

The *iFollow* Discipleship Series



# A Deeper Look at Your Church

*A new member's guide  
to being an Adventist*

by  
Dan Day

***i*FOLLOW**

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## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	vii
About the Author .....	viii
Preface .....	ix
<b>Chapter One</b>	
<i>I'm an Adventist now—so what's next?</i> .....	1
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
<i>Who are these people I've joined?</i> .....	19
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
<i>What do Adventists look like in the real world?</i> .....	41
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
<i>What does my church really believe?</i> .....	63

<b>Chapter Five</b>	
<i>What are we doing to make a difference?</i> .....	85
<b>Chapter Six</b>	
<i>I'm on this ride—but where is it going?</i> .....	103
<b>Appendix</b>	
<i>Adventist Translator</i> .....	127
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	149

*We are called out  
from the world; and  
we join together  
for worship, for  
fellowship, for  
instruction in the  
Word, for the  
celebration of the  
Lord's Supper,  
for service to all  
mankind, and for  
the worldwide  
proclamation of the  
gospel.*

# Chapter One

## I'm an Adventist now— so what's next?

Discipleship is more than getting to know what the teacher knows. It is getting to be what he is.

*Juan Carlos Ortiz*

**S**o, you've just become an Adventist. What an adventure you've begun! Let me be one of the first to welcome you to this particular community in God's extended family. It's a great place to be, with some great people you'll want to meet and get to know. I'm glad you're here—and eager to do all I can to make sure the experience is everything you want it to be.

Consider this book a warm hug and a friendly smile—followed by an invitation to come home for a Sabbath afternoon meal and lots of fellowship. First let me say that I resonate with your “newness” in the church. I came into the church as a young adult, with no religious background, so I know how it feels to stand on the edge of the precipice, looking around, wondering what it all means. At that point in my life I was excited about the future, eager to see what my journey with Jesus would bring. But I was nervous, too.

I had decided to join those I believed to be “God's people,” and I was glad I had—but the future was uncertain. What were the implications of my decision? How would it change my life?

How about you? Are you wondering if you've made the right decision? Are you thinking, “What have I gotten myself into?” Are you wondering how everything fits together and how you'll fit in?

The key is to remember that what lies ahead is all about following Jesus, and that as you walk that path you are in God's hands. Jesus is walking alongside you, and He is well able to help you navigate—and He wants you to succeed. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”<sup>1</sup>

If you've just joined the Adventist church—of all the churches you might have joined—you're here for a reason. God was in that choice. He wanted you here. He has something in mind for you, a ministry that is uniquely yours, something no one else could do as well as you. And He has been shaping you for that role.

**Our God is a God of freedom, and He invites, never compels. We are committed to the freedom of choice of every individual.**

Still, *you* made the decision to become an Adventist. You're here because you wanted to be here. So, there are some things you *like* about Adventist beliefs and practices. Or at least there are some Adventist people who impressed you. When I was baptized it was partially because I had an older sister who was an Adventist and she seemed so cool to me, so certain about what she believed. I wanted to be like her.

As we start this conversation about the church and discipleship—and what it all means to *you* as a new Adventist—we all start in a similar place. We share some affection for the church itself, and a desire to be part of God's family. But the fact that we have reasons for becoming an Adventist doesn't mean we understand everything. It doesn't necessarily mean that we've accepted every belief, or that we've adopted every lifestyle component.

You're at the beginning of your journey into Adventism; you will have questions and gaps in your understanding. Still, you're here and you're hopeful. You know there is a lot more to learn and you're eager to learn it.

So, let's see how it fits together.

*A Deeper Look at Your Church* is a targeted book. It aims to help you find your way through the maze that the church can seem to those just entering it. Things always seem confusing when you're new.

In these pages, we are not going to urge you to just accept everything by faith, regardless of how obscure it seems. We're not going to say: “This is how it is, buster, so *live* with it.” Our God is a God of freedom, and He invites, never compels. We are committed to the freedom of choice of every individual. After all, a church is a *voluntary* organization! Instead, we're going to take you a little

<sup>1</sup>Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV).

deeper into the story of Adventism and let you see for yourself who we really are and what we really believe.

Let me share a little of my story, which may be of help to you.

I was baptized after I'd graduated from high school (the only one in my crowd that *did* graduate, by the way). I had no Christian background, at all—and no interest in things religious. My mother and I (my dad had died long before) were not at the very lowest end of the socio-economic scale, I suppose, but we had it in sight. We lived on welfare, in government housing, and I spent most of my time running with a “gang” (for lack of a better term) who remained just one step ahead of the law—most of the time.

At any rate, when my mother managed to find a new husband (an old guy who didn't much like me), I wasn't particularly surprised when she informed me that there wouldn't be a place for me in her new home. I was out on my ear at age sixteen. I was extremely blessed, though, in that an older sister, Nancy—the one who was an Adventist—offered to take me into her home for awhile, and helped me get a job cutting up, drying out, and packing onions at a local factory.

In my sister's home I was exposed to *The Bible Stories*, to Christian radio, and

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## ADVENTIST VOICES PAST AND PRESENT



- When something fouls up, the objective person tries to assume responsibility to solve the problem. He isn't busy explaining; he's looking for solutions. He's not defensive; he believes that those who have a right to inquire will see him as he sees himself—doing an honest job of keeping progress moving. He doesn't waste his energy protecting his ego.  
Oscar Torkelson, *Signs of the Times*, August 1979, p. 6
- We're so deeply involved in different “ministries” to our local congregations that we have little time to really serve the people who are yet to be touched by the life-changing power of the gospel. But when most of our efforts (our time, our money) go to sustaining internal activities, it's time to remember that our commission is to “go and make,” not “stay and keep busy.”  
Stephen Chavez, *Adventist Review*, August 14, 1997, p. 6
- Sometimes we today allow little things of the world or sins that appear little and not too important to multiply and overwhelm us. They keep us from full surrender and consecration to our Lord. Like a spider's web they cling to us. But we must allow the Lord to brush away these cobwebs, lest they destroy us.  
R. E. Loasby, *Review and Herald*, August 31, 1967, p. 7



to the book, *The Desire of Ages*—all of which had something to do with my willingness to attend an evangelistic series her church was holding. I was surrounded by people who cared about me and wanted me to be part of their community. And the rest, as they say, is history.

So you can see why I would say that some new Adventists begin without knowing a great deal about the church. I knew virtually nothing about being a Seventh-day Adventist. I had been exposed to a few distinctive doctrines, and I had a fledgling relationship with Jesus, but that was all.

My sister took me to the campus of an Adventist college, where I informed the registrar that I was ready to enroll. I had no money and no academic preparation. They asked me what my GPA was and I asked, “What’s a GPA?” Remember, nobody else in my gang had even graduated from high school, let alone gone to college—and by this time, most of my friends were already in jail. Still, God opened doors for me, and I was suddenly a student. (When my GPA finally arrived, it was so low that they would never have allowed me in, had they seen it—which only affirms that God works in mysterious ways.)

I can still remember the scene, a couple of years later, when—still very rough around the edges—I went in and announced to the head of the religion department that I wanted to study to be a pastor. He was a serious and well-known figure in the church, who went on later to head the Ellen G. White Estate. He looked at me dubiously and said in his deep, resonant voice, “Dan, are you *sure* this is what you want to do?” He was quite sure it wasn’t what *he* wanted me to do.

The fact is, I didn’t realize the gap that existed between me as I was then and what it would take to become an Adventist minister. Still, in their generosity (or ignorance) the professors let me sign up for Greek and all the other ministerial classes. And, though it wasn’t easy, in a relatively short number of years I not only graduated from college, but I was also sponsored by a conference to go to the Adventist Seminary for advanced studies to become a pastor, with a commitment to give me a church when I was done.

When I arrived at the Seminary, the first class I took had 125 students in it, and I was sure I would flunk out before I even started. At the end of the class, though, they handed out only 3 “A’s.” I got one of them, which surprised me as much as anyone.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The class was taught by Raoul Dederen, one of the great theologians of the Adventist church. He must have seen something no one else saw in me—something I certainly didn’t see in myself at the time.



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## INSPIRED THOUGHTS

- The Lord of life and glory clothed His divinity with humanity to demonstrate to man that God through the gift of Christ would connect us with Him. Without a connection with God no one can possibly be happy. Fallen man is to learn that our Heavenly Father cannot be satisfied until His love embraces the repentant sinner, transformed through the merits of the spotless Lamb of God.  
E. G. White, *God's Amazing Grace*, p. 97
- Many long for special talent with which to do a wonderful work, while the duties lying close at hand, the performance of which would make the life fragrant, are lost sight of. Let such ones take up the duties lying directly in their pathway. Success depends not so much on talent as on energy and willingness. It is not the possession of splendid talents that enables us to render acceptable service, but the conscientious performance of daily duties, the contented spirit, the unaffected, sincere interest in the welfare of others. In the humblest lot true excellence may be found. The commonest tasks, wrought with loving faithfulness, are beautiful in God's sight.  
E. G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 219
- Words of cheer and encouragement spoken when the soul is sick and the pulse of courage is low—these are regarded by the Saviour as if spoken to Himself. As hearts are cheered, the heavenly angels look on in pleased recognition.  
E. G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 159

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How is this possible? How did I go from where I had been to where I had arrived? I tell this story to assure you that if God has a plan for you (which He certainly does) nothing can stand in the way—including all the supposed limitations your background provides. When we talk about discipleship, we're talking about some significant possibilities for growth! Don't allow anyone to tell you what you can't be or can't do. God is in the miracle business.

Even though obviously I'm a little biased—being someone who *chose* to become an Adventist as a young adult (rather than merely being born to it, as many are)—I must tell you that the story of Adventism is a great story, filled with remarkable elements and wonderful people. It is a fascinating story shaped by people with all the flaws and weaknesses common to humanity. We're a church, not an angelic order. That's why, while we're still starting out, we have to be realistic and candid about what you can expect to find in the church.

I don't know what your experience in the church has been so far—and I hope it has been great—but in your local congregation, you are going to find people with varied attitudes and behavior patterns, some of which you will appreciate, and some which you won't. They're just *people*, after all. Like you.

Bill Hull writes in his new book on discipleship,

Too many have been taught that faith means to agree to a set of religious facts about Jesus rather than choosing to take up their cross daily and follow him. This shredding of justification from sanctification has done great damage to the authenticity and power of the gospel. It has created a church where faith equals intellectual assent, and high commitment is the exception rather than the norm. Therefore, in the United States, the church continues to shrink in size, lacks relevancy because of moral duplicity, and preaches a gospel that produces more consumers of religious goods and services than disciples.<sup>3</sup>

The denominational setting Hull is describing isn't an Adventist church, but the situation it describes may apply to many Adventist churches today.

In the church you will find kind, loving men and women, filled with enthusiasm. You will be delighted to meet and fellowship with them. They will become your dear friends and you will wonder how you could have survived all this time not knowing them. Your friends in the church will enable you to survive some of the challenges that lie ahead. So make lots of friends in the church.

However, you will also find some in your local congregation with whom you just won't seem able to connect. You'll almost certainly find some people who seem bored and uninspired—and who don't want to do anything but sit there and take up space. You can't really read their hearts, of course, and you may be wrong about them.

You may even find some in the church who may cause you to wonder why they're there, because they're *against* whatever the church is trying to do. In fact, you may even find a few who are so critical and fault-finding that you'll think they are determined to take the church down. You may even wonder why somebody doesn't "do something" about these people. "They're a drain on the church," you may say. Or even, "They're dangerous."

And they may well be. But...

The "but" is important. I confess there have been times when I've

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<sup>3</sup>Bill Hull, *Choose the Life, Exploring a Faith that Embraces Discipleship*, p. 11.



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## RESOURCES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- Throughout, Paul was committed to a methodology for mission that emphasized the building-up of the Christian community. The first step for him was not to pull down or to uproot but to act in a positive fashion by laying solid foundations and planting carefully. Paul's approach assumed that everything he and his missionary associates and successors might venture to do was subject ultimately to God's oversight and judgment.  
Stanley H. Skreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness: New Testament images of disciples in mission*, p. 231
  - Jesus could not satisfy the *voxpopuli*. He outraged it. He rejected the "righteous" and accepted the "sinners." Or, to put the matter more accurately, the coming of Jesus is the shining of light (1 John 1:5) in which *all* are exposed as God's enemies, and *all* are accepted as God's beloved. Both the "righteous"—the representatives of religion, of morality, of social and political order, of sacred traditions—and the "sinners"—the "man in the street," the thoroughly "conscientized" crowd demonstrating outside the governor's mansion—are revealed in the final showdown as the murderers of God, and both are accepted as the beloved of God.  
Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An introduction to the theology of mission*, p. 50
  - Nothing *disciplines* the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing *transforms* the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition. It will devise subtle, religiously acceptable means to call attention to the service rendered. If we stoutly refuse to give in to this lust of the flesh, we crucify it. Every time we crucify the flesh, we crucify our pride and arrogance.  
Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, p. 130
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considered some of the people I've run into inside the church as dangerous. I've even asked the Lord why He was allowing them to stay in the church.

Yes, it is true that at times I've taken it on myself to instruct God on matters like this. Thankfully, the Lord has been more gracious and merciful with me than I have been with others. What I've come to understand, finally—besides the fact that the Lord really doesn't need my counsel on matters like this—is that He is well aware of who is and isn't really in the church and what is going on with them. And He is well able to take care of things His own way.

It is the very nature of "church" that it is filled with imperfect people desperately in need of God's transformation. We are disciples in process.

Our God excels when it comes to transforming people. Paul tells us, “Of one thing I am certain: the One who started the good work in you will bring it to completion by the Day of Christ Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> God is at work on even the hardest of hearts, and He promises us that He will achieve His goals. So we need to step back and allow Him to do things His way, in His time.

**There are people He is planning to bring into the church that need you to be there to deliver His message of love and acceptance.**

The church is not a rest home for saints. It is a hospital for sinners. It is where people come when they are looking for hope—often when they’re at the end of their rope. Some of them don’t know that hope is what they’re looking for—and we may consequently find them a bit irritating, at times—but God wants them in the church so that He can keep working on their hearts.

Which is also why He wants *us* in the church.

The simple truth is, God places you in His church because He has a mission for you. There are people He is planning to bring into the church that need *you* to be there to deliver His message of love and acceptance. A big part of becoming a disciple is discovering these people and ministering to them in Jesus’ name.

In the following story, you may capture a sense of how what one person does carries over to others—sometimes down a long line of good deeds—to accomplish God’s will.

Andor Foldes is now seventy-two, but he recalls how praise made all the difference for him early in his career. His first recollection of an affirming word was at age seven when his father kissed him and thanked him for helping in the garden. He remembers it over six decades later, as though it were yesterday. But the account of another kiss that changed his life says a great deal about our inner need for purpose. At age sixteen, living in Budapest, Foldes was already a skilled pianist. But he was at his personal all-time low because of a conflict with his piano teacher. In the midst of that very troubled year, however, one of the most renowned pianists of the day came to the city to perform. Emil von Sauer was not only famous because of his abilities at the piano, but he could also claim the notoriety of being the last surviving pupil of Franz Liszt. Sauer requested that young Foldes play for him. Foldes obliged the

<sup>4</sup>Philippians 1:6 (NEB).

master with some of the most difficult works of Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann. When he finished, Sauer walked over to him and kissed him on the forehead.

“My son,” he said, “when I was your age I became a student of Liszt. He kissed me on the forehead after my first lesson, saying, ‘Take good care of this kiss — it comes from Beethoven, who gave it me after hearing me play.’ I have waited for years to pass on this sacred heritage, but now I feel you deserve it.”<sup>5</sup>

One act of kindness or affirmation can change things, even over a long period of time. One person is in place to connect with another. It’s how God works, sometimes. And you are where you are because God has a plan. He may not reveal it to you, but it is there, nonetheless.

Do you remember that scene near the end of Jesus’ ministry where He was walking with Peter? At one point, Peter pointed to John, his fellow disciple, and asked: “Lord, what will happen to him?”<sup>6</sup>

Rumor had passed around that Jesus had said that John wouldn’t face death, the way the other disciples would. Jesus hadn’t said anything of the sort, and He clarified that with Peter, but then He added, “What is that to you, Peter?”

In other words, “What business is it of yours? It’s not your job to worry over the spiritual journey of other disciples; it’s your job to follow me.” Remember, this scene came immediately after Jesus had asked Peter if he loved Him, and then told him that the way he would show that he did was to “feed my lambs.”<sup>7</sup>

Our job as believers is to feed God’s lambs. It is not to worry about what God is doing in the lives of other believers, pointing fingers or blame (however tempting that may be). Lambs require quite a bit of care. They need to be nurtured and loved. That’s what we’re supposed to do for others, even those we can’t understand—we’re supposed to nurture and love them.

I’m describing some of the realities of church life because some new Christians begin with less than the needed generosity toward those around them. And because of this, the path to spiritual maturity they are walking can be significantly compromised, even to the point where they fall off the path.

Spiritual growth—as a part of discipleship—isn’t a smooth, even process. The path into God’s future for us is littered with potholes. Some of those who

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<sup>5</sup>Tim Kimmel, *Little House on the Freeway*, pp. 41, 42.

<sup>6</sup>John 21:21 (NEB).

<sup>7</sup>John 21:16.

**The church, as a whole, has not been as engaged as it might be in ministering to new members.**

don't seem so close to the Lord have fallen into those potholes. And it may be that helping them out of the pothole or putting them back on the path (and patting them on the back) is why God has us where we are.

Can you see how much better that would be than merely shaking your head at how unresponsive they are? Or mounting a plan to get them kicked out of the church? If God is driven by love and forgiveness (and patience)—and is willing to allow them to be in the church, even with all their flaws—how can *we* be driven by anything else? If

He is willing to give these people a long line of rope, how can we do otherwise?

Think about it. Your own line of rope may be far longer than you realize.

Why do new members need a deeper look at their church? The reason is that the path you're going to be walking is littered with opportunities to go astray. The simple truth is, not all who begin this journey continue it all the way. Some who begin with enthusiasm leave the path and drift away.

This is a sad reality, and we don't want it happening to you.

Why would something like that happen, given the enthusiasm of those beginning their walk? And why do some make it, while others fall away? These are tough questions that deserve careful consideration. There are as many reasons why people falter in their faith journey as there are people. But the church, itself, is often part of the problem.

The church, as a whole, has not been as engaged as it might be in ministering to new members. The truth is, many of us are not as committed as we might be in attending to the needs of new members, and we've not done as good a job as we should in being sure we're showing new members the path ahead. Neither are we as faithful as we should be at walking that path with you, to be sure you can lean on us when you need it.

Another problem is that many times we don't ensure new people become involved with the ministries of the church as quickly as we should. We often just let new members sit in the pews, rather than helping them discover their spiritual gifts and the ministries in which they could find real spiritual growth and meaning in their discipleship.

If you're just starting out in your own spiritual journey, I hope you will be there for those who come after you, regardless of how well you are cared for, yourself. Break the cycle. Reach out to embrace those just beginning.

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## OTHER VOICES



- If we should deal out justice only, in this world, who would escape? No, it is better to be generous; and in the end more profitable, for it gains gratitude for us, and love.  
Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Vol. 1*, p. 180
- I feel that we must always share love and encourage others. This should be a priority in our lives. When you are feeling down and blue, step out of your own little world and show love to someone else. You can always find someone in worse shape than yourself. You will be surprised to find out that this is a great “picker upper.” It’s amazing how much satisfaction is gained when you give love and encouragement away... Encouragement can come in many forms. Maybe a kind word, or a short note or even just a love pat on the back.... We will always have errands to run and work to do, but we will never know how much we can touch lives unless we just slow down and give some of ourselves to others.  
Kathy Frederick, *Life’s Little Lessons*, p. 37
- There are two other benefits to reproof that are worth mentioning. First, reproof forces you to focus your anger on the person who hurt you rather than displacing it on others. Second (as the medieval commentator Ibn Ezra points out), the act of reproof allows for the possibility that you can discover that the other person is in fact totally innocent. It may be that you misunderstood what was spoken and that there is no real reason to be angry with the other person. If you hesitated to reprove the one you think wronged you, those mistaken feelings of hurt would only fester.  
Michael Strassfeld, *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice*, p. 29

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In his interesting little book on church growth, *Help! I Want My Church to Grow*, Adventist pastor David Ripley writes about his process of discovering the myths that permeate our views of the church:

As I looked for answers and discussed the situation with many, I was told variously that the Adventist Church in North America is not growing because the members are asleep, lazy, selfish, secular, materialistic, and even because they lack spirituality. I do not believe this is so! A majority of the members of the churches I have been blessed to pastor are made up of sincere Christians who are willing to give of their time, talents, and resources for both their local church and the worldwide Church. And as I have become aware of the myths Adventists hold



and have challenged my church members to let go of them, I have been privileged to see God bless.<sup>8</sup>

Pastor Ripley has captured the essence of the matter, I believe. The church is filled with good people who want to do the right thing, both in terms of ministering to new members and supporting a vigorous, growing church. We want to *be* the church, in every possible way. We want to do God's work. Not everyone, however, knows what the "right thing" is—or just how to do it.

The truth is, the church is what we make it. If we want it to be a warm, loving environment that nurtures new members, we can make it so. We can be that sort of people. How?

**Be sure your own personal connection with God is free and clear, by staying in daily, open contact with Him.** Recognize the only disciple you can choose for is you! Living every day with God is essential to being His disciple. No plans for the church are of value except as we build them, one believer at a time. So, that means it starts with us. What the *church* "should do" can only be understood in terms of what *I* am "willing to do."

As a new Adventist, however, don't fall into the trap of believing that the church can be transformed by the earnest effort of a few "true believers" who band together on the basis of their superior spiritual insight. These self-appointed critics believe themselves right and everyone else wrong. Remember this: the Adventist church is God's bride. And since it *is* God's church, He is well able to take care of things. Leave it in His hands. What God needs from us, as new believers, is to press on in faith. Instead of joining the critics, we should ask God what He wants us to do. He has a work for each of us, and if we choose to embrace it, our lives will be filled with joy.

**Take time to look around you each day for someone who needs a word of encouragement, and then do something to help.** If you see someone who looks unhappy or lost, go to that person and share a little of the joy of Christ. It is so easy for us to get caught up in our own little world. The church is filled with people who could use some encouragement. They may not be in tears, but that doesn't mean they don't need a friendly word. My wife, Brenda, is a middle child. From childhood she was the one who took care of others. She felt she had to put on a smiling face, regardless of what she was feeling inside. So, even if she was as sick as a dog or feeling broken inside, you'd think "Miss Brenda" was having a great day. So, just because someone isn't scowling or in obvious pain doesn't

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<sup>8</sup>David Ripley, *Help! I Want My Church to Grow*, p. 17.

mean a word of hope wouldn't benefit.

Go around the church being a force for good. Welcome people and share with them how God blesses in our lives. What Paul writes to the believers in Corinth applies to each of us: "He comforts us in all our troubles, so that we in turn may be able to comfort others in any trouble of theirs and to share with them the consolation we ourselves receive from God."<sup>9</sup>

**When people begin to express criticism or accusation, shine the light of God's love into their lives.** Sometimes the most telling argument against criticism and accusation is a generous response. "A gentle answer turns away wrath."<sup>10</sup> People can get into patterns of criticism that they don't know how to get out of. They become so sour that it is eating away at their own lives, even though they are unaware of what is happening.

You don't have to correct people when they express defeated attitudes or begin to find fault. Just don't agree with them. Instead of confronting them, become a positive voice. Here is where many of us in the church make a serious mistake. Instead of simply smiling and showing the love of God, we feel obligated to point out to people the mistakes they're making. We want to reprove and correct, when what we really need to be doing is loving people. Be the gospel.

**Offer your services to work with others in the church to make the environment more intentionally welcoming.** Intentionality is important, and many of us give it too little attention. Work with a small group in the church to create patterns of welcoming behavior. If such a group doesn't exist, form one. Be intentional not just in the wider church community, but in what you do personally. Don't just hope something good will happen; be part of it. Lead out in it.

One of the most distressing realities of the church today is the degree to which we've all come to depend on a professional clergy to provide inspiration and leadership. In the early church, there were no paid pastors. There were no church-owned buildings. There were only home churches where small groups of believers came together. Everybody shared in delivering "the message." It was personal and spontaneous. And it captured a world.

I'm not urging that we sell our church buildings and stop training professional clergy (I'm not *crazy*); but I am urging that we rethink the role each of us could play in ministering to one another. Remember, the church is what we make it.

Why don't you—in your study group—spend some time talking about

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<sup>9</sup>2 Corinthians 1:4 (NEB).

<sup>10</sup>Proverbs 15:1 (NIV).

how you could make your church a place where new Adventists would feel welcome and engaged? Create some lists and identify some steps. Then, once you've done that, why don't you make each of those ideas a project for your group? Start something. As a disciple of Jesus, how can you help other disciples?

Now, one small group can't change an entire church, can it? Hmmm.

God will bless you as you find out.



## The Unity of the Church

As Jesus' ministry on earth was coming to an end, He prayed to His Father, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." These words marked His plans for the yet unborn Christian church that, as there is unity in heaven, there should be unity in the church family. "The unity of the church is the convincing evidence that God has sent Jesus into the world as its Redeemer. This is an argument which worldlings cannot controvert."<sup>1</sup>

- **Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.** To what is the church compared?

Paul does not suggest that all Christians should be treated the same. Rather, he insists that those in special need should be treated with particular care. In the political economy of God there is always room for the special treatment of those with special needs. In a society that respects only the strong and the successful, there may be a surprising grace here. Equality is not the same as uniformity. The only "sameness" in the church is in the depth of mutual concern among the members. In such a church, both suffering and honor are shared among the members. We recognize that only the most wonderful of actual churches even begin to approach this magnificent reality. But in ecclesial as in individual ethics, Paul's fundamental command is "Be what you are." The church is the body of Christ. Now live up to that reality.<sup>2</sup>

- **Read Ephesians 3:14, 15.** From whom does the church get its name?

*Foundationally*, the Church commenced with Christ, her Foundation (Matthew 16:18)... A church before Christ's *death* would have been an *unredeemed* church, a church before His *resurrection* would have been a

<sup>1</sup>E. G. White, *Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 620.

<sup>2</sup>Roger E. Van Harn, *The Lectionary Commentary*, p. 209.



## BIBLE STUDY

church *without the indwelling Spirit*, a church before His *ascension* would have been a *headless Body*.<sup>3</sup>

- ▶ **Read Ephesians 1:10; 4:16.** What was one of God's purposes in establishing the church?
  
- ▶ **Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-25.** What interdependence exists between members of the church?

We are all represented as being members of the body, united in Christ. In this body there are various members, and one member cannot perform exactly the same office as another.... Yet all these organs are necessary to the perfect whole and work in beautiful harmony with one another.<sup>4</sup>

- ▶ **Read 1 Corinthians 12:25, 26 and Galatians 6:1, 2.** What does the apostle admonish concerning the responsibility of church members to one another?

**Compare Matthew 23:4.**

**Compare Matthew 11:28-30.**

**Compare 1 Corinthians 1:10.**

- ▶ **Read Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:13, 14.** Through whom does the church become united?

<sup>3</sup>Herbert Lockyer, *All the Promises of the Bible*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup>E. G. White, *Testimonies, Vol. 4*, p. 128.



The universal church exists on the basis of what God has accomplished through Christ (cf. 1:3-14). In my view the most enduring legacy of Ephesians is the way it establishes peace, love, and unity as priorities for the church. The church is the place where peace is made manifest through the blood of the cross—the place where all barriers must be broken down (2:13-14). Love in imitation of Christ is the virtue that actualizes Christ's sacrifice and shapes community life (e.g., 5:2, 25). Unity is the product that results from God's interaction with the world. The unity of Jew and Gentile is God's mystery revealed in the world (3:4-6). Unity should characterize the smallest cell of believers—the household (5:21-6:9; see especially 5:31-32)—and extend to the universal church (e.g., 2:15-16). Through the unified church God's wisdom will be made known to the spiritual powers in the heavenly places (3:10).<sup>5</sup>

- ▶ **Read 1 John 4:7, 11, 16, 19-21.** What is the source of this unity?
  
- ▶ **Read John 17:23.** Of what does Christian unity convince the onlooking world?

Christ brings His disciples into a living union with Himself and with the Father. Through the working of the Holy Spirit upon the human mind, man is made complete in Christ Jesus. Unity with Christ establishes a bond of unity with one another. This unity is the most convincing proof to the world of the majesty and virtue of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>E. G. White Comments, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5, p. 1148.

*One of the gifts of  
the Holy Spirit is  
prophecy. This gift  
is an identifying  
mark of the  
remnant church  
and was manifested  
in the ministry of  
Ellen G. White.*