Conversion, Community and Caregenuity
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In a recent reaction piece entitled, "Explaining Trends (Especially Decline) in Religious Groups," Ronald Lawson critiques a study by the Pew Research Center which had researched the rise of the "nones" (no religious affiliation) respondents in North America during the 1990s.[1] After citing somewhat differing evidences of this trend from the Pew Research and Gallup polls, he turns to his own research into the membership patterns of three sectarian groups: Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists (SDA).

From his own study he found that Jehovah Witnesses only count those members who are actively witnessing as part of their official membership. This very conservative accounting of membership is qualified by the following statement. "But many others, most of whom have probably stopped attending meetings, which are closely geared to witnessing, continue to identify as Witnesses to census and survey questions; no doubt many more who once did that have ceased doing so."[2]

In other words, the Jehovah Witnesses have three different "membership" groups. Those who are counted on the official church roles, those who still consider themselves Jehovah Witnesses but not counted by the church, and those who were once Jehovah Witnesses but no longer would consider themselves as part of that group.

Applying this same rubric to the SDA church, he notes that while there are a little more than one million Adventist members in North America, "the number of people in church on a given Sabbath, it is about half that - and those include unbaptized children and visitors."[3] He then notes the results of studies made by Monte Sahlin:

> Monte Sahlin, based on studies in dozens of NAD congregations, estimates that 70-75% of the baptized members attend at least at that level, which leaves us with a quarter of our listed membership as not attending. However - note this well - he also estimates that the

[1] Ronald Lawson, "Explaining the Trends (Especially Decline) in Religious Groups," Spectrum, August 23, 2013. http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2013/08/23/examining-trends-especially-decline-religious-groups, accessed, August 30, 2013.
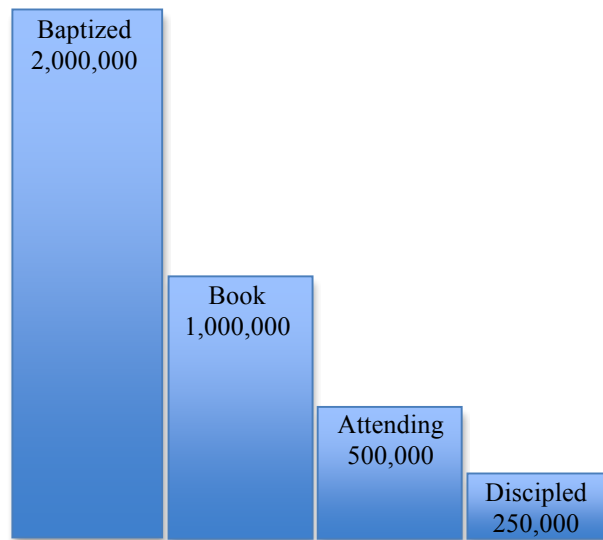
[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. This is a fairly normal percentage throughout the world field that the attendance in most SDA churches is about half of the book membership.

number of former Adventists in the NAD (that is, people who were once baptized and on the rolls but are no longer counted as Adventists in denominational statistics, and who no longer identify as Adventists) is about two million, twice the current membership.[4]

If we take the total people in North America who at one time or another were members of the SDA church as 2,000,000 and compare it to those attending the church on Sabbath as 500,000 then it could be said that about three out of four people are missing. Further delineation might suggest that if one would take the really active and discipled members of the local church (like the Jehovah Witnesses do), then no more than half or 250,000 of those attending are actually fully participant members.

In fact, according to Ellen Whites states that, not "one in twenty" that are registered on the church books "are prepared to close their earthly history, and would be as verily without God and without hope in the world as the common sinner. They are professedly serving God, but they are more earnestly serving mammon. This half-and-half work is a constant denying of Christ, rather than a confessing of Christ."[5]

The following bar chart represents this brief overview of the challenge facing the SDA church in North America and beyond.

Graph 1
Baptized, Book, Attending and Discipled Membership in North America

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ellen White, *Christian Service,* (Washington DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1947), 41.

While the numbers of the above graph need to be studied further, it does paint a rather clear picture of the challenge facing the SDA (and other) churches in North America and beyond. Although relatively many people are brought into the church through baptism, only about 25% end up regularly attending the church. Even less can be designated as truly fruitful disciples as brought out by the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-9.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the theological (conversion), sociological (community) and strategic (caregenuity) dimensions as a way of both understanding the possible causes and solutions to meeting this challenge. It will look at the factors of conversion and community as they apply to both the attending and non-attending members. The intent of the paper is not to make an exhaustive survey of the problem or its solutions but to uncover what is felt to be the major factors relating to the challenge and the possible solutions.

1. Conversion

Jesus said to Nicodemus, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). One of the basic assumptions of this article is that a thoroughly converted and discipled person will be far less likely to leave or impair the work of the church than those who have little or no conversion. Despite the absolute necessity and need for the transformed life, Morris Venden in the preface to his book on conversion insightfully writes how much this most essential element has been overlooked in the study and life of the church:

> This book is about conversion—the most neglected topic in the Christian church.[6] To the careful searcher, it is also the most important topic. Ellen White called it the greatest miracle.

> Recently, I checked with our Seventh-day Adventist publishing house to see how many books they have published on conversion. The answer was zero! I checked in the Southern Baptist Seminary library in Fort Worth Texas, and discovered only five books on conversion. Four of them are of extremely limited value. The first chapter in the books comes from the fifth book, the only good one.

> Then I went to the CD-ROM disk of Ellen G. White's writings. There I found nine thousand references on this topic. Wow! I concluded from what I found there that the conversion of our children should be the most important concern of

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[6] My own major professor from Fuller Theological Seminary, Charles Van Engen also said more then once that conversion has been little talked or written about in books dealing with church growth issues.

parents and teachers and that presenting doctrines to anyone is pointless until we know that person has been converted.[7]

In the parable of the sower, three of the seeds could be classified as "dropouts" or perhaps digress to "nones" as the previously cited article called them. It is only the last seed, "the one who received the seed that fell on good soil" by hearing the word and understanding it, that produced a crop "yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Matthew 13:23).

In her commentary on Christ's parables, Ellen White has much to say about the internal spiritual realities of both the bad and good seeds. She says that although the stony ground hearers who spring up speedily may "appear to be bright converts. . . they have only a superficial religion. . . . When the word of God points out some cherished sin, or requires self-denial or sacrifice, they are offended. It would cost them too much effort to make a radical change in their life."[8]

In the chapter on the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus Ellen White clearly underlines this radical nature of conversion, "the Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature. There is a death to self and sin, and a new life altogether."[9] Apparently this radical transformation of life is the exception rather than the rule, even when talking about those who actively serve God. "There are *very many* (emphasis mine) who claim to serve God, but who have no experimental knowledge of Him. . . . The only hope for these souls is to realize in themselves the truth of Christ's words to Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again."[10]

The person who has not made a total or complete surrender to God will not be able to endure the test of trial. "It is by halfheartedness in the Christian life that men become feeble in purpose and changeable in desire. The effort to serve both self and Christ makes one a stony-ground hearer, and he will not endure when the test comes upon him."[11] Just as the plant in the parable withers and dies in the heat, the spiritual life of unconverted church members collapses when trials come and they may lose interest in religion of the church altogether.

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[7] Morris Venden, *The Miracle of Conversion,* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2009), 7.

[8] Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons,* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 46-48.

[9] Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1898), 172.

[10] White, *Christ Object Lessons*, 48-49.

[11] Ibid., 50.

In contrast to the above fickle state of the believer, there are those who have fully committed themselves to God as pictured by the fruit bearing plant. "With the whole heart, with undivided purpose, he is seeking the life eternal, and at the cost of loss, persecution, or death itself, he will obey the truth."[12] While much can be said for the need of a more contextualized ministry and worship, there is no substitute for the thorough conversion to the truth which will generate absolute loyalty to the Lord and His requirements despite the lack of consumable elements at their local church.

This thorough conversion to the truth as a key ingredient to baptism and church life is strongly attested to in the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy and the Church Manual.[13]   In Table 1 is a summary of the seven baptisms found in the Bible listed by the Scripture where it is found, the "Minister," the "Baptized" and the "Miracle."

Table 1
Summary of Baptisms in the Old and New Testaments

Scripture	"Minister"	"Baptized"	Miracle
1Cor 10:1-3	Moses	Israel	Red Sea Opens
2Kings 5:1-14	Elisha	Naaman	Healed Leprosy
Matthew 3:13-17	John the Baptist	Jesus	Theophany
Matthew 28:17-20	Apostles	All Nations	Risen Lord
Acts 2:1-41	Peter	Diaspora Jews	Tongues
Acts 8:26-40	Philip	Eunuch	Spirit Took
Acts 9:1-19	Ananias	Paul	Sight Healed

After reading these passages the overall impression is given that baptism is a highly significant and solemn event which recalls the momentous reality of Christ's own life, death and resurrection as reproduced in the conversion of a believer and presided over by a duly ordained servant of the Church. In all the instances of baptism recorded in the Bible, there is a dramatic miracle which attended the service. This miracle was not only an indication of the presence and power of Divinity, but an *external* sign of an *inward* spiritual transformation.

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[12] Ibid., 60.

[13] The following section is mostly taken from an unpublished article, James H. Park, "Baptism, Ordination and the New Life."

Saul's physical sight was healed as a sign that his inward spiritual sight had been enlightened. Naaman was healed of his physical leprosy as a sign that his inner spiritual leprosy of pride and self-sufficiency had itself been healed as evidenced by his standing in the humble waters of the Jordan. And the cloud which overshadowed the Israelites at the Red Sea was the power which caused the waters to divide and provide the path to freedom.

I believe that these examples underline the fact that the public rite of baptism should and must include a miraculous, born again, conversion experience in order to be truly Biblical. Ellen White is clear in her own writings that both thorough instruction and deep conversion be integral to every baptism.

"All who enter upon the new life should understand, *prior* (emphasis mine) to their baptism, that the Lord requires the undivided affections. . . . The practicing of the truth is essential. . . . There is need of a thorough conversion to the truth."[14] Notice what Ellen White says here. *Prior* to conversion the Lord requires three things. The "undivided affections" (a complete surrender), the "practicing of the truth" (a Christian lifestyle) and a "thorough conversion" (a new life from above).

"The preparation for baptism is a matter that needs to be *carefully* (emphasis mine) considered. The new converts (notice what she calls them, "converts") to the truth should be faithfully instructed in the plain 'Thus saith the Lord.' The Word of the Lord is to be read and explained to them point by point."[15]

Even in her day she lamented the lax standards of the church when bringing people into church fellowship. "The test of discipleship is not brought to bear as closely as it should be upon those who present themselves for baptism. . . . When they give evidence that they fully understand their position, they are to be accepted."[16]

The Church Manual is also very clear on the high expectations the church should expect when incorporating new members. "*Only* (emphasis mine) those giving evidence of having experienced the new birth [conversion], and who are enjoying a spiritual experience in the Lord Jesus, are prepared for acceptance into church membership."[17]

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[14] Ellen G. White, *Evangelism,* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1947), 308.

[15] Ibid., 301.

[16] Ibid., 308.

[17] *Church Manual*, (Washington DC: Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010), 29.

"This is a spiritual relationship. It can be entered into only by those who are converted. Only in this way can the purity and spiritual caliber of the church be maintained. It is the duty of every minister to instruct those who accept the principles of the truth, that they may enter the church on a sound, spiritual basis."[18]

Notice that this last quotation emphasizes that it is important to maintain the purity and spiritual caliber of the church. Ellen White makes a fascinating comment regarding Satan's efforts to bring unconverted people into the church and their influence.

> It has been the *continual* (emphasis mine) endeavor of the enemy to introduce into the church persons who assent to much that is truth, but who are *not* (emphasis mine) converted. Professed Christians who are false to their trust are channels through whom Satan works. He can use unconverted church members to advance his own ideas and retard the work of God. Their influence is *always* (emphasis mine) on the side of wrong. They place criticism and doubt as stumbling blocks in the way of reform.[19]

It is very important to emphasize that the superficial conversion of new members produces two negative results. The first problem is that these members, because they lack deeper spiritual roots, often fall away like the stony ground or thorn infested hearers and become part of the un-attending statistics noted earlier. Secondly, and perhaps not as often perceived, the unconverted members who stay in the church often impede its reformation and advancement, especially those who eventually are moved into leadership positions because of their natural abilities.[20]

It might be asked, given the admonition from the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy and the Church Manual to only baptize completely surrendered, thoroughly converted and practicing candidates, what is the current practice of the SDA church in the world today?   In the introduction it was already suggested that the SDA church in North America has a rather low percentage of thoroughly converted and discipled people.

One of my PhD students from Rwanda, Phodidas Ndamyumugabe, did a dissertation which attempted to understand how a genocide between two ethnic groups happened in a dominantly Christian country with a high percentage of Adventists. After careful Biblical and

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[18] Ibid.,

[19] Ellen G. White, *2 Selected Messages,* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 159.

[20] For an obvious example of how an unconverted church member can impede the work of God see the chapter on Judas in the Desire of Ages.

historical research he says, "At the end of this study, it appears that thousands of Christians were involved in genocide because they were not truly converted."[21] He goes on to elaborate that from, "the beginning, many Rwandans had been pulled into the church through political, material or social security influence without deep conversion."[22] This nominality, coupled with social pressure, ethnic propaganda and the promise of material gain through participation in the genocide were primary factors in causing the killing.

I have been teaching in the Philippines for ten years at our Adventist Seminary and have both experienced first hand and received many reports from the field which clearly show that the push for baptismal numbers has often seriously degraded both the preparation of the candidates and the spiritual meaning of baptism. The result is often a severe dropout after the baptism because high numerical goals tend to produce a high baptismal number rather than a high discipleship.[23] "Connection with a church does not take the place of conversion. To subscribe the name to a church creed is not of the least value to anyone if the heart is not truly changed."[24]

George Barna has also found that the discipling of new converts is in serious jeopardy in the evangelical church. "Studies we have conducted over the past year indicate that a majority of the people who made a first-time 'decision' for Christ were no longer connected to a Christian church within just *eight weeks* of having made such a decision!"[25]

While it might be said that the lack of understanding and application of the twin theological meanings of conversion and baptism is an internal factor in the growing of disciples, the next section will outline the external factor of Western individualism which has profoundly affected the important aspect of community which is needed to retain and grow disciples.

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[21] Phodidas Ndamyumugabe, *Possible Causes for Christian Involvement in the Genocide in Rwanda,* (AIIAS Library, 2006), 297.

[22] Ibid., 297.

[23] The current program of the General Conference Secretariat to "audit" the church books worldwide had its initial impetus by Pastor GT Ng when he was the Secretary of the Southern Asian Division which includes the Philippines. The auditing of the membership resulted in a drop of nearly 22% from 1,064,375 to 830,946 members. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=D_SSD, accessed, September 1, 2013.

[24] Ellen G. White, *Evangelism,* 290.

[25] George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church,* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 2.

2. Community

      For my doctoral dissertation I compared and contrasted the cultural aspects of the closely knit New Testament community with the emergence of Western individualism of the 18th century which dominates the social landscape today. My major finding from that study could be summarized as follows,

> The communal culture of the New Testament stands in stark contrast to the emergence of the autonomous individual in modern society where each person is encouraged to develop beliefs and practices independently from others. This individualism has profoundly affected the methods of discipleship today where personal meaning and fulfillment are often sought in isolation from a worshipping community.[26]

      One of the major factors which influenced the intensely communal nature of the New Testament was the relatively tiny and highly dense walled cities. Compared to modern cities, urban areas in Paul's day could be characterized as "very small."[27]   In his well researched and influential book entitled *The First Urban Christians,* Wayne Meeks comments that because entire families were herded together into one room, the opportunity for any private moments in New Testament times was "rare."[28]

      Although Christianity began in the small rural communities around the Sea of Galilee, "within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement."[29] "Even without qualification, every competent historian has known that the Christian movement arose most rapidly in the Greco-Roman cities of Asian Minor, sustained by the very large communities of the Jewish diaspora."[30]

      The churches established at this time in the urban areas were termed "ekklesia" which originally referred to a town meeting of free male citizens of a Greek city. The term was used for the whole Christian movement (1 Cor. 10:32); churches within a region (1 Cor. 16:1; Gal.

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[26] James H. Park, *The Incorporation and Release of Disciples for Mission in Contemporary North America,* (Fuller Theological Seminary Library, 2001), 140.

[27] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christian,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 28. For instance the ancient city of Antioch had a population density of 117 people per acre whereas New York City has 37 people per acre.

[28] Ibid., 9.

[29] Ibid., 11.

[30] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins. 1996), 143.

1:2); local churches (1 Thess. 1:1; Col. 4:16); and "for the smallest cell of the Christian movement, the household assembly,"[31] (cf. Rom. 16:5, 19; Col. 4:15).

The primary importance of the term ekklesia is not to designate a building or purely institutional structures of administrative concerns. "Its chief importance lies in the way it stresses the centrality of meeting for community life: it is through gathering that the community comes into being and is continually recreated."[32] The primary focus of the gathering was to restore and build a worshipping, wholistic community.

The intimacy of the household "was the basic context within which most if not all the local Pauline groups established themselves."[33] Due to its limited physical size "a moderately well-to-do household could hold around thirty people comfortably."[34] Within this domestic space the Lord gathered a diversity of people from all across the Mediterranean area.

In an attempt to describe this community of believers and seekers, Paul used the metaphors of family (Gal. 6:10); adopted children (Gal. 4:4-5); heirs (Rom. 8:16-17); and members of the household of God (Ephesians 2:18-19). "Adelphoi, 'brethren' is by far and away Paul's favorite way of referring to the members of the communities he is writing."[35]

In addition, the church is pictured as a body, within which the Spirit gives a variety of gifts (1 Cor. 12) in order to edify one another (Eph. 4:11-13) in love (1 Cor. 13). The individual members relationship with one another therefore was internally nurtured through the fruits of the Spirit and externally manifested by the gifts of the Spirit. Through the Spirit, "those groups enjoyed an unusual degree of intimacy, high levels of interaction among members, and a very strong sense of internal cohesion and of distinction."[36]

Although no figures exist which would allow us to see what the "book" versus the "attending" membership was in the New Testament church, it could be said that because of the very strong social fabric that glued the congregants together back then, there was far less

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[31] Meeks, 108.

[32] Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 46.

[33] Meeks, 84.

[34] Banks, 35.

[35] Ibid., 50-51.

[36] Meeks, 74.

likelihood that the weaker members would be forgotten or "slip through the cracks" without anybody noticing and initiating a very active reclamation ministry.

In direct contrast to the intimate community of the first century church is Western individualism. Alexis de Tocqueville, when viewing the American scene in the nineteenth century, coined the phrase "The Age of Individualism." In the second volume of *Democracy in America* he wrote the following observation about the American society:

> Each person behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of others. . . . As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there no longer remains a sense of society.[37]

"Individualism lies at the very core of American culture."[38] Individualism in America is deeply rooted. One of the great founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson could say, "I am a sect myself," and the Revolutionary War hero Thomas Paine confidently asserted, "My mind is my church."[39]

Building upon this strong individualism, Protestant self-reliance taught that "the state and the larger society are considered unnecessary because the saved take care of themselves."[40] and when help is needed, the mythical hero is ready to come riding to the rescue:

> America is also the inventor of that most mythic individual hero, the cowboy, who again and again saves a society he can never completely fit into. . . . And while the Lone Ranger never settles down and marries the local schoolteacher, he always leaves with the affection and gratitude of the people he has helped.[41]

The ideal of rugged individualism of American culture was applied to the spiritual experience. The civil religion of America is not based on the Bible but is built on a type of Jeffersonian self-reliance: "The most quoted 'Bible verse' in America is: 'God helps those who help themselves'; 82 percent believe that is a direct quote from the Bible."[42] Being a disciple, as

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[37] Richard Sennett, 1994. *Flesh and Stone*, (New York: Norton, 1994), 323.

[38] Robert N. Bellah, et. al., (*Habits of the Heart*, (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1996), 42.

[39] Ibid., 233.

[40] Ibid., x.

[41] Ibid., 145.

[42] Barna, 225.

well as becoming an entrepreneur in America, demands "taking a sink-or-swim approach to moral development as well as economic success."[43]

One of the evidences of this steady journey inward was the decline of the nineteenth century camp meeting. An advocate for these regional meetings urged people to "come and settle on the ground at the commencement of a camp-meeting, and they will be better acquainted, and form more christian attachments by the time the meeting closes, than they would have formed in many years on the ordinary plan."[44] The silent passing of the camp meeting into American lore gave rise of regret by some.

> The ascent of individualism, and the waning of religious authority were often noted and often lamented aspects of modernity. The Scot Thomas Carlyle gave voice to this regret, when he spoke of "the cut-purse and cut-throat Scramble" of nineteenth-century society, "where Friendship, Communion, has become an incredible tradition; and your holiest Sacramental Supper is a smoking Tavern Dinner, with Cook for Evangelist."[45]

Perhaps there is no more fruitful place to search for New Testament community in the midst of this individuality is in the small group movement which has emerged as a significant and deeply studied phenomena within American life. Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Social Sciences and the Director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University coordinated the efforts of fifteen scholars in a three year study which sampled more than a thousand church members and nine-hundred non-church members of small groups.[46]

According to Wuthnow's survey, "exactly 40 percent of the adult population of the United States claims to be involved in a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it" (1994:45). The following profile lists just who is involved in small groups:

> Women are more likely to be involved in small groups than are men in all age categories and in all regions of the country. Older people are somewhat more likely to be involved in small groups than are younger people, controlling for gender, education, and region. College graduates are more likely than those with

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[43] Bellah, viii.

[44] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 218.

[45] Ibid. 216-217.

[46] Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994). 367-375; 395-421.

lower levels of education to be involved in small groups, controlling for other factors.[47]

According to the survey by Wuthnow, nearly everyone in our society wants to be able to share their deepest feelings, be in an accepting environment and have loyal friends that they can count on.[48] It is not surprising then that "the most distinctive feature of the contemporary small-group movement is its emphasis on support."[49]

Whereas eighty-two percent of those involved in small groups said that the group made them feel like they were not alone, seventy-two percent reported that the group gave them encouragement when they were feeling down.[50] On the other hand, the majority of those not involved in small groups said that "they already have support in more naturally occurring settings" such as an informal circle of friends.[51]

While the results of this survey are encouraging, society's core values of freedom of individuality have also affected the small group movement by redefining the meaning of community:

> Community is what people say they are seeking when they join small groups. Yet the kind of community they create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual.[52]

It is obvious that because of the powerful force of individualism which has laid at the very foundation of American culture, members of small groups "are often faced with dilemma of wanting a more solid, communal form of religious commitment and at the same time picking up the privatized, relativistic messages that infuse their groups from the wider culture" (1994:57). How this duality between individual beliefs and participation in a community is accommodated is outlined by the following remarks by Wuthnow:

> What some have called "privatized" values or "individualistic" spirituality is institutionalized in the norms of many small groups. We tell ourselves that faith is essentially a matter of personal discovery and that values are not absolute,

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[47] Ibid., 375.

[48] Ibid., 53-54.

[49] Ibid., 261.

[50] Ibid., 171.

[51] Ibid., 183-184.

[52] Ibid., 3.

universal standards, but discretionary matters about which we can have our own opinions. We then carry these views into our groups as well. A written text of some kind may provide a common framework, but the values it embodies are so general that everyone can read something different into it.[53]

According to Robert Bellah, this shadow of religious pluralism has been cast over the American consciousness since colonial times: "The American pattern of privatizing religion while at the same time allowing it some public functions has proven highly compatible with the religious pluralism that has characterized America from the colonial period and grown more and more pronounced."[54]

In summary, although the current small group phenomenon is providing critical emotional support to over a third of the society, Wuthnow states that the survey data is unclear "whether the deepening spirituality that people experience in small groups encourages them to move away" from a private and individual view of religion.[55] It is clear that small groups in America have trouble escaping from the strong gravity of individualism which permeates our society. People tend to think and act as individuals, even when they are involved with other people.

The modern church not only has to endeavor to overcome the sociological distance between its members but the very real physical distances of the sprawling urban centers of today. When we read that the New Testament community continued to meet, "every day . . . in the temple courts" (Acts 2:46) it must be kept in mind that not only the communal nature of the society contributed to its success but also the confined urban spaces. At that time the local meeting place was very easy for everybody to walk and gather together.

How times have changed. As I pastored in Los Angeles for twenty-five years I could say it was a very rare occurrence that I would meet a church member during the week. Many of the church members not only lived some distance from the church but also traveled in different social circles during the week. The next section will offer strategies how the modern church can overcome the theological, social and physical distances which highly contribute to the low discipleship levels of the SDA church in North America and beyond.

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[53] Ibid., 200.

[54] Ibid., 225.

[55] Ibid., 252.

3. Cargenuity

      Caregenuity is a term that I coined to describe what the SDA church has to do intentionally in order to meet the twin challenges of low conversion and high individualism that has plagued the church in most Western contexts. This section will give a list of fourteen recommendations the local and wider church could use to address the two major problems brought up in this article.

A. Recommendations for Conversion

      1) Develop a Biblical Theology of Conversion: As Seventh-day Adventists we endeavor to have a Biblical foundation for our theology. I believe that a renewed study of the theological meaning and importance of conversion as it relates to baptism would be a necessary first step in renewing this critical component in the life of the church.

      2) Examine our Current Practices: Having obtained a Biblical theology of conversion and baptism, we should examine our current practices of the preparation of candidates and make the necessary adjustments to harmonize our ministry with what the Bible teaches. It is important that both administrators and ministers be involved in the understanding and the implementation of these principles and how they might be put into practice within their individual contexts.

      3) Educate the Members about Conversion: Initiate a concerted denominational effort to bring the importance of the Biblical theology of conversion into the consciousness and practice of the members through the Sabbath School quarterly, college and seminary courses, worker's meetings and publishing in the church papers.

      4) Better Understand the Role of an Evangelist: The work of the evangelist is best when they are brought in to secure decisions and reap those already being ministered to by the church. With this in view, new modalities need to be created to truly reach out to those who are outside of the community of disciples.

      5) Develop Devotions for Busy People: One of the major components of nurturing conversion is the daily discipline of studying the Bible and praying. Within the context of our hurried pace within North America, it is often difficult for people to find the time for personal devotions. Perhaps MP3 or other media could be developed which could be used for people on the go in their cars to lead them in a personal devotional experience.

6) Construct Discipleship Ministry System: All those who are brought into the church through baptism or transfer need to go through a process of discipleship in which their own place and contribution to the church is understood and maximized. This can be done through gift testing, an interview of the new members to determine their background and ministry interest and ongoing training opportunities.

7) Seek to Make Reproducible Disciples: Finally, the goal of discipleship is not merely to grow individually but reproduce that growth in others. Those who are incorporated in the process of conversion need to grow up and learn how to reproduce themselves in others as soon as possible.

B. Recommendations for Community

8) Understand the Effect of Individualism: If individualism is one of the major influences which is affecting the growth of community-based disciples then pastors and members must give priority to understanding the cultural context and attempting to deal with this often hidden impediment to discipleship.

9) Intentionally Build Missionary Communities: Recognizing that even the small group movement has been infected by a good degree of individualism, pastors and members should begin to put in place the necessary building blocks which will create the type of balanced communities of faith set forth in the New Testament. As such, these communities will be built upon an abiding communion with God, a deep fellowship with one another and an ongoing effort to fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples.

10) Practice Supportive Accountability: Communities cannot be built upon capricious participation but must be molded by supportive accountability. The laid back and non-committal approach to religion that is rampant in our society must be replaced by a mutually agreed upon covenant which guides the community in its ongoing relationships with one another.

11) Build a Contact System: One of the greatest challenges of building community in today's urban environment is simply trying to maintain an ongoing meaningful contact with others.   While the emerging technology of computer mailing lists, e-mail and cell phones provide some help in this area, a caring and intentional system must be developed which will

bring and keep together the community of faith.   This contact system must especially be applied to newcomers and those who do not yet have a network of friends within the congregation.

12) Consider Pastoral Load: Given the many, many duties of a local church pastor who usually does not have a staff, I personally feel it is fairly unrealistic to expect one pastor to cover all the administrative, nurture and church growth aspects of the congregation. Organizations who expect growth must do more to staff for growth. In this respect, pastors need to have people who complement their particular gift mix.

13) Grow People not Programs: Some church growth strategies in the past have focused more on growing programs than growing people. Truly long-term strategies are people-based and focus on the communion and community aspects of discipleship which then grows into effective outreach.

14) Use the Social Networking Opportunities: And last but not least, the church needs to use the wonderful opportunity of social networking such as cell phone, SMS messaging, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. as a means of building community and ministry to people in real time. Social media overcomes the time and distances between people and can help the church get back to the ideal of the New Testament community way of life.