

Intervention Strategies to Curb the Exit of Adventist Members in North Rift Valley Field, Kenya

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Abstract: This study is about intervention strategies to curb the exit of Adventist members in North Rift Valley Field of the SDA Church in Kenya. Kapsokwony SDA Church was chosen as a case where critical number of members left the church for unknown reasons. Therefore, the study employed a case study design and used the interview schedule to receive information from 20 members. The study employed the thematic approach in analyzing data and established that church members' dropout can be overcome through innovative and live programs, regular visits, training and involvement of church members in church activities as well as engaging members in small group unit activities. The study recommends that pastors, elders and Sabbath School leaders should conduct regular visitation to church members. Sabbath School department should organize small group ministries for prayers and bible study programs which may inspire members to feel the sense of unity and bring them together for mission, which will propel the retention of members. Pastors and elders should train and engage new converts for them to grow, adapt to church environment and connect with God and people. Finally, church leadership should produce resources for witnessing the good news to others.

Keywords: Discipleship; innovative programs; training; involvement; nurturing; retention.

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Introduction

Nurturing is a process of making a new and even old members of the church grow spiritually. This is done by caring for and helping individual church members by provision of necessary spiritual food (Joshua 1:10-11; Acts 16:1-35, Philippians 2:25-29). Oxford dictionary defines retention as "continued possession, use or control of something." Nurture and retention of members are key elements for church growth.

Scriptures address the essence of disciple-making of Christ's followers after teaching and baptizing them. The Old Testament shows how leaders played a major role in discipleship activities which are closely related to nurturing. God used people to employ all avenues of protecting other people from apostasy. Examples are found in Genesis 12:1-3; 13:1-18;

19:1-29 where Abraham nurtured his nephew Lot. Likewise, Moses nurtured Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:7, 8).

The New Testament puts Christ at the center of the discipleship venture as scriptural evidence indicates that he commissioned his disciples to go, teach, baptize and disciple all people (Matt. 28:18-20). He managed to nurture 12 disciples and retained 11 out of 12 which is 91.6%. Therefore, his methods of nurturing and retention worked very well. The apostles emulated what their teacher Jesus did.

Peter nurtured several disciples like Silvanus and Marcus and retained them (1 Peter 5:12, 13). Barnabas made efforts to nurture and retain Paul (Acts 11:25-26). Paul did the same to Timothy, Silas, Sosthenes, and Titus (1 Timothy 1:2-5; 2 Timothy 4:8-13; 2 Timothy 2:2; Acts 20:27-28). He bade

them be examples to other people (2 Timothy 2:2). In a similar way, as we work to win souls, we should teach and involve new converts to fulfill the commission.

Discipleship is defined in various ways. According to Hull (2006), discipleship is the process of following Jesus. The General Conference Corporation of Seventh-day Adventists (2018) defines discipleship as the process of becoming like Jesus by spending time with Jesus. Discipleship is a spiritual journey of making other people know Christ, growing into an intimate relationship with Him. Discipleship is a way of making new converts to follow the ways of Christ and make the same remain in the same paths of Christ. By nurturing them, the disciples grows and at the same time they are retained. Discipleship and retention work synonymously.

While the bible is full of information about nurture and retention, this study concentrated on the backdoor exit of members in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North Rift Valley Field, Kenya. Evangelistic campaigns are done on yearly basis in many churches in the Field, resulting in baptisms but the newly baptized members drop out of the church in a short span of time. The danger of the back door was foretold by Apostle Paul who cautioned the church that men will rise up speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves (Acts 20: 30). In verse 35, he encouraged those in leadership to support the weak. Why support the weak? They would leave the church sometimes unnoticed.

From a pastoral perspective, lack of organized efforts to fulfill Christ's command of making disciples contributes to the loss of members. This study shows that new converts retreat to their old lifestyle after backsliding. To this extent, the church needs to examine the issue with seriousness and deal with it. Yet no research has been conducted in the North Rift Field regarding the back door exit of members where the majority are men. This study selected one church, Kapsokwony as a case study. In Kapsokwony SDA Church, records show that between the years 2015 and 2016, up to 85 members were baptized but 43 dropped out.

Literature reports potential factors for curbing the possibility of members leaving the church. White (1948) cautions that inactivity creates room for Satan to employ his devices. Therefore, newly baptized members need to be given tasks and responsibilities to avoid being idle and in that way

be retained. On the other hand, well organized worship programs accompanied by relevant sermons and beautiful songs attract both new believers and backsliders. Hull (2006) ascertained that new converts require empowering sermons and bible studies to develop them to maturity. When faced with difficult situations in life, simple sermons provide answers. Rainer (2014) states that church service should not be boring, lifeless, predictable and repetitive as such trends bring about a sense of members being bored which may motivate their departure from the church. Finally, Goodhead (2016) indicated that delegation as a principle is a major secret of rapidly growing churches. It further argued that lack of visitation could cause drop out. Therefore, church leaders should make serious plans to visit members for retention to be realized. Therefore, it was important to have this study conducted so as to curb the challenge of church members' dropout at the church under investigation. This study was guided by the following research questions: What interventional strategies can be used to curb the loss of Adventist members in North Rift Valley Field in Kenya?

Methodology

This study employed a case study design and used interviews to get data from Kapsokwony SDA Church. This church is situated in Kapsokwony town, Bungoma County, Western Kenya. The study used 20 church members as participants through interview. The study employed the thematic approach in analyzing data. Those who participated in the study were given freedom to choose the time for interview which lasted for to 10 to 20 minutes. There was privacy and confidentiality in all matters pertaining to the interview. No one wrote his or her name and participation was based on voluntary decisions. Permission from the North Rift Valley Administrative Committee (ADCOM) and the government local authority was granted prior to data collection.

Findings and Discussions

The results section was guided by the following research question: What interventional strategies can be applied to curb the drop out of members challenge in the North Rift Valley Field?

This research question sought to establish intervention strategies to curb the loss of men in Kapsokwony SDA Church. Twenty members were interviewed and reported substantial strategies which if well utilized, can curb the challenge of

church members drop out. Suggested strategies include innovative and live programs, regular visitation as well as training and involvement of new converts as indicated below:

Innovative and Lively Programs

Innovative live worship was cited as one of powerful intervention strategies to curb the departure of members from the church. Respondents revealed that worship programs in the church are boring. Worship service is prolonged, songs are dull, announcements are too long, sermons are too dry with many texts without clear explanations and there is lack of use of practical examples in preaching. The person preaching may lack vigor and may be predictable. Members tend to fall asleep; children move restlessly and other members come late.

This makes new converts stop coming to church for worship. One of respondents reported that “members wish to ascribe to a church that has innovative, live and inspiring programs.” Another respondent held a similar view that well-organized worship service accompanied by powerful sermons and song services attract believers to attend worship services and be active members. These views are supported by literature.

Rainer (2014), for instance, stated that church services should be active and live and that sermons should be relevant to daily life. This is seen in what Apollos, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures did. He spoke and taught the things of the Lord diligently. He spoke boldly in the synagogue such that when Priscilla and Aquila had heard, they took him unto them to expound the ways of God more perfectly (Acts 18:24-28). In the same manner, Hull (2006) ascertained that new converts require empowering sermons and bible studies to develop them to maturity. He further argued that when faced with difficult situations in life, simple and biblical explanations provide answers.

Regular Visitation

Some respondents held the view that church members require warmth and close-range monitoring in the sense that church leaders have to visit members, pray with them and encourage them to attend church worship and participate in church programs. Some respondents argued that members need special visits to their homes or places of work as an intervention strategy. One of the interviewees reported that “I joined the SDA Church from Salvation Army and one thing I have realized is that we members need special visits to our homes or

places of work. We need to be engaged in church activities.” This finding is supported by literature which reports that God visited Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and warned them of potential dangers in disobeying His commands (Genesis 3:8-16). Abraham visited Lot to nurture and rescue him from potential dangers (Genesis 14:14). Jesus valued converts and visited them. He made visits to individuals like Levi-Matthew (Mk 2:15) and others. In Luke 15:1-7, Jesus indicates that when one percent of the flock is lost, a good shepherd must search it tirelessly and relentlessly until the sheep is found.

Training and Involvement of New Converts

Respondents reported that small units and bands of prayers in church are of great support in holding new members. One member, particularly, held the view that new disciples require much training and engagement in church activities. They need to be involved for growth purposes and engagement in mission activities is the best avenue for their involvement. Jesus engaged His disciples in groups of two's especially the seventy (Luke 10:1-12). He bade the followers to be fishers of men (Matt 4:19). Paul trained, prayed and encouraged Timothy to train others (1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 4:8-13).

The careful training of new converts was an important factor in the remarkable success of Paul and Barnabas as they preached the gospel in heathen lands. Disciples therefore need to be trained in small units for a successful evangelism.

Sabbath School Units

Sabbath school action units can play a major role in curbing the church members' dropout challenge. Small units bring warmth, love and fellowship to the church. Everlyn and Richard Hibbert (1980) in Easterling (2020) held the view that where possible, organize people in groups so that they are closely linked to the groups they belong to. The study supports the idea that as the new converts engage in mission, they should be placed in small units for prayer ministry, bible study and other mission activities. This approach strengthens members and causes them to grow in faith. It helps them to be closer to Christ their Savior. Therefore, the church leadership should put emphasis on clustering members in small units for retention's sake.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concludes that innovative and live programs, regular visits, training and involvement of

converts in church activities and small group unit activities contribute to members' retention. Therefore, potential interventionary strategies to curb the drop out challenge include implementation of innovative and live programs, strong and regular visits and close follow-ups to new converts. Based on conclusions, the study recommends that pastors, elders and Sabbath School leaders should conduct regular visitation to church members. Sabbath School department should organize small group ministry for prayers and bible study programs which may inspire members to feel the sense of unity and bring them together for mission, which will propel the retention of members. Pastors and elders should train and engage new converts for them to grow, adapt to church environment and connect with God and people. Finally, church leadership should produce resources for witnessing the good news to others.

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