



Leave the Back Door Open

By Elder Jim Howard, Associate Director, General Conference Sabbath School & Personal Ministries

I was on my way to speak at a conference on “Church Member Retention” when I started contemplating that word—*retention*. Until a few years ago, I think the only time I had used the word was when I worked as an accountant. “Record Retention” referred to how long we were to hold on to boxes of financial records—3 years, 7 years, 15 years, etc. When the “destroy date” on a box had past, we would shred the items in the box and make room for more boxes.

As I thought about record retention, I couldn’t help but wonder if *retention* was the right bar to set for church members. Are we content to have our members sit on a pew and collect dust like those old boxes of financial records? Is our ultimate goal nothing more than making sure church members don’t leave the church?

> Leave the Back Door Open

We often see people baptized into the church and after a few years, or sometimes only a few months, they’re gone. Over the past 50 years an average of 4 out of every 10 new members have left the church. So for years now, there has been a steady emphasis on the importance of closing the proverbial back door of the church.

But again I wonder, should this be our goal? To bolt the door shut so that no one can leave?

As I prepared to speak on the topic of retention, I asked myself, “What has the church done to retain *me*?” I couldn’t really come up with much. And yet I’ve never seriously considered leaving the church. Through the years, especially as I’ve sought to share my faith with others, I’ve had to wrestle to know what is truth and to answer many objections against Ellen White and the church’s beliefs. In every case, the weight of evidence has made me even more confident in the Adventist faith. My own studies and labors have convinced me that this is the remnant church, which the Lord raised up, and that its message is powerfully true. So why would I leave?

To focus merely on retention, or closing the back door, falls short of addressing the real problem. We don’t want members to stay merely because of the attention we’re giving them or the environment we create for them—as important as these things may be—because these may be only temporary. We want them to stay because of their love for Christ and their commitment to the biblical mission and message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Here’s something that will keep them in the church even when the back door is left wide open!

> From Consumers to Producers

So how do we help new members gain that settled conviction that will keep them in the church? For starters, we need to shift our focus from *retention* to *discipleship*. Jesus once said, “Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33). Similarly, the only way to ensure that someone holds on to the truth is to train them to give it away:

“The more one tries to explain the Word of God to others, with a love for souls, the plainer it becomes to himself” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 354).

Ellen White encourages new members to begin sharing their faith immediately:

“When souls are converted, set them to work at once. And as they labor according to their ability, they will grow stronger” (*Evangelism*, p. 355).

“Let all be taught how to work. Especially should those who are newly come to the faith be educated to become laborers together with God” (*Christian Service*, p. 69).

“Every true disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary. He who drinks of the living water becomes a fountain of life. The receiver becomes a giver (*Christian Service*, p. 9).

The key to successful discipleship is for the receiver to become a giver and the consumer to become a producer:

“Not a few, but thousands of human beings exist only to consume the benefits which God in His mercy bestows upon them. . . . They forget that by trading wisely on the talents lent them they are to be producers as well as consumers” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 353).

➤ Making Disciples

For far too long, the ultimate goal of many churches has been baptisms. Once someone is baptized, the attention is shifted elsewhere. While we should never diminish the significance of baptism, we must remember that this is not our *ultimate* goal. The Great Commission is not to make members, but disciples (see Matthew 28:19)! After someone is baptized, there is still much work to be done in developing these new converts into active Seventh-day Adventist disciples.

A disciple is a follower of Jesus, and Jesus had this to say about those who follow Him:

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’” (Matthew 16:24).

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.’” (Mark 1:17).

From these two short verses, we learn that Christ’s disciples will become self-denying (“let him deny himself”) workers for God (“fishers of men”). Now notice what Ellen White had to say about self-denying workers:

“It is evident that all the sermons that have been preached have not developed a large class of self-denying workers. This subject is to be considered as involving the most serious results. Our future for eternity is at stake. The churches are withering up because they have failed to use their talents in diffusing light.” (*Christian Service*, p. 58).

The Great Commission is about more than making members through baptism—it’s about making workers. Members may fill the pew, but workers shed a positive influence, bless others, win souls, and ultimately stay in the church. Our job is not complete until the consumer becomes a producer; until the one caught by the gospel becomes a fisher of men. To make a disciple is to make a self-denying worker for Christ.

➤ Communion With God

So where do we begin our efforts to ensure that new members become active disciples? It starts with knowing the source of our spiritual life and power. New members should be encouraged to build a habit of communion with God through personal prayer and Bible study. They can only give what has first been received through their own relationship with Christ as a personal Savior.

Many newly baptized members have recently come through an evangelistic series or have been given a series of

Bible studies. It is easy in such cases for new members to get in the habit of looking for someone of greater experience to “feed them” spiritually. These must be taught that the only way to maintain spiritual life is through personal communion with God.

When members leave the church they cite reasons such as problems in the church, interpersonal conflicts, or doctrinal disagreements. Yet if the truth be told, the underlying cause was often a neglect of personal time with God. Many new members do not realize that a strong spiritual life is not ours naturally. Worldly thoughts and desires will return in force if we neglect to feed our souls with prayer and Bible study. Notice the emphasis Ellen White places on the importance of personal prayer for spiritual life:

“Neglect the exercise of prayer, or engage in prayer spasmodically, now and then, as seems convenient, and you lose your hold on God” (*Prayer*, p. 13).

“Prayer is a necessity; for it is the life of the soul. Family prayer, public prayer, have their place; but it is secret communion with God that sustains the soul life” (*Education*, p. 258).

Not only prayer, but the creative power of God’s Word is needed. We don’t read the Bible merely for knowledge, but for spiritual life itself! Consider the following texts:

“Having been born again . . . through the word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

“The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

“For the word of God is living and powerful” (Hebrews 4:12).

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Developing vital habits of daily prayer and Bible study must be foremost in any discipleship plan. Without the establishment of these habits, new members will become easy targets for the enemy:

“Satan well knows that all whom he can lead to neglect prayer and the searching of the Scriptures, will be overcome by his attacks. Therefore he invents every possible device to engross the mind” (*The Great Controversy*, p. 519).

➤ Fellowship With the Church

Another important building block of new member discipleship is fellowship. This can be incorporated into a discipleship plan in at least two ways—(1) emphasizing the importance of attending the meetings of the church; and (2) making intentional efforts to befriend and mentor new members.

Discipleship should include helping new members to develop the important habit of attending Sabbath School, church, and prayer meeting or small group Bible study. The relationships they build, especially through the fellowship of Sabbath School and other small groups, will form strong bonds that will be hard to break.

New members should be taught that attending church services and events is not only a personal blessing, but a *ministry* that strengthens the church. Notice how the apostle Paul emphasizes this point:

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24, 25).

Paul counsels us to “consider one another” by coming together for Christian fellowship. We are not an island to ourselves. Our attendance not only increases our own faith, but it helps to encourage and promote faithfulness in other members of the church.

Aside from the fellowship experienced in the meetings and functions of the church, new members will need personal attention:

“After individuals have been converted to the truth, they need to be looked after. . . . These newly converted ones need nursing—watchful attention, help, and encouragement. These should not be left alone, a prey to Satan’s most powerful temptations; they need to be educated in regard to their duties, to be kindly dealt with, to be led along, and to be visited and prayed with” (*Evangelism*, p. 351).

To be sure that this important counsel is followed, churches should adopt a discipleship plan that pairs more experienced members with those newly baptized. These mentors become close friends to those newly baptized, providing helpful instruction, integrating them into the life and mission of the church, training them to labor for souls, and helping them to develop strong spiritual habits.

➤ Intentional and Systematic Training

Discipleship doesn’t happen by chance. New members do not become self-denying workers by accident. They must be taught the importance of communion with God and fellowship with the church, and then they must be trained for service. Mentors should take new members with them as they serve the community, distribute literature, give Bible studies, and more. They should arrange for new members to participate in church services and department ministries. Just as an intentional and systematic process prepares candidates for baptism, an equally intentional discipleship plan should be carried out *after* baptism.

Without such a plan to mentor and train new members, churches will continue to lose newly baptized members out the proverbial back door. We can block the door, shut the door, or lock the door—but they will still find a way out.

On the other hand, if we help new members to develop vital spiritual habits and train them to be active soul-winners, they will become stronger in their faith and grow closer to Christ. They will bless the church and grow the kingdom of God for years to come. And we won’t need to close the back door to keep them from leaving—because they’ll be right where they want to be.

[A simple and effective plan for local church discipleship ministry can be found in the Discipleship Handbook. You can learn more about this valuable resource, which incorporates all of the key principles shared in this article, at grow.adventist.org.]

