

Assimilating and Retaining New Members in the Church

By James W. Zackrison

The concept of discipleship means that process of church membership involves the entire experience of the member. The process does not stop at the moment of baptism, as is all too often the case. Local churches and districts need to develop ways and means of including full discipleship process in their regular “church life.” This process is called by various names: “body life,” “Christian living,” “responsible church membership,” etc.

The Importance of Discipleship

Discipleship is a word that describes a “churched” convert. “Churched” means a Christian who is actively involved in the life of a local congregation by attendance, financial support, and participation in ministry, and who is growing spiritually.

The ultimate goal of any retention program is the on-going development of discipleship in the lifestyle of the church member.

1) Framework for Discipleship

- a) 2 Peter 1:3 “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”
- b) 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Teaching	“All that Jesus taught” “All Scripture”
Rebuking	Showing the true values of Christian behavior and its various components.
Correcting in righteousness	Correcting world views and behavioral patters of the old life and showing how the “new creation” (Eph.4:1, 20-24) believes, lives and acts.
Training in righteousness	Learning the essence of the gospel and how to share it with others.

2) Discipleship and the Great Commission.

- a) The Great Commission is mentioned in each of the four gospels. Notice the various aspects mentioned.
- b) Matthew 28: 16-20 indicates the teaching aspects of the Great Commission using the formula: Go-Make Disciples-Teach them. The original language of the New Testament indicates that this is a circular process. Going-making disciples-teaching them is all one process. These things do not happen one after the other.

They all happen at the same time as part of a process. Confirming new converts in the faith must include a Christian education program in the local church where they can learn “all that Jesus taught. ”

- c) Mark 16: 14-20 indicates that as the Great Commission is put into practice, miraculous things happen. So new converts can expect to see in-depth changes in their lives as a result. Church membership should produce dynamic changes in lifestyle, attitude, understanding and commitment to the cause of the Lord.
 - i) The Great Commission in Mark also forms the basis for a regular revival system in the church, involving forgiveness, rehabilitation, and recommissioning of all church members.
- d) Luke 24: 44-49 indicates the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the discipleship process and the dedication of the new member to service to humanity.
- e) John 20:19-23. The evangelistic “sending.” All disciples are called to share their faith and pass the gospel on to others. This “sending” involves modeling in our personal lives the various elements of discipleship.

3) What Are the Basic Elements of a Discipleship Program?

There are certain basic elements that must be included for a retention system to work. Most of these should be integral parts of church life, but often are not. Some deal with the personality of the church and its members. Fixing these is usually the most difficult problem to overcome. Some are training programs that need to be set up and are usually missing in churches or districts.

a) Definitions

1. *Accession*: To add a member to the membership rolls of the Seventh-day Adventist church by baptism, profession of faith, or transfer.
2. *Active membership*: Members who attend church services on a regular recurring basis and reflect a lifestyle consistent with church beliefs and standards. An individual moves through the various phases of the Engel Scale.
3. *Apostasy*: Abandonment of Christian doctrines or lifestyle.
4. *Assimilate*: To incorporate and disciple new believers and/or newly - transferred members into the life of the and ultimately to *of our new members into the life of our congregation.*
5. *Assimilation process*: This phrase includes the whole process by which an individual moves through the various phases of the Engel Scale.
6. *Baptism*: The event which marks the new believer's entrance into the church and the local congregation

7. *Casually churched*: An individual who claims Christianity culturally and who may even hold membership in a local congregation but whose attendance is limited to special occasions or unique events and whose participation or financial support is minimal to nonexistent.
8. *Churched*: A Christian who is actively involved in the life of a local congregation by attendance, financial support, and participation in ministry.
9. *Disfellowship*: The removal of a member from church membership for disciplinary reasons.
10. *Dropout*: Interchangeable with *inactive*, the term usually connotes that the individual has made a conscious choice to leave, and the congregation has given up hope of reclaiming the individual to active membership.
11. *Evangelism*: "To evangelize is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men and women shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Savior, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church." This definition views evangelism as process more than event
12. *Inactive*: An individual who once was churched but who has voluntarily chosen, for whatever reason, to cease participation in congregational activities.
13. *New member stabilization process*: The process by which the new believer is settled into the corporate experience of the church, both in participation and in distinctive Adventist lifestyle.
14. *New member*: A recently accessioned member who is within the first months of church fellowship.
15. *Non-member*: Any individual who is not a member of the Adventist church.
16. *Profession of faith*: A term that describes how a person may enter membership other than by baptism. Since Adventists affirm baptism by immersion, this term is reserved for those who have been baptized by immersion in another denomination and now choose to join the Adventist church by professing their faith, thus indicating they have accepted the Adventist beliefs and lifestyle.
17. *Transfer*: A new member to a local congregation whose membership has come from another congregation of the same denomination by letter.
18. *Unchurched*. An individual who does not participate in the spiritual life of any congregation except by rare attendance at sociologically occasioned events such as weddings, funerals, etc.

4) The Engel Scale for Measuring Discipleship

James F. Engel developed a scale that is a helpful measure for the development of discipleship. It shows the timeline of discipleship development and provides a framework for developing discipleship programs in a local church.

The Spiritual-Decision Process

God's Role	Communicator's Role		People's Response
General Revelation		-8	Awareness of Supreme Being but no effective knowledge of the gospel
Conviction ↓	Proclamation ↓	-7	Initial awareness of the gospel
		-6	Awareness of the fundamental of the gospel
		-5	Grasp of the implications of the gospel
		-4	Positive attitude toward the gospel
		-3	Personal problem recognition
		-2	Decision to Act
	Persuasion	-1	Repentance and faith in Jesus
Regeneration			New Creature
Sanctification ↓	Follow-up Cultivation ↓	+1	Post-decision evaluation
		+2	Incorporation into the body
		+3	Growth in knowledge and behavior
		+4	Communion with God
		+5	Stewardship
		•	Reproduction
		•	Internally (spiritual gifts)
•	Externally (witness, social action, etc.)		
Eternity			

5) What are the primary reasons why people drop out? Problems, difficulties, personality conflicts and unfortunate attitudes.

- a) **Problem No. 1** – The call of the world.
 - i) Friends, relatives, former lifestyle habits, examples of inconsistency in church members.
 - ii) Sabbath problems at work.

b) **Problem No. 2** – Lack of fellowship

Function	Ratio	Explanation
Friendship	1:7	Each new member should have a minimum of seven new friends in the church within the first six months.
Member/group involvement	75:100	75 of every 100 church members should be involved in a group.
New member group involvement	9:10	Nine of every ten new members should be involved in a small group.

c) **Problem No. 3** – Personality clashes with other people in the church. Personality clashes take many forms:

- i) “Old guard” “gatekeeper” traditionalists who do not really want new members in the church because it disturbs the power structure.
- ii) Church members who “lock out” new members and don’t even know they are doing it. They unconsciously want to “protect” their “church home” from “outside” influences, and they see this as a perfectly legitimate attitude in line with Christian “standards.
- iii) Intolerant church members who insist that new members must immediately meet their personal standards.
- iv) Impatience of church members with new member’s unfamiliarity with Adventist church practices.
- v) Unfortunate use of Adventist “vocabulary” and lack of common sense in dealing with new members.
- vi) Inability of the new member to find a social “home” in the church. “Locked out” new members is one of the most common reasons why people leave.

d) **Problem No. 4** – The pull of former lifestyles and the force of habit.**6) What do new converts not understand?**

- a) New members come from many different backgrounds and usually do not understand many Adventist ways of doing things. This includes:
 - i) The worship schedule of the Adventist church.
 - ii) The concept of “studying” the Sabbath School lesson.
 - iii) Clean and unclean foods and a healthy lifestyle.

- iv) References to Ellen White regarding just about anything that happens in the church.
- v) “Closed” Adventist social structure.
- vi) They do not understand Adventist vocabulary.
- vii) Someone needs to point out the difference between Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle and commonly accepted customs of the society they come from.

7) Building a retention program in your local church.

- a) The “personality” of your church.
- b) Retention ministries your church must have.
 - i) Confirmation class.
 - ii) Friendship evangelism training
 - iii) On-going training program for new members.
- c) Six ways to set up an assimilation and retention system in your church or district.
 - i) Confirmation class. A confirmation class deals with the essentials of Adventist beliefs and lifestyle.
 - ii) Spiritual guardians.
 - iii) Training system.
 - iv) Using Sabbath School as a training base.
 - v) Small groups.
- d) How to Schedule and Organize New Member Training Classes

The local church needs to include in its regular schedule of activities special classes for new converts. It is also beneficial for church members to circulate through these classes on a rotating basis. This is helpful for two reasons:

It allows the church members to fellowship with the new converts.

It is beneficial for the church member to review what is presented in the class for their own spiritual progress.

The best way to set up on going training classes is on a 13 week cycle that parallels the Sabbath School. The class for each week should be a complete unit. In this way anyone can enter the cycle at any time and continue until they have finished the cycle.

Some people in the church should be trained to run these classes. Do not leave it to the pastor, except as the pastor wishes to be involved. It is impossible for a pastor, especially of a large district, to even be physically present for training classes, thus the need for trained individuals to teach these classes.

Classes do not have to be given 52 weeks a year. Organize the system and then implement it as the need arises.

Keys to successful training classes

1. Make every class a unit in itself. The purpose is that people can enter at any time and leave when the cycle is over.
2. Organize teaching teams for the classes. Don't leave it to the pastor.
3. Rotate church members through the classes for their benefit and for fellowship with new members.
4. Have a carefully organized curriculum for the classes.

What classes should be available?

1. Bible doctrines.
2. Adventist lifestyle
3. Adventist history and church life
4. Discipleship and church involvement

8) What Happens When a Person Visits the Church for the First Time?

- a) How to say "Hello" without saying "Goodbye."
- b) What church guests look for.
- c) Who walks in your church door?
- d) Developing a receptionist ministry
- e) Using the "zone system."
- f) Red zone
- g) Yellow zone
- h) Visitors Sabbath School class.

9) How Do You Make Friends with New Converts?

- a) The friendship ratio.
- b) Involving new members in everything.
- c) Natural friendships.
- d) How much time and how long?
- e) Specific things the church must do.
- f) "Unconscious" things the church must do.

10) What Should New Converts Know?

- a) The fundamental doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
 - i) All new converts should take a special class on the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Special emphasis should be given to the doctrines of the:
 - (a) Sabbath.
 - (b) Unconscious state of the dead.
 - (c) Bible prophecies.
 - (d) The role of the remnant church in Bible prophecy. This is especially critical in Roman Catholic countries.

- (e) The Spirit of Prophecy.
- b) All new converts should know how the Seventh-day Adventist church is organized and how it works.
- c) All new converts should know the basics of the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church, especially as it relates to their part of the world.
- d) All new converts need to be instructed in key behavior issues and social conventions:
 - i) Personal relationships: Marriage, divorce, adultery, pre-marital sex.
 - ii) Personal lifestyle: Alcohol and drugs, smoking, occult practices, relationships to society and governments.
 - iii) Social relationships: Community involvement, wealth and poverty, work, medical issues such as abortion and euthanasia.
 - iv) Global relationships: Multiracialism, human rights, the environment, warfare.

11) What Kind of People Should New Converts Be?

- a) The fundamental elements of Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle
- b) Christian standards
- c) Health message
- d) Christian disciplines.

12) What Should New Converts Do?

- 1) Missionary training
- 2) Christian education
- 3) Life and work of the church