Introduction

Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church baptized over 5 million people between 2000 and 2005, 1.4 million members were lost during that time. And currently, annual membership losses (for reasons other than death) are approximately 28% of membership accessions.1 So this means every year, for every one hundred people who join the church, 28 leave it! That figure looks even more disheartening over time: in this century, the ratio of people lost to new converts is 43:100. It is estimated that 1 in 3 Seventh-day Adventist Church members in the last 50 years have been lost to church membership.2

Today, there are nearly 18 million Seventh-day Adventists around the world. That impressive figure is a witness to the good work of our mission-minded church, but, all too often, we get so caught up in the “drive” to add new members that we forget how important it is to nurture our existing members and reclaim our brothers and sisters who have drifted away.

Small-group Discussion

Organize the congregation into groups of about six. Give them the following prompt to discuss among themselves for ten minutes, and ask them to be ready to share their insights with the rest of the congregation.

Prompt: Search the Bible for texts from which to glean strategies the whole church family can use, in this place and time, to make church an environment in which current members are excited to be in fellowship with one another and lost members are encouraged to return.

If some groups are having difficulty coming up with relevant Bible passages to discuss, you may suggest the following:

- Hebrews 10:24, 25
- John 13:34, 35
- Colossians 3:16
- Ephesians 4:15, 16
- Acts 2:42

Large-group Presentation

Ask a representative from each group share the Bible verses that inspired their discussion and, in a few phrases or short sentences, share their ideas to make church a nurturing and meaningful environment for current and lapsed members. Take notes as you listen to the presentations, paying special attention to common themes mentioned by more than one group.

After the presentations use a chalkboard or flipchart to transform the strategies into specific actions that individual members can take to be part of this change. This can
be an interactive exercise as well: ask the congregation for specific actions they are willing to take that will make your church a welcoming and engaging place.

For example, a group may find inspiration in the advice of Hebrews 10:25: “not neglecting to meet together, . . . but encouraging one another” (NRSV). Their recommended strategy might be that the church be more proactive in encouraging and promoting fellowship activities besides regular Sabbath services. A good specific action for individual members would be to pledge to attend at least 75 percent of this year’s mid-week prayer meetings (or other similar event) and find a friend to attend with them.

Conclusion

The General Conference’s official statement on conserving church membership indicates three factors absolutely essential to keeping members in church. A member is weakened if they are missing even one of these factors, but if they are missing two it will almost certainly result in leaving the church. The three factors are:

- They must be able to articulate their beliefs
- They must engage in a personally meaningful ministry
- They must have friends within the congregation

We can see that none of these factors depend on one member alone, but are connected to the rest of the church family and to the church as an organization. A church that (1) preaches substantive messages about Christian beliefs, (2) offers diverse and appealing ministries and volunteer opportunities, and (3) has members who interact with each other as friends is a church that not only survives, but thrives! Let’s all pledge today to do what we can to keep our church a place where people love to come for worship and fellowship.

Hymns

348 – “The Church Has One Foundation”
572 – “Give of Your Best to the Master”
326 – “Open My Eyes That I May See”
574 – “O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee”