

BRING THEM IN, KEEP THEM IN

The Great Commission states, "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age. Amen.'"¹ In order to fulfill this mandate, the churches in West-Central Africa Division have carried out many outreach programs.

In the past, our method had two main approaches: 1) Our children, born into the church, are placed in baptismal classes where they are taught the doctrines of the church. On completion of the course of study they are baptized. Very few of these children leave the church after their baptism. 2) To reach those outside the church, we organize open air evangelistic campaigns. As a way of advertizing these efforts, we paste posters at the strategic spots of a given city where the effort is to take place, and distribute handbills. In some areas of Ghana and Nigeria, church choirs would sing along the principal streets of the town to draw attention to the campaign. Usually, handbills of the effort are distributed to onlookers as the choir sings along the streets. If the evangelistic effort is well funded, radio and television announcements are made to further publicize the outreach. Speakers for such efforts are normally seasoned evangelists either from the conference, union, division or even from abroad. The atmosphere of the meetings are usually very congenial, with good music from the choir and powerful messages from the preacher.

After say two or three weeks of preaching every night with only one night free per week, all those who respond to the preacher's altar calls are baptized. Children of church members who

¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Mt 28:18–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

complete their course of study in the baptismal classes join non-Adventist converts to be baptized on such occasions.

Our experience so far is that while our children that are baptized largely stay on in the church, the large majority of non-Adventist converts leave the church shortly after their baptism. For instance, in 1994, more than four hundred people were baptized in one such campaign in Lagos. The following Sabbath we could hardly get a hundred of them attending church! This occurrence is very typical.

WHY THEY DO NOT STAY

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the creator of mankind, likens the human mind to four types of soil in the parable of the sower found in Matthew 13:1-9. The sower scatter broadcasts seeds. Some fell on the wayside and were devoured by birds. Others fell on stony ground, germinated, but because of lack of soil, they eventually withered. Some seeds fell among thorns but the tender plants that germinated were choked and died. Fortunately, some seeds fell on good soil, germinated and grew to produce plenty of fruit.

Understanding the meaning of this parable is very crucial to knowing the effective evangelistic method that will make converts become permanent members of the church. "The wayside hearers are those superficial hearers upon whom the truths of the gospel have no effect."² Such people never decide for baptism at any evangelistic effort. "The gospel seed that falls into the hearts of stony-ground hearers finds enough soil to germinate, but the soil is shallow and the effect of the gospel is at best superficial. The gospel appeals to their emotions, and they are quick to react to it, but the impression made by it passes with the fickle tide of

² Nichol, F. D. (Ed.). (1980). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Vol. 5, p. 404). Review and Herald Publishing Association.

emotion."³ This class are the ones who are baptized after a campaign but they soon slip back into their old ways and leave the church.

In thorny ground the tender plants did not wither as rapidly as they did in the stony ground. Similarly, the experience of thorny-ground Christians progresses further than that of the stony-ground hearers. They make what appears to be a real start, and apparently they experience justification and the new birth. But they soon become 'weary in well doing' (Gal. 6:9) and do not 'go on unto perfection' (Heb. 6:1). Absorbed by the pleasures of this world and in the pursuit of its attractions, they neglect to weed out from the life those tendencies and traits of character that respond to temptation. . . . Many of the things that attract the thorny-ground hearers and absorb their attention may not, in and of themselves, be harmful. But such persons become so absorbed in this world that they have no time to prepare for the next.⁴

These are the group of Christians that eventually leave the church after a long struggle with the cares of this world.

The good ground hearers are those who are genuinely converted and forever remain so. They go on to produce plenty of fruit. "This refers to the fruit of character (see Gal. 5:22, 23). The fruit of the Spirit manifested in the outward life is evidence of a healthy Christian experience."⁵ It is noteworthy that "the 'ground' is 'good' simply because it yields to the plowshare of truth, because it responds to the softening influence of the Holy Spirit."⁶

Our not taking these four types of hearers into consideration in our past evangelistic efforts has resulted in poor retention of souls that joined the church. It is interesting to note that according to Ellen White, "the wayside, the stony-ground, the thorny-ground hearers need not remain such."⁷ They can all be made good soils. How?

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), 56.

The sowers of the seed have a work to do in preparing hearts to receive the gospel. In the ministry of the word there is too much sermonizing, and too little of real heart-to-heart work. There is need of personal labor for the souls of the lost. In Christlike sympathy we should come close to men individually, and seek to awaken their interest in the great things of eternal life. Their hearts may be as hard as the beaten highway, and apparently it may be a useless effort to present the Saviour to them; but while logic may fail to move, and argument be powerless to convince, the love of Christ, revealed in personal ministry, may soften the stony heart, so that the seed of truth can take root.⁸

She admonishes us to put this principle into practice by adopting Christ's method:

"Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.' "⁹

SMALL GROUP

Since 2009, we have tried to implement this method through the small group concept. Even though it has not been successfully established in some unions, it has proved to be very effective where it has been successfully established. Members of the church meet in small groups of between five to twelve people twice or once a week. If you add children, the number can be more than twelve in some places. Non-Adventists are invited to these groups to join in the study of a series of Bible doctrines, at the end of which a prospect will have been well prepared for baptism. Reaping efforts that may last for one or two weeks are organized to harvest such people who are ready to join the church.

We have observed that the retention rate of those who join the church through this system of small group is far higher than our previous method. Pastor Melchor A. Ferreyra, a field secretary in Inter-America Division has given testimony that before they started to use small

⁸ Ibid., p. 57.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942), 143.

group method in Peru, when he was the union president there, they use to lose eighty percent of the new converts who joined the church. But when they adopted the small group approach, they retained eighty percent and lost twenty percent.¹⁰ We have a similar result from our small group program. In the current Mission to the Cities program of the General conference, West-Central Africa Division has chosen Lagos as the city to evangelize and has tagged the program "Lagos for Christ." We have adopted the small group method for it. So far reaping efforts have been conducted at the end of every quarter, starting from the first quarter of this year, 2013. On Sabbath, November 10, 2013, there was a combined service of all the Seventh-day Adventists in Lagos. The venue chosen proved to be too small for the number of people that attended the service. Those who were outside were far more than those who got seats inside the building. Even at this, when all those who had been baptized so far this year in the Lagos for Christ program were asked to come out, a multitude trooped out, not including those who were outside and could not get seats in the building. The president of the union, Pastor Oyeleke A. Owolabi, has said that they now retain ninety percent of those who join the church through small group as against losing ninety percent when they were using the old method.

Thus we have proved the veracity of Ellen White's statement that:

The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers. Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others. Let them reveal Christlike forbearance and patience, speaking no hasty words, using the talent of speech to build one another up in the most holy faith. Let them labor in Christlike love for those

¹⁰ Melchor A. Ferreyra told me this when he was interviewed on the small group method he had successfully used in Peru when he was the president of Peru Union Mission. His union was adjudged the fastest growing union in South America Division at that time. The interview took place in Abidjan, when he brought the multilingual Bible of Follow the Bible program to WAD in 2010.

outside the fold, forgetting self in their endeavor to help others. As they work and pray in Christ's name, their numbers will increase; for the Saviour says: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven." Matthew 18:19¹¹

The small groups approach affords us the opportunity to mingle with prospects as ones who desire their good, show our sympathy for them, minister to their needs, and win their confidence. Then we bid them, 'Follow Me.'¹² It is thus that the wayside, stony-ground and thorny-ground hearers are made receptive to the gospel and for that matter, retention rate is increased greatly. Furthermore, because a relationship is already developed between the new converts and church members before their baptism, they feel very much at home in the church after their baptism.

CONCLUSION

When Ellen White says emphatically that "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people,"¹³ the emphasis is well placed for there is no other method that can give real success. To bring them in, and keep them in, we just have to use Christ method alone.

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¹¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948) vol. 7, p. 21.

¹²Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* .

¹³ Ibid.

