Can Adventists deliver what they claim? Do they actually live up to the principles and insights of the Reformation?"

As a reader, in hindsight, serious questions like this help Adventists to maintain a critical consciousness to honor the legacy of the Reformation. For, as Pöhler pleads, the "church needs to continually (re)focus its attention on the center of divinely revealed truth" (317) by embodying the spirit of the Reformers.

Fresh insights on the Reformation from an Adventist perspective with case studies are offered. However, I do not think the case studies given suffice for a venture of this nature. In addition, fresh expression of Adventism in the Global South demands that a book of this kind include African, Asian, and South American perspectives. However, several of the contributors come from America and Europe.

Although *Perceptions of the Protestant Reformation in Seventh-day Adventism* is not popular reading, it should be read especially by seminary students, pastors, theologians, and scholars. Rolf Pöhler deserves commendation for bringing these scholars together and for this notable contribution to Adventism. ❏

—Reviewed by Chigemezi-Nnadozie Wogu, a research associate at the Institute of Adventist Studies, Friedensau Adventist University, Möckern, Germany.

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The pastor had focused on three nonnegotiable activities: (1) the study of God's Word, (2) prayer—a lot of prayer, and (3) evangelistic outreach. But the changes in the church were so remarkable that it seemed hard to explain. Imagine how surprised the pastor was when he saw the activities his church was engaged in were reflected in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 7!² So here's the 10-point-foundation for his church's success:

1 *More attention to the lost.* Nine-tenths of our efforts should be on behalf of the lost, not the members. "God has withheld His blessings"³ because we have ignored this priority. If work for nonmembers were to become the main focus, we could expect great progress.

2 *Less time with the church.* As soon as a new church is organized and the members set at work, "then the

minister is to pass on to other equally important fields."⁴ Members should befriend their neighbors, spend time with them in their homes meeting their needs, and, in quiet humility, point them to Christ.

3 *More need for short sermons.* Sabbath sermons are fitting as long as they do not weary the saints and are full of life and the love of God.

4 *Less need for many sermons.* A sermon is not needed every Sabbath; one can have testimonies of personal outreach. Members should share "of blessings received because of blessings imparted"⁵ to those not yet converted.

5 *More need for teaching than preaching.* The greatest help for members would be teaching them how to work for God instead of depending on the pastor. "Let the minister devote more of his time to educating than to preaching. Let him [or her] teach the people how to give to others the knowledge they have received."⁶

6 *Less attention to the conflicts.* Constantly focusing on conflict resolution makes for weak churches. Many pastors and churches make the mistake of giving too much attention to resolving conflicts between members. That is a strategy by Satan to keep the church distracted because as soon as a church is "set right," the process has to begin all over again.

7 *More patience in work.* We need to work with Christlike patience, seeking to encourage others and loving those who are outside the church.

8 *Less internal focus.* Missional small groups should be formed for outreach as well as membership care. A fundamental mistake is to establish small groups that have no intention to reach out.

9 *More persistence in prayer.* Earnest prayer should be made for unbelievers. Two or three members should gather together "and plead with God for the salvation of some special one."⁷

10 *Less members, more disciples.* New converts can become powerful soul winners right away. New converts should not be held back from the work of ministry. If they are filled with the power of God, they will do good work for the church.

The church in California had fervent and frequent sessions of prayer. They had active small groups; there were testimonies of God's goodness every Sabbath; the focus of the church was toward the lost, not the saints; there was a real openness for ministry training; and the church began planting a second church. The closer pastors and churches follow these counsels, the more success they can expect in their local church. ❖

1 A version of this column was first published in the *Church Ministry Newsletter of the Northern Asia-Pacific Division*, March 2019.

2 See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 18–22.

3 White, *Testimonies*, vol. 7, 18.

4 White, *Testimonies*, vol. 7, 18.

5 White, *Testimonies*, vol. 7, 18.

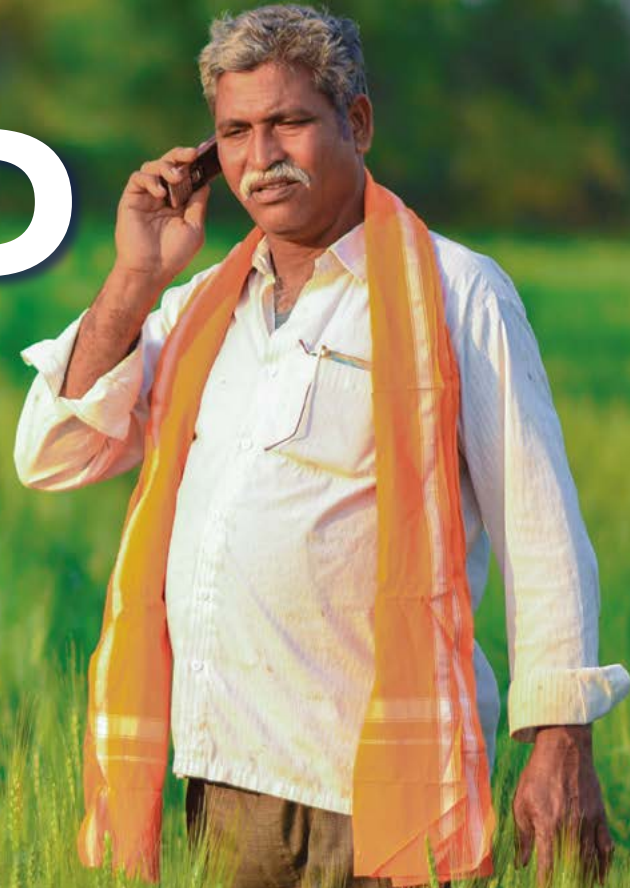
6 White, *Testimonies*, vol. 7, 20.

7 White, *Testimonies*, vol. 7, 21.

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