The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America has established a goal of 100,000 baptisms by the end of 2010. Other parts of the world also have goals for their territories. That goal raises the urgent question: are the local Adventist churches prepared to nurture and assimilate these new members? The gospel commission says that we should “go and make disciples” by baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. We have set a goal for the baptizing, which will bring us converts. But have we also set a goal for teaching them to obey Christ’s commands, which is needed to make them disciples? Dallas Willard calls this blindness to teaching “the Great Omission.”

My interest in discipling peaked when Gary Swanson, associate director of the General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department, asked me to oversee the development of a year’s worth of undated adult Bible study guides (i.e., quarterlies) to be used to disciple and assimilate new members into the Adventist Church. Before I could begin such a task, I wanted to talk with pastors in order to find out what they see as the challenges and needs of new members in becoming disciples of Jesus and members of the Adventist Church. We set up three focus groups for June and August 2008 in three locations across the United States. What did we find?

Research methodology

A focus group methodology was chosen because it uses open-ended questions, yet allows the collection of data in a shorter amount of time than does conducting individual interviews. Pastors were supplied by asking individual conferences to select pastors based on these criteria:

1. Their interest and/or demonstrated capability in establishing new believers.
2. Their age, gender, experience, and diversity.
3. Their willingness and availability to participate.
4. Recommendation of confidence from conference leadership.

The conferences represented were the following: Allegheny East, Chesapeake, Georgia-Cumberland, Gulf States, Mountain View, Potomac, South Atlantic, South Central California, and Southern California.

Findings

Challenges within the church.

As we discussed the needs of new members, we defined new members as “adults who have joined the church from some background other than the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” Consider the challenges faced by these new members as they walk into a subculture whose worldview often conflicts with society. Pastors say that new members want to be accepted and have a sense of belonging to this community of believers. New members wonder, What is expected of me? And what do Adventists do?


The pastors in all four focus groups were emphatic: the number one challenge faced by new members is old members, or what one pastor called “difficult old members.” Or, as another said, “They need protection from the saints.” A third pastor said, “In all the churches I’ve pastored, when someone leaves, it’s because some member grabbed hold of them and just literally drove them out with their unnecessary rules. ‘Don’t eat this. Don’t do that.’”

These were some of the other difficulties that pastors felt new members faced.

• New members’ expectations may set them up for disappointment. During an evangelistic
meeting they were the center of attention, but once they join the church, they may feel “neglected.”

- The Adventist lifestyle presents many new behaviors: Sabbath keeping, tithes and offerings, a healthy diet, and church school, to name a few.
- Sometimes a conflict presents itself between what the new members have been taught about lifestyle issues and how they see long-time members living.
- At times arguments among old members destroy the fragile faith of new members.

**Personal challenges and challenges at home.** The pastors all agreed, too, that converts bring with them many habits and addictions that they need and want to overcome. Too often they assume that with their commitment to Christ and their baptism they will come out of the water able to live a completely victorious life. Many find, much to their disappointment, that this is not always the case.

If a new member is the only one in his or her home who is an Adventist, he or she can face serious challenges. Some new members also have to deal with those from their old churches who hear about their conversion to Adventism and say, “What have you done?” before sending them right to the Internet with all the disinformation it contains.

“I think the Internet,” one pastor said, “is the number one problem.”

**What new members need**

Once we recognize the challenges new members face, we need to ask ourselves, What do they need to be discipled to Christ and assimilated into the church? The pastors talked about the need for the doctrines of the church to be taught and to get new members involved in ministry, but they also emphasized the need for developing deep and healthy relationships with Jesus first and foremost—and then with the church members and their families and friends.

**Relationship with Jesus.** Several pastors stated that the new members’ need for a relationship with Jesus is the first and most important need. One pastor said, “They have fallen in love with Jesus, but they don’t know how that translates into their day-to-day life.”

**Relationships with church members.** In more than one focus group, someone loosely quoted research that says new members must find two or three friends within the first few weeks of joining the church, or must find six or seven friends within six months, or they will drop out. Many expressed agreement that new members need a mentor, coach, or spiritual guardian, specifically called by the church, who has the gifts of teaching and friendship,
“to take that family under their wings.” It should not be for a short time, they said, but for six months, a year, or longer.

Besides immediately getting two or three new friends, they need to increase friendships “gradually as they enter new circles, so that they don’t lose what they had [before baptism], but instead they gain.” They have to feel that they belong to this church family. To accept new members as friends and part of our church family seems like a simple thing to do until you realize that new members and old members live and function in two separate worlds.

The pastors’ greatest frustration dealt with the issue of some long-time members’ attitudes and behavior toward new members. There was consensus on the importance of preparing the church for new members.

“My problem,” said another pastor, “is that the culture I create for evangelism, the pre-work, the meeting itself, is a foreign culture to the church. We say that nurturing and soul winning is our primary ministry. People come into the church believing that, but when they settle down into the church, the church’s culture is not that culture. So it’s a shock. All of those things [that we did for evangelism] are events, not culture to the church.”

“The problem is that discipleship is not purely cognitive,” said a pastor. “It must be modeled, not simply taught. Who will model it? To come into this church now, you are coming into a group of people who have never been discipled themselves. They are just clinging to the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs. That’s powerful, but it’s absent of the relational.”

Relationship with the church as an organization. For people who come into the church through an evangelistic series, the transition from the evangelistic meetings to the regular church may bring a difference not only in personal relationships but also in worship styles, meeting location, and other matters. A pastor gave an example: “Evangelistic meetings are totally different from the church. More open. Lively singing. Then we put them in the church to sing, ‘Nearer My God to Thee.’ That’s a culture shock.”

The pastors in all four focus groups expressed the importance of getting new members involved in some kind of ministry. They need to feel that the local church needs them. Serving with others in a ministry also naturally develops personal relationships with other members.

Relationships with family and friends. The pastors presented two types of intentional instruction that new members need in relating to family and friends. First of all, they need to know how to explain their new lifestyle even while they themselves are still learning how to implement or adjust to it. All of the issues around Sabbath keeping immediately become a source of curiosity, or annoyance, to their family and friends. Then there are dietary changes and the giving up of alcohol. These lifestyle issues directly affect relationships.

Second, they need to be encouraged to bring their friends and family to church. “Capitalize on the fact that they have friends and family who become a cycle of evangelism. Get them involved in ministry and sharing their faith,” one pastor suggested.

What biblical teachings and doctrines need to be taught?

Besides relational needs, we discussed the biblical teachings and Adventist doctrines that new members need to be taught during their first year as members. At first, all four groups would list things such as tithing, Sabbath observance, diet, health reform, church history, eschatology, Christ’s ministry in the sanctuary, and the gift of prophecy.

But very quickly they slipped into a discussion of approaches or emphasis. One said, “When it comes to doctrines: heaven, the millennium, some of those doctrines—those are really hot buttons. Hell is really big. They want to talk within the context of what they are seeing in the movies and TV. We aren’t addressing this in the context of what they are seeing.”

Talking about the relevance of the worship service, a pastor said, “Those thirty or forty minutes that people dedicate to come to church and to have an encounter with God—those moments are special
because the people are waiting for something…. And we can have great knowledge of history and theology, but if we don’t apply the Word to their issues today, it’s not going to be relevant. They’ll say, ‘That was nice; but I didn’t learn anything that had to do with my life.’”

“I notice,” said a pastor, “that many [Bible study] guides are not even asking questions people would ask. They are just asking questions that fit with the text.” Another pastor supported that comment: “Ask the hard questions…. I find that people get offended if we don’t ask the question even when we don’t have the answer.”

The pastors became quite animated when they began to emphasize the importance of studying the Word, and not any specific teaching. One pastor said frankly, “I think we need to emphasize the place of the Word of God. If I spend some time in the Word, maybe some of my questions will be answered instead of [my being part of] a generation that says, ‘That’s just not the way I see it.’”

“I struggle with closing the gap between cognitive knowledge and personal experience in what I am preaching and teaching,” a pastor confessed. “I struggle with how to present the Word. I can teach them about forgiveness and how they are saved. But how can I lead them with that same teaching to experience forgiveness and rejoicing in their personal salvation?”

Conclusion and reflections

When people make or renew a commitment to follow Jesus and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church from another denomination or from no religion, most must go through a classic worldview transformation. The comments and stories of the focus-group pastors reinforced the difficulty of such a change. At the same time, because these new members are faced with close family and friend relationships challenges, they have a great need to establish new relationships among believers and be given time to grow in Christ. How the church responds to them often determines whether or not they can make it through this difficult transformation.

The tragedy is that too often church members do not sincerely welcome them and provide the discipling they need. Instead, many offer apathy or judgment. As one pastor said, “The disciplers need to be discipled.” Bill Hull, who has spent more than 20 years focused on discipling, says that “the church struggles with what it means to follow Jesus.” He says the church itself needs to be evangelized “to choose the life of discipleship.” For the Adventist Church to choose the life of discipleship will require more than a few seminars on “How to Witness” and “How to Welcome New Members.” In many cases, members themselves need a worldview transformation from a Christless Christianity to a surrendered following of Jesus.

Near the end of his book, Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change, Paul Hiebert summed up in one paragraph the essence of what I learned from the 41 pastors in four focus groups:

We must…. realize that new converts often experience “conversion shock.” Their initial reaction is often one of euphoria and joy. When this wears off, they begin the difficult task of learning to think and live as Christians. They must learn a new language, behave in new ways, and form new relationships. In short, they must be enculturated into a new culture and socialized into a new community. During this period new converts often face periods of doubt and depression. They question their decision, and some return to their old beliefs. During this time of reevaluation, the support of the Christian community is extraordinarily important…. When individuals convert one by one… they often lack strong group support. Only the most committed sustain their new faith outside a supporting community of faith.

If we, the Adventist Church, are successful in assimilating and discipling new members that we are praying will come into the church, we will need to declare 2010—and beyond—as the Years of Discipleship in addition to the emphasis on evangelism.

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**Pastors’ perspectives on assimilating new members**

Part 2—Discipling strategies

**Review of previous article**

In the summer and fall of 2008, four focus groups composed of pastors were held in three locations across the United States in order to find out pastors’ perspectives on assimilating new members into the Adventist Church and discipling them to Jesus. Part 1 of this two-part article focused on the challenges and needs of new members as reported by pastors. Part 2 deals with some of their specific strategies for assimilating them into the church.

**Making the transition to membership**

When a person is baptized, their relationship to the church changes. To handle the critical transition from nonmember to member, pastors in the focus groups reported three types of initiatives: connecting new members to spiritual guardians, getting them involved in ministry, and taking them through a process of orientation. Some use combinations of these initiatives.

Although the terminology may vary from spiritual guardian, to mentor, spiritual coach, big brother/big sister, small group leader, to elder, deacon, and deaconess, the intent remains basically the same: to make sure that at least one longtime member takes responsibility for nurturing and teaching the new believer. One pastor said that he makes the assignment of a spiritual guardian a public ceremony in the church service and gives to both the mentor and mentee a certificate that lists each one’s responsibilities.

Getting new members into ministry as soon as possible is the goal of many of the pastors. “Involvement, involvement, involvement,” said one pastor. “Even before they are baptized, we enlist them in some ministry of the church.”

Some pastors have set up an entire process for transitioning people into church membership and their new walk with Jesus. One church has an hour and a half program the first Sabbath of every quarter to explain spiritual gifts and then uses an online assessment tool to help identify people’s spiritual gifts and get them involved in ministry. Right after the evangelistic series is completed, some churches begin a seminar series of some kind. The pastors told of using Mark Finley’s Coming Events series, the CHIP program (Coronary Health Improvement Project), discipleship seminar materials, *Bible Readings for the Home* study, or a series they themselves developed. One pastor has put together studies that deal with the history of the Adventist Church and denominational terminology. Instead of focusing on denominational uniqueness, another pastor emphasizes basic discipleship.

**Maintaining and strengthening relationships**

Relationship building continues long after new members are brought into the church. Explaining the importance of relationships, a pastor said, “People come into the church primarily on the doctrine level, but leave primarily on the social level. You need to supplement the doctrines with social life. And that can be a whole list of things.” And, indeed, the list of possibilities is long. A primary means for these pastors to develop relationships with new members seems to be through the teaching of a class or leading a small group.

“My most successful piece,” one said, “is when I do a Friday evening meeting with all the new members and tie them to me... They stay with me for two years and, in the cases where I have been consistent with those relationships, those members stay in the church.”

Another pastor thinks the task begins before baptism and requires the work of others. He spends time with the people during the evangelistic series and finds out their interests. Then he connects the new person with a member who will spend time on similar interests. “It takes work on the pastor’s part to make a correct match,” he says. “I have to know what my members will do and won’t do. I have to oversee it, and I have to
keep watching to encourage them to keep at it.”

Commenting on the need for keeping current members motivated to stay in touch with new members, another pastor said, “The operative word is friendships. People don’t get rid of friends. We get burnout because it is a task instead of a friendship.”

Dramatic differences exist between congregations in how they use Sabbath for fellowship. Where practiced, this weekly fellowship also helps new members with Sabbath observance. “We’ve had a fellowship meal at every church [where I have pastored]. . . . [New members] are not connected with an Adventist family, so after church, they have nowhere to go. Come home to a TV blaring. [Sabbath fellowship is a] haven for people.” In some congregations, the church building is in use all day Sabbath.

But some churches do not have such fellowship on Sabbath. “In my church,” a young pastor said, “People don’t hang out. There’s no fellowship. We preach the sermon, and twenty minutes later, everyone is gone. Five hundred people just disappear—like into thin air.”

Using small groups
For anyone who knows the literature on small group ministry, the answer to relationship building (and every other discipleship matter) is a small group. The pastors, however, explained the reality of getting their members to become excited and involved in that model.

“You’re talking about a kind of culture,” one said. “There’s something about Adventism [in my location] that doesn’t like the small group.”

On the other hand, some pastors use small groups successfully. In one church, every new believer coming into the church is placed in a small group with an elder serving as the leader.

One pastor gave his personal testimony on the power of small groups. “I had been out of the church,” he said, “but I came back because of small groups. And the people in that small group developed me in my sense of calling, and I’m a pastor now because of that small group. But it is hard to get people interested in small groups. I’m afraid there is something drastic that is going to have to happen to get people to look at that paradigm.”

Teaching new members
“A new members’ class,” one pastor said, “is probably one of the most enjoyable classes to teach. The people are really hungry for Jesus. They are asking the real life questions.”

Although typical, for a pastor to have a new believers’ class, the time, location, and type of class vary among the churches. The most common class seems to be the pastor’s Sabbath School class. One reason for choosing this time slot is to develop in new members the habit of coming to Sabbath School.

One pastor, whose church has a potluck meal every Sabbath, said, “I found that new believers want to be part of the general Sabbath School family. So I do two things: The hour before Power Hour or prayer meeting is the new believers’ class. And every Sabbath afternoon, I do Pastor’s Hour. New believers are encouraged to come. And there they can ask any question, biblical or organizational.”

Others meet only on a week night, particularly Friday night. One pastor explained why he changed to meeting on Friday nights: “They aren’t as open on Sabbath morning. More shy . . . I find that Friday night by far is the best. Hard to get them involved in a Sabbath School class.”

One pastor solves his multichurch assignment by holding the class on Friday nights.

After baptizing about 20 people, a pastor said that he held a special class for about 10 months, telling those newly baptized that this class was part of becoming a member of the Adventist Church. He said, “I totaled up the hours. We spent seventy hours together, and I want to tell you the fellowship, the things that were learned, the experience, will last forever.” When one focus group had a discussion on how long a new members’ class should continue, there was a consensus that one year was not too long.

One sensitive issue that the pastors agreed they all had to deal with is whether or not to let long time members join the new believers’ class. “You can’t just open it up,” said one.

“I recruit,” said another. “I pick people geared around those families that I think will connect with new believers.” Another said, “I have key people who are nurturers. I like them to be in there.”
Resources pastors use

Because there is a real need to teach new believers how to study their Bibles, the Bible is a primary resource that pastors use in teaching. Referring to evangelistic series and Bible studies, a pastor said, “So far, it’s all been prepackaged for them. If they have a question and there is the Bible, how can they find an answer?” Another pastor said that the most successful teaching strategy he has used is buying new members a Bible, “a nice one.” “I asked thirty people to get a version they understand. I didn’t care which they got. Twenty-seven of thirty got the New Living Translation. I now preach from it.” He continued, “I challenged [all the] people to read through the Bible. Last year thirty-five people, who had never done it before, read through the Bible.”

Steps to Christ is another widely used resource. “By the time they have been baptized,” a pastor related, “most of them possess the book. In many cases, they would have it, but they wouldn’t have read it.”

Conclusions and reflections

In the four focus groups, we explored in depth the assimilating and discipling of new members. As I listened to the pastors and went over their words in great detail, I have concluded that there are three basic issues that need to be dealt with before our congregations will be fully prepared to welcome and disciple new members: (1) long-time members themselves need to be discipled to Jesus; (2) quality discipling materials need to be produced for both longtime members and new members; and (3) pastors need a clearer understanding of the processes of discipling.

As one pastor said, “My challenge is, I have never been trained on how to disciple. There was nothing in the curriculum coming through the training. There has been no follow-up, and I’ve been a pastor for 37 years.”

One pastor, talking about the lack of accountability for discipleship, said that it “doesn’t have a culture around it. I can’t speak for the others, but I am so busy that the kind of nurture you are talking about consistently means I have to pull away from the main things the church members want me to do.”

Help appears to be on the way. From lay-led efforts to independent ministries’ offerings, to the Growing Disciples initiative of the Ministries Coordinating Committee (including the Sabbath School Department’s new member lessons under development), to the North American Division’s current development of discipling helps, to new curriculum in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, an interest in discipling is springing up all over this denomination.

In the fall of 2008, the Andrews University Theological Seminary introduced a new curriculum for the Master of Divinity program based on eight areas of competencies. One of those areas is discipling. The seminary also offers a Christian Formation and Discipleship concentration for the PhD in Religious Education. In 2010, the seminary will launch a new concentration in Discipleship and Spiritual Formation for the Doctor of Ministry program.

Many resources currently exist. For example, for assimilating new members, the book You Can Keep Them If You Care, by James A. Cress, offers a perceptive understanding of the unique challenges that Adventists face and gives specific methodologies. The Trans-European Division has created Life Development, a discipleship pathway that begins with small group evangelism.

Remember, though, that not everything labeled “discipleship” is discipleship. Too often people will create a course or program in equipping the laity for evangelism and call it discipling. When we focus only on teaching people “how to witness,” such teaching is needed.