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By Russell Burrill
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Taking the Mystery Out of Guest Visits
By Elizabeth Anderson

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Idaho Conference Assists Pastors with CALLED Convention

Up to $2,000 is available for Idaho conference pastors to attend the CALLED convention for pastors and their families. Conference president David Prest says "NAD ministerial has pulled out all the stops to put together a first class convention. So we want to do all we can to assist our pastors to attend." The North Pacific Union Conference is subsidizing pastors $300 each and the Idaho conference is putting a package of $1700 for a total of $2000. Registration is now open for the June 28-July 1 event to be held in Austin.

Ideas, Events, Resources, Announcements

Parsonage Allowance - A U.S. federal court has confirmed that clergy can continue to claim the tax benefit for housing allowance, upholding a
Seventh-day Adventist Church-backed appeal against a lower court ruling that would have ended the so-called parsonage allowance.

**Peace On Earth** - The ABC Christmas special this year has been produced by the Voice of Prophecy. Recently filmed at the Spencerville, MD Church, the program features the music of the Adventist Children's Choir and the King’s Heralds, along with an inspiring message from Shawn Boonstra. Check our link for local broadcast scheduling.

**Previous resource links:**

- 3 Common Traits of Youth Who Don't Leave the Church
- 3 Childcare Options for Small Groups
- Questions and Answers About Women's Ordination
- Should Your Church Stop Having a Stand and Greet Time?
- General Conference Evangelism
- GenU.tv

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Creating a Logical Sequence of Topics in a Short Series Part 1

By Russell Burrill

Through the years Adventists have varied greatly on how many sermons should be in a series of meetings so that people end up joining the Adventist church. Back in the early part of the 20th century, our forefathers conducted meetings every night for 6 months with nearly 180 sermons. They felt that was essential. In the 1950’s evangelist Fortyce Detamore shocked everyone by beginning to conduct 3 week meetings targeted to former Adventists. Later that got extended to four or five week meetings.

For over 50 years the expectation has been that you need 25-30 meetings to cover the message and see people make lasting decisions for Jesus. I have written extensively on how to conduct that type of meeting.[1]

However, in recent years the time frame has shortened again with many conducting meetings of two weeks duration or a maximum of 12 sermons, counting Sabbath morning.

The question that surfaces with this reduced series is what subjects do you cover and which subjects do you leave out? The purpose of this article is to suggest a logical sequence for a 12 message series of meetings.

In Adventist Evangelistic Preaching I lay out a basic philosophical foundation for the order in which you place subjects. The reader is urged to read that book for a detailed explanation. The basic premise suggested there still applies to a short series. That premise is that there are three basic decisions one is seeking in an evangelistic meeting. The first is a decision for Jesus as one’s personal Savior. The second is an acceptance of the unique biblical message as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The third is the decision to become a part of the Adventist family.

That basic principle is what guides you in determining how you organize the topics for an evangelistic series, no matter how short or long the series is to be. This order does not and cannot change. Therefore at the beginning of the series you focus on leading people to Jesus, then on the basic testing truths and finally call for a decision to join the church and be baptized.

A short series operates on the assumption that the people who are attending have a basic understanding of the Adventist message. Perhaps they have been given Bible studies or have already been attending church. For this short series you assume that people are reviewing truths rather than being exposed to truths for the first time.

As you prepare this short series, you operate under this basic assumption. However you still must progress with people through the three stages. Because the audience already has basic exposure to the message, you should be short on stage one and two. Your primary focus is for the third decision to join the church. You cannot ignore the other two stages, but your whole purpose in the short series is for stage three.

There are various themes you can build as you put the series together. If you choose to do the series with a prophetic approach, then you must root each subject in Daniel or Revelation. If you choose another approach then you tie each subject to that approach. There are various ways to present the series in whatever format you desire, but you must arrange your topics in an order that leads people to Christ, to biblical truth, and finally to a decision to join the church.

Below is a suggest order of topics. This is one way to do it, but there can be others as well. I have listed the topic and then indicated whether that subject would be used to bring people to Christ, truth, or church. Remember the same topic can be used for different phases. It is all about how you use that topic.
Jesus as the triune divine Son of God
Salvation by grace through acceptance of Jesus
The Judgment beginning in 1844
The Law of God
The Sabbath
State of the Dead and Hell
The Apostasy (Daniel 7, Revelation 13)
The Mark of the Beast and Seal of God
The US in Bible Prophecy
The Remnant Church
The Ministry of Ellen White
A Final Appeal Sermon

Christ
Christ
Truth
Truth
Truth
Truth/Church
Church
Church
Church
Church

You will notice there are only two sermons on bringing people to Jesus because that is assumed since these people have previous contact. There are then 4 or 5 sermons on the basic message that covers the law, Sabbath and state of the dead. Then there are 5 or 6 sermons on calling people to join the church. Because of the short series your emphasis must be on the decision to join the church. That is seen in the emphasis demonstrated above.

Recognizing that people who would attend this series already have a basic background in the message as taught by the Adventist church, this is a possible order of topics that enables you to progress logically with these people to a final decision to join the Adventist family. In that sense this is a true reaping series.

Russell Burrill, Professor Emeritus of Church Growth, SDA Seminary, Andrews University

The clock in my car reads 9:30 as I drive into the church parking lot. There are plenty of spaces, so I park with the other vehicles clustered in slots closest to the only visible entrance. I’ve never visited a Seventh-day Adventist church, so I’m not sure what to expect.

I open the door to find that it leads to the vestibule. “Happy Sabbath,” says a smiling lady wearing a black and white suit. Her pin says “greeter.” She hands me a bulletin. Another woman wearing black and white practically skips up behind her and greets me with a hug and kiss on the cheek, which is a little awkward.

“Welcome. We’re so glad you’re here,” the skipper says. “Sabbath School is in the sanctuary,” she adds, putting her arm around my shoulder. She then guides me through a quick tour of the Bible classrooms and restrooms, which are clearly marked.

“Oh, there’s also a potluck after service today, so stop by. The food is delicious, filling—and healthy,” she adds.

After our pleasantries, I wander into the sanctuary, down the middle aisle and sit in the pews on the right. I peruse the bulletin, which shows the order of Sabbath School and church services and gives songbook numbers.

I look up and notice more people in the sanctuary now, but they’re all sitting on the left side. A few people smile at me, including the person standing in front that starts talking about the Bible, but no one invites me over. It feels awkward, but I just sit and listen as best as I can.

After the class, I visit the restroom and stop by a visitor’s table in the lobby. It has a few brochures about what happens when you die, having faith in Jesus and healthful eating. There are also some contact cards. Many smiling faces continue to say hello.

“There’s a sweet, sweet spirit in this place …” I hear a harmonious group singing when I walk back into the sanctuary. I like this tune, and the songbook words are also projected onto the wall—an added plus for a newbie like me.

The platform participants enter and begin the service—which is easy to follow because the bulletin tells me when to stand, sit, kneel and the like. The pastor stands (I think it’s the pastor) and gives the welcome. Then, I’m surprised when he asks visitors to stand and introduce themselves. His warm tone and kind smile keep me from running, but what a way to put someone on the spot! I share my name and city of residence.

The pastor then says, “Let’s greet our neighbors with a hug and holy kiss.” The musicians start playing a lively tune and everyone stands and starts hugging, shaking hands and singing. There’s a deluge of smiling Adventists telling me, “Nice to see you today!” “Happy Sabbath!” and “Be sure to stop by the visitors’ potluck after church!”

Then they collect offering—again! Why are they sending adorable kids to gather dollar bills on their way to Kids’ Corner? Why do they need two offerings? Maybe it’s to replace a roof, but I still think it’s a little tacky to use kids.

I’m shocked that I enjoy the sermon since I’m not really religious. It’s a solid, scriptural presentation about living like Jesus and the importance of studying the whole Bible.

After church, at least three more families invite me to the potluck. I go and the food is good. This church does seem to
value healthful living, but that’s something I already knew about this denomination. One drawback, though – I’m surrounded by people yet eating alone.

To be frank, the people at this church seem sincerely friendly, but it seems like they only say hello because it’s either their job as a greeter or because the pastor tells them to. To be fair, they were more talkative after service. Will I come back to this church? Maybe.

By the way, the name’s Jane. I’m a mystery church visitor.

**A (True) Tale of Two Conferences**

“Jane” doesn’t exist, but her experiences represent countless unexpected visitors that file in and out of Columbia Union church sanctuaries each week. In fact, Jane is a composite based on actual secret visitor experiences in Pennsylvania and Chesapeake conference churches.

Their active mystery guest programs are meant to raise awareness about the church experience from a visitor’s viewpoint. Aside from slight differences in implementation, the end goals of both programs are to illuminate the effective ways visitors are engaged from the moment they start looking for the church, and to shine light on the areas that may need improvement.

In Chesapeake, individual churches can opt in to Partners for Growth, the conference’s church expansion program. It started with nine churches last year, and the mystery guest reports are one component of the training.

Board members from participating churches attend lectures during a weekend practicum and look at the components of growing churches, like how they nurture and baptize community members. Near the end of the practicum, they’re also told about the mystery guest visit. When those results are revealed, board members review strong and weak points and vote on which areas to improve.

“The whole emphasis is on what it means to be God’s church in this world. It means to be salt and light,” says Gary Gibbs, Chesapeake’s ministerial director. “It means to give the message of the Good News of Jesus to our communities, and not just to turn the lights on on Sabbath and take care of ourselves.”

**Selecting Visitors**

Gibbs handpicks Chesapeake’s mystery guests at local Christian colleges and universities in the Washington, D.C., area, or at local secular colleges with religion and humanities programs. The Pennsylvania Conference contracts with Faith Perceptions, a Missouri-based company that helps churches evaluate the first-time guest experience.

Pennsylvania’s goal is slightly different. “What we’d like to do is … not necessarily change an individual church, but a perception over the entire conference,” explains Tim Madding, Pennsylvania’s ministerial director.

For example, he discovered most church members think their congregation is very friendly. “Some would even say that it is the friendliest church in town. What they don’t realize is they’re really just friendly to themselves. When they come to church, they’re coming to see their friends, their family, the people they know, and they unintentionally … ignore the guests,” Madding says.

Individual churches usually contract with Faith Perceptions for a predetermined number of unique, secret visits. The company’s minimum package consists of 12 “unchurched” visitors, who are staggered over three to six months, depending on the plan a church chooses.

According to Melanie Smollen, Faith Perceptions president, each paid guest will attend a service, complete a survey and
submit the bulletin, “which is kind of like a receipt showing that they went,” she says. “Once we’ve gotten all 12 visits in, we will aggregate that data using those responses from each survey, and we’ll put together a comprehensive report for the church.” She says this helps pinpoint strengths and areas where visitors may fall through the cracks.

Smollen says that what they are doing for Pennsylvania, however, is very different. For the past two years, Pennsylvania has commissioned single visits to various churches throughout the conference. The conference then condenses Faith Perceptions’ extensive report into a one-page summary, minus information identifying the individual church. “We [publish] that on the back page of the conference newsletter that gets sent out every month,” Madding explains.

**Learning From the “Stings”**

The reports are certainly getting a lot of buzz in Pennsylvania. Madding reports that when he visits churches now, members often want to know if they’ve hosted a mystery guest. “Some of the reviews have been a little good, some of them have not been so good,” Madding notes.

In Chesapeake, Diego Boquer, who pastors the Glen Burnie and Brooklyn churches in Maryland, says his members learned a great deal from their mystery guest reports. “Some things were confirmation [that] there were things that were dysfunctional and they just needed to be addressed in a very nice and loving way,” Boquer says.

Boquer says he understands those who feel a mystery guest’s report seems a bit unfair. “This is just one person’s opinion,” he says. But, he reminds members, “What about the hundreds of people that come only once and never come back? Maybe this one report represents a lot of those numbers,” he explains.

Facing uncomfortable realities through someone else’s eyes might be a blessing in disguise, Boquer says. It can alert members that “maybe we’ve been here for such a long time that we cannot see anymore through the eyes of a new person coming in. It’s our blind spot,” he says.

When the secret visitor evaluation was revealed at the Glen Burnie church, member Susan Newman said the report got her thinking: “Everyone is really a secret visitor coming in, because they’re making their evaluation even though … they’re not writing it out for us.”

Since Glen Burnie’s participation in Chesapeake’s weekend practicum, Newman has delved into the greeting program. She wasn’t comfortable standing at the church doors handing out bulletins and striking conversation out of thin air, but she learned about second-level greeting, which she says is more in line with her personality. Second-level greeters collect completed visitor information cards, which gives her information to begin conversations. She also works with the potluck ministry, dining with the new visitors or making sure they get linked with other members.

Newman also reaches out to visitors via text message during the week and invites some visitors for meals outside of church. Newman also found good friends along the way, including some who are now baptized members.

**Keep Them Coming Back**

“You can’t determine when your visitors are going to come,” says Gibbs. “You get one shot.” And, it can occur when members least expect it, but there are obvious signs: a new face in the congregation, someone furtively glancing around wondering where the hymnals are located, or someone looking out of place during familiar rituals.

While churches in both conferences tended to rank high in friendliness, some visitors didn’t see it until after the church service, while some reports indicated guests, like Jane, felt members only greeted them at the front door because it was their job.

Madding says he hopes churches will remember that, even if a worship service doesn’t go particularly well, “If those church members are friendly and connect with the guests, they will be willing to come back for another visit,” he says.
Gibbs says the visitor program helps churches realize “that we have a very good opportunity through what we do every Sabbath to actually reach out and win souls.”

He adds, “There are people coming through our doors, checking us out, and we have a great opportunity to keep focused on mission. … God sends people and we need to be alert to that and be ready to embrace them. … Bad weather days, good weather days, whatever’s happening, we have to have heart for the stranger in our midst.”

Elizabeth Anderson works for WTOP radio in Washington, D.C. In her spare time she enjoys entertainment writing, and "good news" stories that highlight the best of humanity. She also likes reading and writing articles that approach topics from non-traditional perspectives.

This article is republished with the permission of the Columbia Union Visitor. It appeared in the July 2014 issue

5 Tips for Creating a Visitor-Friendly Church

1. **Spruce Up Your Website**: “A church’s website is the new ‘first impression’ that visitors receive,” says Gibbs. “Therefore, it is vital that the website be attractive, easy to navigate and have current information.”

2. **Provide Clear and Ample Signage**: Not only should guests be able to easily locate your building from the street, but make sure they also know where to park and how to find restrooms, water fountains, sanctuary entrances, the mother’s room and classrooms.

3. **Explain Rituals**: Note activities that involve standing or kneeling. “Just make sure that you’re sensitive to the guest—that they understand what’s going on,” notes Madding. Also, explain how collected funds will be used. For example, “Please explain … why the children are picking it up and what this offering is for,” suggests Madding.

4. **Make Your Message Clear**: Pastor Boquer says it’s a good idea to “design our worship services in a way that we can encourage nonbelievers or people that are visiting for the very first time” so that they can easily understand the message.

5. **Be Friendly**: “You can have a worship service that just bombs … but if church members are friendly and connect with the guests, they will be willing to come back for another visit,” Madding explains. Also, assign first- and second-tier greeters to connect with guests during their visit—and beyond.
He was an unusual boy. The teacher was sure she had never seen anyone like him. If the other students were acting up in the class or out at recess, it was certain that he was not one of them. In all that he did, he manifested kindness and a tender regard for each of his classmates. He was different.

The teacher purposed to find out more about this boy. After school one day, when the two were alone in the classroom, she stated what a fine mother he must have for raising such a good boy. The boy replied, “No, my mother is dead.”

“Oh, she said, “Your father must be an honorable man. May I meet him?”

The boy hesitantly replied, “My father is dead also.” Behind a look that evidenced a deep hurt, the boy stated, “I will tell you what happened if you promise not to tell any of my classmates.”

“Yes,” said the teacher. “I promise.”

The boy then began to relate the sad events which took place during his childhood. A neighboring country had invaded his homeland and his father and mother—a prince and princess—had been killed by the invaders. Tears filled the boy’s eyes as he recalled his father’s last words. “Don’t forget that you are the son of royalty,” his father told him while the cruel realities of war separated the two for the last time.

The boy told the teacher how he could never forget those closing words, which were the springboard for all his actions. He purposed in his heart not to dishonor the name of his father and mother. Everywhere he went, in all that he put his hand to do, he made manifest that he was part of a royal family.

Note this quotation from Ellen White which sheds light upon this subject:
In like manner the Lord means that Seventh-day Adventists shall witness for Him. They are not to be hidden away from the world. They are to be in the world, but not of the world. They are to stand distinct from the world in their manner of dealing. They are to show that they have purity of character, that the world may see that the truth, which they conscientiously believe, makes them honest in their dealings; that those with whom they are connected may see that believers of truth are sanctified through the truth, and that the truth received and obeyed makes the receivers as sons and daughters of God, children of the heavenly King, members of the royal family, faithful, true, honest, and upright, in the small as well as the great acts of life. . . . Whatever is worth doing is worth doing well. Let us be faithful in the smallest duties, as well as the work requiring the largest sacrifice. Manuscript 47, 1898.

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