

## COOL TOOLS FOR SABBATH SCHOOL

# Connectors for Christ

I watched her walk into our church alone. Sabbath School was in progress, and the young woman with short dark hair and dressed in a pantsuit took a seat by herself midway between the front and back of the sanctuary.

She had a professional look about her. I guessed her age as between 38 and 42. She didn't seem to know anyone—and no one spoke to her.

Toward the end of the service, she went out through a side door. *Perhaps she's going to the bathroom*, I thought. But then after a few more moments I thought, *Maybe not*. I slipped out to try to find her. She wasn't in the lobby, so I asked two of our male members who were chatting there, "Did you fellows see a dark-haired lady in a pantsuit come through here in the last few minutes?"

"Oh, yeah," one of them said. "Someone like that just left."

I raced out into the parking lot, but I was too late. She was gone. Sadly, I returned to the lobby.

"Did you guys talk to that lady?"

"No."

"Just to let you know, she was a visitor," I said to them, "and nobody else talked with her either."

"Oh, sorry," they said, as they returned to their conversation.

Who was this young woman? What was she looking for? Why did she arrive late and leave early? What was going on in her life that caused her to visit our Sabbath School? I never found out the answers to those questions. I watched for her for months, but never saw her again. As far as I know, she never returned.

### Why It Matters

Why do I feel so strongly about the fact that she was able to visit our Sabbath School and leave with no one speaking to her? Perhaps because during my 16 years out of the church, when I would occasionally visit a local church, not much connectedness happened for me either once I got past the greeters. Most of the time I was lost in church.

The majority of those who *visit* our Sabbath Schools are experiencing some kind of crisis in their lives. And if they don't experience some warm connectedness with members when they drop in, they simply won't come back. They may be dressed extremely well and look as if they're doing fine, but most are dealing with some form of pain. Actor Jim Carrey underscored this point recently when he said,

"If we all acted the way we really felt, four out of eight people at a dinner table would be sitting there sobbing."

If you'd like to enhance the environment of your Sabbath School so that your visitors will experience what I call a foretaste of heaven, consider becoming a "Connector for Christ." Unlike the greeters who usually have time for only brief encounters, a Connector can be anyone in Sabbath School who is willing to encounter people on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Some of these encounters will be brief, others deeper. The visitor's response and body language will tell how much of an encounter he or she desires. But our vision for Connectors is that visitors will see and experience so much warmth and fellowship during their visit that they can't help wanting to come back, wanting to become an active part of Sabbath School themselves.

### The Art of Connecting

The following eight points will help anyone who wants to be a Connector to get started.

1. *Make eye contact with your visitors.* Walk down a sidewalk or a grocery store aisle and you'll observe that most people don't make eye contact with you. So when you and I *do* make eye contact with someone, this is an unusual experience for them. It is even more significant if we smile at the same time.

Friendly eye contact carries all kinds of positive emotional connotations. Proverbs 15:30 underscores the point: "A cheerful look brings joy to the heart" (NIV). Do you want your visitors to feel love and connectedness when they visit? Make eye contact with them.

2. *Smile.* A smile communicates warmth, acceptance, and love. Look at two people who are in love, and what are they doing? They are smiling at each other and making eye contact *ad nauseum*.

The combination of a smile and eye contact is a powerful emotional connector. Smile at a stranger, and a relationship begins as he or she smiles back. Smiling offers another benefit too. Smile at someone when you're feeling lousy, and you'll start feeling



better also. Behavior modifies feelings. It's a psychological law.

3. *Touch your visitors.* There is healing power in a touch. What kind of touch? A firm handshake can convey warmth and healing. A squeeze on the shoulder or a hug can be nice, but probably not during the first encounter unless the person is your long-lost brother-in-law! We also need to recognize that not everyone wants to be hugged, so we must be sensitive to people's boundaries while at the same time reaching out to them.

Jesus touched people all the time—lepers, Peter's mother-in-law, children, all kinds of sick people. And they all felt better afterward because there was healing in His touch. Imagine the love of Christ flowing through you to every person you touch.

Appropriate touching helps people bond emotionally, often at a very deep level.

4. *Ask a few questions.* You don't want to grill your visitors, but a few pertinent questions can provide you with valuable information. Some examples: "Are you a regular here or are you visiting? Have you been here before or is this your first time? How did you happen to visit today? Do you live in the area? Where did you hear about our church? Do you have any special needs we can help you meet? May I answer any questions about our church?"

Asking a few well-chosen questions demonstrates our interest in someone and gives us an excellent tool for connecting with them.

5. *Practice listening.* After asking questions, suture your mouth and you will learn an unbelievable amount about your visitors: why they came and what they are looking for. Some expressions that will keep your visitor talking: "Uh-huh. Really? I didn't know that. No kidding! How interesting!" And if you're talking with a young person who tells you something really positive, you might say, "That is so cool!" unless, of course, you don't know what "cool" means!

Listening is hard work, but it pays great dividends in relationship building. Listen to your visitors and they will begin to bond with you. If more of us practiced our listening skills at home, we'd have stronger relationships there as well.

6. *Talk to your visitors with enthusiasm.* Your warm tone of voice can actually enhance someone else's mood. Your cheerful tone, along with positive words, can have a terrific impact on your guest. And, of course, word choice is important—and you don't have to have a postgraduate degree! *Rejoice* over good news someone shares with you ("We're backsliders who decided to come back to church"). *Sympathize* when hearing negative information ("We had a death in the family").

Proverbs 16:24 tells us, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (NIV). Ask God to give you the right words for your encounters before you leave for church. In Isaiah 50:4 He promises to give us "the tongue of the learned" (KJV) that you will "know how to speak a word in season to him [or her] that is weary" (KJV).

7. **Feed your visitors!** Food is a powerful social component. "Any chance you can join us at our fellowship meal afterward?" is one way to extend the invitation. Jesus gave us the example. He often fed people when He was here, right? "Breaking bread together" is a powerful means of forming an emotional connection.

Diane Ackerman points out in *The Natural History of the Senses*, "If an event is meant to matter emotionally, symbolically, or mystically, food will be close at hand to sanctify it." Few first-time visitors will join you in your home for a meal, but they'll be impressed that they were invited.

8. *Simplify your life if you want to connect with people.* Connecting takes time. If you're always on the run, you'll never have time to connect with people. Diane and I pray before leaving for church that the Lord will help us connect with the people He wants us to meet, and in just the right way. We try to arrive at Sabbath School a half hour early so we can connect with as many visitors as possible after they have gotten past the greeters.

Also, if you position yourself near the back of the sanctuary, you can connect with others who arrive after the service has begun. Your connection may of necessity be brief; perhaps just a handshake and a whispered "Good morning, nice to see you." But even that fleeting encounter will be meaningful to a person who's feeling lonely or isolated.

### **A Place for Everyone**

Sanguines, if you work at it, you will soon find yourselves connecting with five, ten, or even more people you don't know on any given Sabbath. Keep in mind, however, that this isn't a numbers game. Even one or two deeper connections can be just as valuable as a dozen.

For those of you who are shy and it's all you can do to connect with one person per week, know that over the course of a year God will have used you to touch at least 52 lives. And with each encounter the subculture of your Sabbath School will become a little more heavenly and you'll have an added measure of joy in your own heart.

**Mike and Diane Jones**

