



DESIGNING DISCIPLING GUIDES

Theology and Teaching/Learning Principles Working Together

Christians are familiar with the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the church: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19, 20, NIV). However, we too often interpret that passage to be solely a call to evangelize—thereby neglecting the lifelong teaching and nurture that must follow baptism. Dallas Willard calls this blind spot the Christian Church’s “Great Omission.”¹

This necessary lifelong teaching and learning may be one solution to the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s challenge with retaining its young adults and new members. This hypothesis is being tested with a new set of discipling guides produced by the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Designed to resemble a regular *Adult Bible Study Guide* (informally known as the “Sabbath school quarterly”), these undated *New Members’*

Bible Study Guides (Study Guides) have been written specifically for new or “renewed” Adventists. Their purpose is to disciple new or returning believers, thereby helping them achieve the transformations and growth necessary for them to become mature Christians. However, the Study Guides will also be useful in many Adventist school contexts.

Of special interest to educators and those who design discipling curricula is the use of the recently developed *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples* (TGFDF) framework and the blending of theology and teaching/learning principles. In order to disciple students, teachers have to be acquainted with two basic subjects: (1) the content of discipleship, and (2) the way people learn. In other words, theology and teaching/learning principles need to be combined. As the writer of the *New Members’ Bible Study Guides*, I chose the *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples* framework to provide a map for selecting the discipleship content.

The Study Guides serve as an example of how educators at any level can use the TGFDF framework to develop discipling/

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discipleship materials, and how biblical content (theology) and teaching principles can work together.

Understanding Discipleship

Too often, when Adventists sit down to write a discipleship curriculum, they default to the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, which outline and undergird the Adventist understanding of Christianity. Disciples need to know and love Jesus, and they need to know how to follow Him in their daily life. Christianity as defined by the Fundamental Beliefs, and “following Jesus” are closely related; however, they have different perspectives. The Fundamental Beliefs deal with propositional truth, while “Following Jesus” starts with knowing Jesus. The Fundamental Beliefs are part of every lesson in the Study Guides, but they are not dealt with as doctrines. Instead, the lessons grow out of the life and teachings of Jesus.

The *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples* framework incorporates the four processes of discipling: *Connecting*, *Understanding*, *Ministering*, and *Equipping*. The terms used for the processes are shorthand expressions that attempt to summarize the theology of discipling. The series title of the Study Guides is “In Step With Jesus.” Titles for each of the four quarters of the Study Guides and the *TGFD* discipling processes are listed below:

Understanding the Learner

Before the writing process began, the editorial team had to understand who the new members were and what challenges they faced. Thus, the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department and the Ministerial Department of the General Conference joined together to sponsor four focus groups of pastors. Held in three different locations across the United States, these focus groups brought together a total of 41 pastors from nine conferences. In the focus groups, the planners learned the needs and challenges of new members from the pastors’ perspectives.

In the process of writing the Study Guides, I conducted dozens of interviews with new members. Books and articles about new church members added to my understanding. Of special insight was James Cress’s *You Can Keep Them If You Care*.²

What the editorial team discovered from their research about new members’ needs and challenges is summarized below. The new members struggled with the following areas:

- Developing a close relationship with Jesus.
- Translating “following Jesus” into their real-life experiences.
- Making new church friends.
- Making lifestyle changes.

- Dealing with objections from family and old friends.
- Understanding the culture of the church that they have joined.

After gaining an understanding of the new members, the editorial team applied the principles of how people learn to design instruction that can make a difference in their lives. Most educators are familiar with James Kolb’s³ experiential learning theory. That theory is mirrored in Richard Osmer’s⁴ “tasks of practical theology.” Although Osmer gives no indication that he has built on Kolb’s theory, the similarities are evident and may simply reflect the fact that both theories describe how people learn, even though they use different wording. Because Osmer’s work focuses specifically on teaching in a Christian setting, his model was adopted as the basic learning theory for the lessons. Osmer’s model asks four questions, starting with the learner’s situation:

- What is going on?
- Why is this going on?
- What ought to be going on?
- How can we implement the “ought”?

Elements of the New Members’ Bible Study Guides

The Study Guides follow the basic format of the Sabbath school quarterly, and were designed to for use in Sabbath school classes or in small-group sessions. However, they are also useful in other venues. Because the lessons deal with, among

Quarter’s Title

Together Growing Fruitful Disciples Process

1 – The Journey Begins: Following Jesus and His Teachings	(Connecting & Understanding)
2 – The Power of Love: Growing Through Relationships	(Connecting)
3 – The Power of the Word: Growing Through Understanding	(Understanding)
4 – The Power of Mission: Growing Through Discipling & Serving	(Ministering & Equipping)

other things, human beings’ relationship with Christ, friendships, lifestyle, and church culture, the Study Guides can be a useful tool for high school and college-age students. Whether in a Sabbath school, a small group that meets on Friday nights (perhaps in a faculty member’s home), or in a Bible class, these guides can help our young people strengthen their relationship with Christ and their church, and inform their decisions about friendships and lifestyle.

Introductory questions. Each week’s lesson opens with introductory questions that focus on the student’s situation. Examples: *How does my understanding of who Jesus is affect the way I live? How can I be confident that the Bible was inspired by God?*

Walking With Jesus in the Real World. Each week’s lesson has a one-page story about real people that illustrates some as-

pect of the topic, and is designed to help people find courage from the testimony of others. Also, teachers can use the stories to discuss sensitive issues that people may not want to discuss about themselves. This feature will be useful for classroom worship and small group study.

Daily lesson study. This main feature follows the same format of the question-and-answer Bible study of the Sabbath school quarterly. However, the content and commentary on the texts are designed especially for new or “renewed” members.

A Closer Look. Because biblical terms or concepts may require additional explanation, a short sidebar fulfills this need. For example, the first quarter “closer look” topics include “Significance of the ‘I AM’ statements,” “A hard saying [hate your father and mother],” and “Jesus’ patience with Peter.”

“Adventese” Sidebar. To help new members understand the Adventist culture and language, “Adventese” defines unique denominational terms, explains some Adventist history, and describes current institutions. Each Adventese sidebar has a theme, such as “Food Terms,” “Familiar Acronyms,” and “Early Church Leaders.” Students and even teachers who are lifelong Adventists will benefit from the explanations of many of these terms!

Checking Up. Friday’s lesson contains a quiz on the biblical lesson containing multiple choice or matching questions. In addition, an “Extend Your Learning” exercise concentrates on a biblical topic related to the lesson. And finally, a question or exercise entitled “Examine Your Experience” applies the objectives of the week to the student’s own life.

Consider This. The last page of the week’s study is devoted to an essay that uses psychology, sociology, history, current research, etc., to enhance the student’s understanding of the topic. Examples from the undated first quarter include, “What Should I Do With My Life?,” “The Famous 12 Steps,” and “Which Bible Version Should I Use?”

“In Step With Jesus” Website. Additional resources for each week are provided online at <http://www.instepwithjesus.org> and include Ellen White quotations related to the topic, relevant Websites, and a variety of other resources.

Teacher’s Guide. The first few pages of the *Teacher’s Guide* for the first quarter’s Study Guide contain basic instructions on how to teach a Sabbath school class, and will be helpful for classroom teachers as well. In order to discourage presenters from adopting the default approach of woodenly going through the lesson day by day, the teacher’s guide provides three or four issues that synthesize the main points of the week’s topic.

Because the lessons deal with, among other things, human beings’ relationship with Christ, friendships, lifestyle, and church culture, the Study Guides can be a useful tool for high school and college-age students.

Contextualizing the New Members’ Bible Study Guides

One of the challenges of producing any study guide to be used in all the cultures where the Adventist Church exists is contextualizing the content. To provide the same biblical lesson for everyone, but also to provide unique contextual applications, the *New Members’ Bible Study Guides* add features that can be easily changed to meet cultural perspectives.

Each world division of the church, as it translates the Study Guides, can re-

move any culturally inappropriate material and insert locally relevant adaptations, especially in the following features: “Walking With Jesus in the Real World (Personal Stories),” “Adventese,” and the “Consider This” column. Making these changes will increase the value of the Study Guides to many groups around the globe.

Conclusion

The *New Members’ Bible Study Guides*⁵ demonstrate the use of the *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples* framework and the combining of theology and teaching/learning principles, with a careful focus on the learners. These elements are essential for the development of discipling materials, whether such materials are prepared for use in the school or the church setting. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006).
2. James A. Cress, *You Can Keep Them If You Care* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ministerial Association Resource Center, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2000).
3. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984).
4. Richard R. Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
5. The *New Members’ Bible Study Guides* can be obtained at your Adventist Book Center (<http://adventistbookcenter.com> or 800-765-6955).