

## **FAMILY (OF GOD) MINISTRY: ATTACHMENT AND NURTURE**

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### Introduction

God has blessed us with three metaphors for the Church. We (the Church) are referred to as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the family of God. Each metaphor is useful for helping us understand both our relationship with the Trinity, and with one another. The following reflections, however, will spring from the concept of the Church as the family of God.

Two concepts that are getting special attention right now within the church organization are the concepts of “nurture” and “retention” of church members. Recent, careful auditing of church records around the world indicate that the number of baptisms into the family of God are seldom matched by the number of those new members who are “nurtured” and “retained” within the family. “Nurture,” of course, is a word that associates well with the concept of family. The intertwining of the concepts of “nature” and “nurture” certainly can be observed as new members join the family of God and are nurtured by fellow family members toward a new life in Christ and away from their inherited sinful natures.

The word “retention,” however, is slightly farther away from the connotation of family. “Retention” is often used in relationship to customer service. Customer “retention” is a worthy concept if we are attempting to retain consumers of our particular brand of religious goods and services. However, “attachment” might be a more family friendly term for the relational phenomenon we are aiming for with fellow church members. “Attachment is an emotional bond to another person. Psychologist John Bowlby was the first attachment theorist, describing attachment as a ‘lasting psychological connectedness between human beings’ (Bowlby, 1969, p. 164)” (About.com). Perhaps we will better “retain” members in the family of God when they

sense that the Church is a safe haven, a secure base, an entity which, like the Father Himself, is always there for them.

### Attachment and Nurture in a Postmodern Context

The Adventist Church, as well as other Christian denominations, is losing around 50% of their young people. Some researchers state even higher numbers. The standard forms of how we do church, evangelization, and Christianity do not seem satisfactory for the majority of the postmodern generation. There are many reasons why the situation is gloomy. The postmodern context for our young people includes a higher rate of broken families; disappointment with legalistic church practices; stagnant or almost non-existing faith of parents; media and peer influence; growing globalization; detachment from roots and moral values; growing individualism, conformism, but at the same time a growing need for authentic relationships that is not satisfied by the artificial coldness of church relationships; growing materialism caused in many cases by parents who feel guilt for not spending time with their children; and the relativism of the truth (Dudley, 2000; Cunningham, 2009).

We know that we are commissioned, as the Seventh-day Adventist Family of God, to introduce people to Christ and nurture them to grow as His followers. However, it seems apparent that we need to be more intentional, not about packaging our message as propositional truths or fundamental beliefs that will appeal to consumers who we then attempt to “retain,” but also in the context of lived out “Family of God” to whom they can become securely attached and where they can be lovingly nurtured. According to Ng, secretary of the world church. "Going, baptizing and teaching contribute to the accomplishing of the commission, but they are not the end in themselves" (Brauner, 2009).

Nurture and retention (attachment) should continue strongly after a person joins the Church family. The process of discipling, intentionally walking “alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip, and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ” (Ogden, 2003, p. 129) is an inevitable part of a bigger picture of Family (of God) Ministry—or discipleship. Discipleship is a matter of each family member following the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, daily as He shapes one’s life in community and sends one to disciple another.

### Discipling in Community

The process of discipling is reflective of Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The Shema is addressed to adult disciples—not only parents—in a specific religious community who are being commanded to have God in their own hearts and then to sit, walk, lie down, and rise up always in a frame of mind of intentional discipling. In the *Review of Religious Research* it was pointed out that it “indeed ‘takes a village’ to socialize a child religiously” (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003, p. 252), but that the family is the first village. Smith and Denton (2005) state that “a lot of research in the sociology of religion suggests that the most important social influence in shaping young people’s religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents” (p. 56). They concluded, “In sum, therefore, we think that the best general rule of thumb that parents might use to reckon their children’s most likely religious outcomes is this: ‘We’ll get what we are’” (p. 57).

If the “first village” is the family in religious socialization of the young, the rest of the village is the Church and all those associated with it. Goodliff says that in the postmodern society “family is too fragile an institution to bear the burden of responsibility we placed upon it” (as cited in Collinson, 2004, p. 194). Collinson continues to quote and to comment on Goodliff regarding the role of the church in the face of family breakdown in society. “ ‘The church, not the family, is the institution that primarily conveys God’s grace and is the community to which we

owe our prime allegiance.’ His belief strongly supports our contention that the household of faith, the discipling community, is ideally suited to the task of nurturing the spiritual development of its members no matter what the nature of their home or family environment. As the faith community with its multiplicity of gifts carries out the mission of Christ to the world, it can provide an effective environment in which children and adults are nurtured to grow and develop to the full extent of their potential.”

### The Family Dynamic of Church

“Every church is more than a collection of individual members. People in the church, as in any group, are intricately interconnected. They exist in a system that is much bigger and more powerful than the individual members. Each person both influences and is influenced by everyone else” (Richardson, 1996, p. 26). People in the church are part of a family. To belong to a family means to have the same DNA. To belong to the church family means to have God’s DNA, to become a child of God. The core of God’s DNA, the core of the DNA of every child of God, is love. In this context, family ministry should not be viewed only as another ministry or program that the church offers. The Church must become a family.

Some churches have understood this as a call to eliminate all age-segmented programs and create family-integrated intergenerational programming where family is the focus. The households become the basic places of nurture and evangelism where discipleship is lived in the everyday lives of the family members.

Other churches have responded to the call for family ministry by adapting the family-based model which maintains traditional age-segmented programs but emphasizes the role of the family. Family, physical and spiritual, is the basis of each of the church ministries and the place of nurture. Faith development does not occur through isolated programs but through the family

ministry that pulls all ministries together. An important aspect of this approach is the intentional training of parents and spiritual mentors.

The third family ministry model, proposed by Timothy Paul Jones and Randy Stinson, is a family-equipping model. The age segmented ministries and programs are seen as important, but they are rearranged to reflect the newly attained focus on parents as primary disciple-makers of the children. This model stresses the role of the church as well as the role of the parents in the spiritual nurture of believers. In the case of broken families and dysfunctional homes, the role of the parents is taken over by the church members who become spiritual parents of the new believers (Nelson & Jones, 2010).

Your church might be successfully using one of these models or may have an original model that fits the unique needs of your congregation. Without reference to the model used for your family ministry, it is important to remember that to attach and nurture a person in the church—to “raise” a child of God and help her/him to develop and maintain growing relationship with God—is not a role of the parents, pastors, youth groups, or church ministries, or even family ministry. The transformation of the person is the work of the Holy Spirit. However, God decided to share with us the joy that comes from nurturing people and helping them deepen their faith. He entrusted us with this sacred task. The danger of collective responsibility, the danger of the words “we,” “us,” “people,” “community” lies in the fact that it is often understood as “you,” “he,” “she.” The essential questions are: who are the people that are to be nurtured? And, who should go and nurture them?

Paul claims in his letter to the Romans that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All need to be “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23.24). This means that all need to “put on the new self, which is being renewed in

knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col 3:9-10). All need to be ministered to, to be nurtured, to be renewed through knowing God better, and through experiencing His love expressed in the loving actions of the rest of His children.

But who is to minister to “us”? Let’s try to put the question more specifically. Who is to minister to young children? Who is to minister to singles, to families, to the sick, to the elderly? Of course, there is a place for individual ministries and personal gifts that meet specific needs of specific groups. However, if the essence of nurture is active love, can we delegate love to a department, to a ministry or even to a specific person? Can I love the children, leaving the love for the teenagers and all other groups in the church to somebody else?

To love a person does not equal the absence of hatred toward them. It cannot be accomplished while being indifferent. Nor is it fulfilled simply by feelings of love. To love a person means to be actively and sincerely concerned and involved in her/his life. To love does not mean to fulfill all the needs of a person at all times, but it does mean to be available to that person, to notice her/him, to show love whenever I can. “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 Jo 4:16). One of the mysteries of God is that through loving our sisters and brothers, through touching the members of the body of Christ, we can touch Christ Himself and be changed for eternity.

### Conclusion

In *God’s Amazing Grace*, Ellen White states, “Find time to comfort some other heart, to bless with a kind, cheering word someone who is battling with temptation and maybe with affliction. In this blessing another with cheering, hopeful words, pointing him to the Burden Bearer, you may unexpectedly find peace, happiness, and consolation yourself” (p. 120).

As family ministry leaders and the members of the body of Christ, we are first of all responsible to minister to others, to set an example of love. However, God has given us special gifts and special calling to help to create a space for the nurture and retention (attachment) of all the members of the family of God, to help to create a place where children are welcomed, where young people can stretch their wings in safety, where families are empowered, where older members are valued—put simply, a place where everyone feels at home. We all need to be nurtured. At the same time, we all should nurture others. Only then will the church become “functional” as the Family of God—a safe haven, a place where each is loved and can love in return. A place where all are safely “attached” and “nurtured.”

As a result, the Family of God will be “prepared for the communion of heaven because they will have heaven in their hearts” (White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 421).

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