

CHURCH GROWTH—BUT ON ADVENTIST TERMS

A concise philosophical outline for evangelism and church growth

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Church growth orientations

Church growth orientations differ. One approach, is to copy that which is bringing numerical growth in other places. If the XYZ church, in its place and setting, with its own approach to the Bible, with its constellation of members and staff, grows by 300 members a year, then we will copy it in our place and setting, with our constellation of members and staff. We hope to see similar numerical growth. Their music, style of dress, behaviors in the sanctuary, and so forth, are copied.

However, the whole set of variables cannot be copied or even closely approximated. Every community, every church, every worker, is unique. There is no formula that can be copied. At best, we may develop guiding principles.

Numbers, as important as they are, tell only part of the story. Promises of future growth tell nothing. What are the people learning? How is it shaping their lives? What is going on inside of the believer? Are we developing reproductive—or sterile—disciples?

A different approach

Below is sketched a different approach. A case for sound church growth is built on the following assumptions:

1. God, in the beginning of this movement, in a special, even sacred sense, led our pioneers. Our foundations in Scripture, prophetic guidance, hermeneutics, and goals, offer special insight for how we should do the work of the church—including growing it.
2. Central to our goals and mission is to facilitate the spiritual development of believers, to stimulate their desire and increase their capacities to faithfully and intelligently witness to

their faith wherever they are, and to aid them in engaging in deep personal preparation for translation.

3. The weekly Sabbath church service is not primarily evangelistic, but is about worship. The evangelistic impulse should always be present, ever developing, but its role in the church worship service is secondary.

4. Having said that, it is not enough to worship; if believers believe, they will demonstrate witness for their faith in both life and word. The local church will be involved in outreach as a combined church family and as individual church members.

5. The church will be wary when it adapts methods of evangelistic outreach. At minimum, that which is adapted must be genuinely compatible with Seventh-day Adventism.

This means

- doctrinally compatible
- compatible with Adventist polity (the way local churches, conferences, divisions have agreed to be organized and function).
- compatible with the sense of propriety both locally and in its conference.
- special church growth projects should be undertaken only by workers who have unambiguously demonstrated that the fruit of their labors is Seventh-day Adventist Seventh-day Adventists (see especially 1 and 2 above).

Five assumptions—detail

The **starting point** for successful Seventh-day Adventist evangelism is the conviction that what we are bringing to people is actually good news, actually a correct representation of the teaching of Scripture. We believe that God led our pioneers, that 1844 marks the end of the 2,300 day/year prophecy, that from that time the Investigative Judgment has been underway, and that God is cleansing His sanctuary. We accept that truth is knowable, that Scripture interprets

Scripture, and that the writings of Ellen G. White, because of the special guidance of the Holy Spirit, are a continuing and authoritative source of truth. We believe that with God's strength His law can be obeyed.

Church is about **maturing the believer**. This is manifest in an increasingly Christlike spirit, sustained interest and activity in personal soul-winning, in a burning desire for personal reform, and a steadfast preparation for translation. Christ's church cannot neglect spiritual growth and still anticipate numerical growth. Members who are growing in Christ will offer an attractive, winsome witness that is the natural result of inward transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit in the surrendered, cooperative believer.

The primary purpose of the Sabbath church service is **worship**. There are primary times for teaching (e.g. Sabbath School) and for evangelistic enterprises (special meetings), but the worship service is a gathering of believers to worship their God. Non-members are welcome, and the meetings of the church should always be conducted with a care for the presence of non-Adventist guests. Still, the worship service should never depart from its essence: it is a weekly family reunion between God and His children.

To become a Christian is to recognize one's fundamental connection with all other humans; as we need Him, they need Jesus, too. The love of God compels us to seek in ourselves and in them the full restoration of the image of God. Members of the church should be steadily improving the effectiveness of their **personal witness**. There is not only one legitimate kind of meeting or kind of outreach.

Doctrinally **compatible** means that methods and teachings are fundamentally in harmony with the 28 Fundamental Beliefs and the baptismal vow. There will be no neglect of teaching

tithing, nor attempt to divert it to the local church. The lifestyle standards voted by the world church will be sustained. There will be no reduction from 28 fundamental beliefs to eight or 16.

New members will have their membership according to the conventional Seventh-day Adventist plan for church membership; there will be no “creative” membership schemes. Special authorities or powers that differ from the pattern offered in the *Church Manual* will not be sought by the pastor or the congregation. The church board, nominating committees, etcetera, will be operated in accordance with the *Manual*.

Because the local witness of the church may be adversely impacted by inappropriate methods or self-presentation, “creative” evangelistic projects will only be conducted when the consensus of the churches local to the project is that the proposed “creative” effort is an appropriate expression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Special church growth projects will be conducted by persons who have a demonstrated record of winning to the church persons who join it and persist in its fellowship over the long term, and who demonstrate a faithful experience. Some “church planters” are really “church experimenters.” Sound stewardship of the resources of the church requires that they be spent in the advancement of that which is unambiguously the Third Angel’s Message.

Summary

This approach combines concerns for faithfulness, creativity, and unity. It would mean, we are sure, that some of the kinds of projects sometimes undertaken would not be undertaken. It promotes accountability, better stewardship of resources, and more “Adventist” results. If we are going to do the work of God, we should do it with the long-term health of the world church, local church, and believer in view. May our Lord find us faithful.

Biographical Note: Pastor Larry Kirkpatrick is a convert to the Adventist faith. Since 1994 he has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He holds degrees from Southern Adventist University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. His work has included research assistant for the Ellen G. White Estate, pioneering Adventist internet ministry, involvement in GYC, and presenter at the 50th Anniversary *Questions on Doctrine* Conference. He is author of the books *Real Grace for Real People* and *Cleanse and Close*. For many years his sermons and papers have been published on the internet. Larry and wife Pamela have served churches in Nevada, Utah, and California. The Kirkpatricks presently serve at the [Mentone church](#) near Loma Linda, California.