3 Common Sense Keys to Church Growth

By Jesse Wilson

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fruitful. But the pursuit of the next best thing in the church growth area can be amusing.  

Creating a Logical Sequence of Topics in a Short Series  
Part 2  
By Russell Burrill

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Revelation Round Table  
By Kevin Miller

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minutes of study and discussion I would interject with 30 minute presentation on the evening’s subject. The last few minutes the facilitators again led their tables in the study of the lesson. The evening wrapped up in an hour to an hour and a half.  

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A First for Pastoral Spouses
By Donna Jackson

Pastor, why not treat your greatest support and strength to a First?

At the June 28-July 1, 2015 NAD Pastors & Family Convention in Austin Texas, your spouse will be a part of the first convention planned for ministerial spouses from 57 conferences and two missions! A spiritually-enriching and fun program is being planned that will focus on the call, support, and empowerment of ministerial spouses.

In addition to various seminars for spouses, the general sessions will stimulate connection through small table discussions, learning at ministry expo activity stations, and relaxed enjoyment at a fine arts celebration.

To register your spouse soon, go to www.nadpastorsconvention.com. It will be a gift that keeps giving!

Ideas, Events, Resources, Announcements

Adventist WestPoint - Early-bird registration begins now of the April 5 - 8, 2015 Adventist WestPoint that will be held at the Marriott Mission
Valley in San Diego, CA. Presenters this year include Elder Dan Jackson and Dr. Jon Paulien. Seminar topics include discipleship, reaching new people-groups, biblical studies, evangelistic methods, training and motivating volunteers, and using the latest technology effectively in your church. And as always, there will be great preaching and music!

5 Reasons a Pastor's Sabbatical Blesses Everyone - Pastors live in a world of very unique challenges that can drain their batteries over time. Thom Rainer shares reasons why a sabbatical blesses both the pastor and the congregation.

Previous resource links:

- Parsonage Allowance
- Voice of Prophecy: Peace On Earth
- 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?
The problem with common sense is that it’s not quite as common as it used to be. This is particularly true in the area of church growth and evangelism. Most pastors understandably and appropriately want their churches to grow. Despite the pushback that evangelism gets these days for being a “numbers game,” there is no dispute that Christ calls us to be both faithful and fruitful. But the pursuit of the next best thing in the church growth area can be amusing.

I walked into my home library one Sunday looking for a particular book and I almost laughed at the number of church growth books that offered the “real answer” to our church growth challenges:

- The Turnaround Church
- The Breakout Church
- The Monday Morning Church
- The Word and Power Church
- The Disciple Making Church
- The Organic Church
- The Church That Works
- The Missional Church
- The Sticky Church (Really?)

And those were just the books that I saw on one shelf in my home library! My real library is at the university where I can wade through another ton of guaranteed solutions like: The U Turn Church, The Un-Church, and my all time favorite title, Simple Church – two words that were never meant to go together!!!

Now I have an explanation. I’m a practical theologian by trade and church growth is my specialty area. (That’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it.) But as a pastor and now a trainer of pastors, I am under a constant barrage of books that promise to answer all evangelism and church growth problems in a few simple steps. Don’t believe it. Think diet books. They all promise a miracle. They all rarely work. They all have the same thing in common. If you exercise regularly, eat moderately, and get plenty of rest – they work. What a surprise! Another victory for common sense.

Since 2012 Forbes Magazine and other media outlets have noted that the Adventist Church is the fastest growing church in America. A 2.5% growth rate is nothing to write home about, but it’s clear that we are not the only group that’s struggling to expand the kingdom. A number of reasons were cited to explain the growth. Our emphasis on health and simple living were sited of course. But USA Today noted that one obvious reason was that a significant percentage of Adventist Churches conducted revivals, reaping meetings, or evangelistic campaigns during the calendar year. Now that’s a thought. If you want to have a successful evangelistic campaign, you must conduct a campaign! Common sense.

I am convinced that much of what we need to know about church growth can be observed by a third grader working in a garden. Paul puts it this way in Galatians 6:7, “We reap what we sow.” Many televangelists have turned this text into a
recipe for disaster. But it is a principle of life and certainly a principle of church growth and evangelism. Jesus spoke about the growth of the kingdom in organic, agricultural terms. If you don’t put anything in the ground, don’t expect anything from the ground. Common sense. If there has been no real pre-work for the meeting, it will be a miracle if anything happens at the meeting. Common sense.

In other words, evangelism is a process that assumes that we will cultivate relationships, plant seeds of truth into those relationships, and then look for the harvest from those relationships. There are a number of programs and plans you can use. In fact, practically any legitimate church growth program will work – if you work it. But that’s a blog for another day. Let’s look at 3 common sense keys to church growth.

1. “If it Ain’t Broke – Don’t Fix It!”

Evangelism, like so many other ministries, can tend to follow the fad. At times we seem to prefer the novel approach to the proven approach. If there is an approach to evangelism that is working for you, work it. Don’t change what you are doing just because someone commented that it wasn’t contemporary.

Each pastor is a unique collection of gifts, temperaments, and talents. We are different. Our backgrounds and tastes are different. When you find an evangelism strategy that works for you, there’s probably a reason for it. It flows. It fits. And when you are comfortable it makes others comfortable. People can sense when you are ministering in another man’s armor.

Many traditional approaches to evangelism have been condemned to the trash heap. Tent evangelism and Revelation seminars, for example, are two approaches that have been criticized for being dated and ineffective. I must admit, I still have reoccurring nightmares of my early tent meetings. My tents blew down so often that storm clouds still make me break out in a cold sweat!

But in certain areas, tent evangelism works to this day. I still remember driving up Interstate 40 into Louisville, Kentucky and seeing a gigantic tent evangelistic meeting and the cars were everywhere. I was so amazed I stopped in myself. Whether it’s novelty or nostalgia, if it works and it works for you – work it. Same for Revelation Seminars. Some pastors have a natural teaching gift that's tailor made for that classroom approach. If it ain’t broke don't fix it.

2. If it Ain’t Broke – It Will Be!

There is one thing that won’t take any pastor long to learn. Few approaches to ministry or evangelism work forever. Attention spans are short. Interest levels are even shorter. Many a pastor has left the pulpit dejected because the sermon that worked on the road fell flat at home. Many an evangelist has left a campaign scratching his/her head because the series that baptized 50 in one place baptized 5 in another. There are a host of possible reasons for the difference but this one thing is true. You have to be flexible and skilled enough to use multiple ministry and evangelistic approaches.

Ellen White is helpful here: “God wants us all to have common sense, and he wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation to things.” (3 Selected Messages 217)

Good stuff. Sharpen your skills. Add enough to your evangelistic and ministry toolbox to pull out another tool when the one you’re using isn’t working. Because what works extremely well this year might not work at all next year. It’s one of the reasons that I have been encouraging leaders to take responsibility for their professional growth. Too many leaders are at an absolute loss when things begin to stall or break down in their ministries. It might very well be that the principles and programs that you learn at a conference this year might save your ministry next year.

3. If it Ain't Broke – Bend It.

I’m not a fan of soccer. No offense to the fans of the “beautiful game,” but I prefer my football with shoulder pads. But like most Americans, I jumped on the World Cup bandwagon. I was impressed with Germany and even more interested when I read about their journey to the championship.
It seems that for decades the German national team was a force, but they experienced one heartbreaking loss after another in big matches. They were a model of efficiency, but couldn’t quite seem to get over the hump. In June of 2004, after another disappointing loss in the European championship, the Germans made a major change that paved the way to their 2014 World Cup Championship victory. They revamped their program and prioritized the recruitment and development of young players. The youth movement revolutionized German soccer and the future seems bright for years to come.

The team went from good to great. They did it by making adjustments to a system that was already working but needed to work better. A wise leader knows how to make adjustments, to “bend” even the best system to keep it fresh for the future. Some of our evangelistic methods don’t need to be discarded they just need to be adjusted.

A great example is Dr. Carlton Byrd, the pastor of the Oakwood University Church and speaker/director of Breath of Life television ministry. He is one the most productive evangelists in the church, but I call him the best of “old school.” His meetings are a throwback to the best of traditional evangelism. From his legion of Bible workers, to his quiz cards, to his sermon titles, if you closed your eyes you might think you traveled back to an E. E. Cleveland campaign. But his media, and music, and marketing are as contemporary as the evening news.

Ellen White again, “Men are needed who pray to God for wisdom, and who, under the guidance of God, can put new life into the old methods of labor and can invent new plans and new methods of awakening the interest of church members and reaching the men and women of the world.” (Evangelism 105)

Here’s to common sense and growing churches.

Jesse Wilson is an associate professor of religion at Oakwood University and director of the Pastors Evangelism and Leadership Conference that’s held each year in December at Oakwood University
Creating a Logical Sequence of Topics in a Short Series Part 2

By Russell Burrill

In the previous article we examined what a sequence of topics would look like where the assumption was that the people coming to the series have previously been exposed to the Adventist message and therefore did not need extensive exposure to the message. Therefore the focus was on helping them make a lasting decision to become a part of the Adventist movement.

Our premise is predicated on the three decisions one seeks in an evangelistic series: Christ, biblical truth, and joining the church. We suggested a series that still covers all three areas, but with special emphasis on the third area.

In this article, we wish to make a suggestion on sequencing based on a different assumption. That assumption is that the people that are attending have not had any previous exposure to the Adventist message. It operates on the assumption that you will not be attempting to have people make a decision for baptism at the end. Instead the focus would be to help people make a commitment to deeper Bible study where they will study the truths of Adventism in greater detail.

In such a series you should cover basic Christianity and have just a brief introduction to testing truths. This is solely for the purpose of helping people realize that there is much more truth they need to learn and they will want to study the Bible in greater depth. Because you cannot do this series on Sabbath morning, I am suggesting a 10 message series instead of a 12 sermon approach as in the previous article.

Remember that there are many ways to cover these topics, and what follows is just one possible suggestion that operates on the assumptions noted above.

Bible as the reliable Word of God

The Divinity of Jesus

The Plan of Salvation

The Assurance of Salvation

The Promise of Jesus’ Return (Do not cover the rapture)

The Hope of the Judgment (Focus on the judgment as providing assurance of salvation)

The Hope of Heaven

The Three Angels Messages

The Predicted Apostasy

Need for Deeper Bible study

Your purpose in this series is to get people into a Bible study plan. Here you will cover deeper truths. What are you doing in this series? You first of all are establishing the Bible as reliable and Jesus as the divine Son of God and presenting the salvation He offers. People should be strongly urged to surrender to Jesus and accept Him as
their Savior. That is the first half of the series.

In the second half of the series you are attempting to show that there is much more to discover about Jesus. I suggest covering the 2300 days here. The reason is that this truth does not require changing life practices. However the focus should be on the positive side of the judgment and revealing that when one has Jesus as Savior the outcome of the judgment is certain.

In covering the Three Angels messages you are opening up the prophetic message for the last days. You obviously would not cover the details of the three angels such as the fall of Babylon or the mark of the beast, but instead put the emphasis on the fact that the last message to the world is a gospel centered message – the everlasting gospel.

It would be helpful to cover the fact that error has crept into the church during the Middle Ages (don’t cover what errors). The focus would then be that we need to study further to discover what the Bible says because of the predicted apostasy. Be careful here to not become negative to the papacy. That is not your purpose. It is to show that error has come in so we need to study deeper into the Bible.

Your last message would then totally focus on the need for further Bible study. That is why your last two messages are helping people to get involved in further Bible study. Remember this is the outcome you want from the series, so throughout the series focus on the need for deeper study with a special emphasis on this in the last two messages.

Remember the focus of a series is to bring people to Jesus, His truth and ultimately to His church. Because of the assumption you are making in this series, you are primarily focusing on stage one, bringing people to Jesus and whetting their appetites for further study.

_Russell Burrill is a professor emeritus of church growth at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary, Andrews University_
The Anchorage Northside Seventh-day Adventist Church decided to do a unique series of prophecy seminars aimed at not only biblical truth but spiritual friendship as well. The seminars were held in the fellowship hall with the round tables that seated approximately eight people. Each table had a lesson facilitator and assistant. At the beginning of the session the attendees were led through the beginning of a lesson by a table facilitator. Then after about fifteen minutes of study and discussion I would interject with a 30 minute presentation on the evening’s subject. The last few minutes the facilitators again led their tables in the study of the lesson. The evening wrapped up in an hour to an hour and a half.

Our seminars consistently had around 40 to 50 participants. About 12 of them were non-baptized guests who were intrigued with the message of hope the Bible portrays through prophecy. It was enjoyable to watch the tables in action from two counts. The first was the new people opening up to wider and deeper understandings of Christ. They were constantly amazed and challenged by what they learned. The second was watching the member facilitators shepherd their tables through the studies gaining confidence in the Word and in their friendships with the attendees.

The overall results were not as high as anticipated from a baptismal perspective. There were two baptisms and 4 rebaptisms. However the impact on the members who facilitated was profound. They felt the weight of shepherding other people through the Three Angels’ Messages and really felt engaged with soul-winning. One gentleman said, “I’ve been through all this before but I got the most out of this this time.” This was pretty much the summary of everyone involved.

We learned quite a bit about doing meetings this way. It was the first time for most of us so we did make some mistakes. However, we do look forward to correcting those and doing another one. The one profound take away was that more members were involved in the actual getting the information out, the greater was their interaction with the attendees. This dramatically helped to build the relational aspect with the meetings. By God’s grace in Christ and the empowering of His Spirit we will grow soul-winners at Northside.

Kevin Miller is pastor of the Northside Church in Alaska