

How the Church Grows

By Richard Rice

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Early in 1918, some four years before he was elected president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Elder W. A. Spicer stopped in Chicago to visit a student at Broadview College. Frida Swenson, along with one of her sisters, had recently come to the United States from Sweden. The two of them met up with another sister who had become a Seventh-day Adventist. They urged her to give up her newfangled ideas, but instead, she converted them. Hoping to finish high school in a year or two, Frida enrolled at Broadview and worked hard to improve her English. To earn money, she served as a domestic in wealthy Chicago homes.

The purpose of Spicer's visit was to persuade Frida to leave all this behind and travel to Asia as a missionary. He told her that John Klose, a student at Emmanuel Missionary College, had accepted a call from the General Conference to go to Korea, but he was single and the Church could send only married men to overseas appointments. John needed a wife. He had met Frida and liked her. Would she accompany him to Korea and help him establish the Adventist work in that part of the world?

Frida was inclined to say no. She really wanted to stay in school and get on with her life in America. But as she later explained, Elder Spicer made her feel that the souls of all those people were her personal responsibility. So, she finally agreed to go. She and John were married on March 11, 1918. They went directly from their wedding to the train station, traveled west to San Francisco, and boarded a ship for the Far East.

They made their home in Seoul, the country's capital, and the following year they became the parents of a baby girl they named Alyse. The Kloses never expected to leave Korea. They were certain that the end of time was so near that they would never finish their seven-year term of service. They did, of course. In time, they had three other children and returned to America, where they served the Church for another thirty-seven years.

I have a special interest in this obscure couple because Alyse Klose is my mother. So, without the Adventist commitment to world missions, I wouldn't be here. My grandparents labored in the finest spirit of Adventist missionaries. They were led to marry, to travel, to endure years of hard work, loneliness, and ill health by the conviction that their efforts would help bring salvation to others.

They found their mandate, as Christians have for centuries, in the "great commission," which concludes the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus commands his followers, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19 NIV).

It took a while for early Adventists to develop a vision of worldwide service—early on they felt that their work would not take them outside the United States—but once they did, it became one of the Church's most



Seventh-day Adventist black camp meeting, 1930.

prominent features. After twelve decades of vigorous mission work, Adventism is now a global phenomenon. The Church's membership is now around eleven million and the vast majority of Adventists, more than 90 per cent, live outside North America and Europe.

From its very beginning, the Christian community has been an expanding community. The very nature of fellowship in Christ leads its participants to reach out and draw others in. The good news of salvation is too good to keep to yourself. During his lifetime, people who were drawn to Jesus invited others to come, too. When Andrew met Jesus, the first thing he did was to find his brother Simon Peter and tell him, "We have found the Messiah." When Philip met Jesus he sought out Nathaniel and said, "Come and see" (John 1:40-46 NIV). When the woman of Samaria realized who Jesus was, she left the well and urged the townspeople to come and meet him (John 4:28-29).

Jesus also told his followers to tell others what God had done for them. When Jesus healed the Gerasene demoniac and the man begged to go with him, Jesus said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.' So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed" (Mark 5:19-20 NIV). Time and again, as the Gospels tell the story, people Jesus helped and healed readily told others about him, and they came to him by the thousands. He was soon a national figure:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him." (Matt. 4:23-25 NIV)

The proclamation of the gospel continued in the

work of Jesus' followers. During his ministry, Jesus sent his disciples out to preach (Matt. 10; Luke 10 1-24). The last words of the risen Christ directed his followers to proclaim the gospel throughout the world. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV; compare Matt. 28:19-20).

As described in the book of Acts, the ministry of Jesus continued in the work of his followers. They proclaimed the good news of salvation, healed the sick, cast out demons, and established Christian communities wherever they went. As described by Paul, the foremost gift of the Spirit to the church was apostles (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11), and the essential work of the apostles was to preach the gospel (Gal. 1:1, 16; 2:2). Their work was effective. The rapid growth of Christianity in late antiquity is one of the most amazing phenomena in the history of Western civilization. Within a few years, according to hints in the New Testament, the gospel spread throughout the Mediterranean world (Col. 1:6; compare Rom. 1:8). Within a few centuries what began as a small Jewish sect became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. Today, Christianity is by far the largest and the most widespread of the world's religions. So growth was an essential feature of the Christian community at the outset. Because the good news of salvation demands to be shared, it is the nature of Christianity to expand.

Spreeding the gospel through evangelism and mission work has been an essential part of Evangelical Christianity since its rise in the nineteenth century, and it has been a hallmark of Adventism for



most of our history, too. As we generally think of it, becoming a member of the Adventist Church involves accepting the Church's beliefs and agreeing to live in harmony with the Church's standards. There are certainly biblical precedents for this understanding.

As described in the New Testament, the proclamation of the gospel took the form of communicating a message in a public way. Unlike mystery religions, whose devotees were under oath to keep secret their teachings and their rites, Christianity was an open book. There were no secret ceremonies, arcane rituals, or coded messages. In fact, the earliest Christian documents were written in the common language of the day, *koiné* Greek, the vernacular of late antiquity. So, the Christian message was discussed, analyzed, and argued. As described in the New Testament, the apostles spoke publicly in a variety of settings, from synagogues and private homes to public forums and even legal hearings. They spoke to a variety of audiences, from Jewish rabbis to Greek philosophers, from slaves and peasants, to merchants and craftsmen, to governors and kings.

The apostles' early preaching apparently consisted of an account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Paul recorded the message as he received it and passed it on to believers in Corinth in the following passage. Scholars regard it as one of the earliest summaries of the apostolic message.¹

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
that he was buried,
that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve [and then to others].
(1 Cor. 15:3-5 NIV)

Joining the Christian community involved behaving, as well as believing a certain way. Converts underwent baptism and, depending on their backgrounds, many of them made drastic changes in their ways of life. A number of passages in the New Testa-

Camp meeting sponsored by Southeastern California Conference Black Ministries Department, 1998.

ment letters speak explicitly of the shift from life before to life after receiving the gospel. The notion of a clear-cut, "before and after," transition is particularly evident in Colossians 3:1-17 NIV, which seems to use the metaphor of changing clothes to make the point:

Here is the reason for the change: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (1-4).

Here is the "before": "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. . . . You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other" (5-9).

Here is the pivotal transition: ". . . since you have taken off your old self with its practice and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (9-10).

And here is the "after": Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as

Christians became part of a new community, and acquired a new identity. . . .

As described in the New Testament, however, this new community not only contributed to their identity, it also became the most important factor of all.

you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (12-17).

Important as these transformations were for early Christians, they changed in another way that was even more remarkable. They not only began to believe and behave in new ways, they also found a completely new way of belonging. This, in fact, is the most important "before and after" change of all. Christians became part of a new community and acquired a new identity. In the ancient world, people defined themselves, not primarily by their individual qualities or characteristics, but by the group they belonged to. A Greek, for example, thought of himself as a member of his or her ethnic group. The qualities he shared with other Greeks were more important than his individual traits.² Jews, of course, felt a sense of solidarity as God's chosen people. Similarly, when people became Christians, they began to identify themselves as members of a new community.

As described in the New Testament, however, this new community not only contributed to their identity, it also became the most important factor of all. People who became Christians did not stop participating in all other communities—they were still members of families, members of society (Paul took pride in his Roman citizenship)—but being part of the Christian community became supremely important. Whatever people had been before, and whatever else they still were, the most important thing about them now was their membership here. This particular community superseded all the social categories that defined their existence.

This is the thrust of Paul's great assertion, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-28 NIV). Membership in the Christian community thus transcends racial, economic, and even sexual boundaries. Union with Christ means union with one another, no matter what one's background or social status may be.

When we understand what belonging involves, we see why it is more fundamental than believing or behaving. If we start with belonging, then believing and behaving naturally fall into place. But if we start with believing or behaving, it is often hard to get belonging into the picture. There are people who believe what the Church teaches, but don't feel a part of the community. During my year as a ministerial intern, I studied the Bible for months with a couple in our neighborhood. They agreed with everything the Church taught, but they never became members. They never felt a part of the community.

By the same token, people can adopt many aspects of a Christian lifestyle without being part of the Christian community. There are students in church-operated schools who conform to the standards for years and never break a rule, but when their formal education comes to an end, they walk away from their religious upbringing without a backward glance. They were surrounded by the Church, but they never really belonged to it.

However, if believing and behaving don't always lead to belonging, the reverse is not true. Belonging naturally involves believing and behaving. If you belong to a community, you will share its beliefs and commitments. But you can believe certain things without behaving or belonging, and you can behave a certain way—you can change your lifestyle—without believing or belonging. Start with belonging, and you get the whole package. Start with one of the others, and you don't. Belonging, then, is the most basic category. It is more inclusive than these other dimensions of Christian existence.

The priority of belonging has important consequences for Christian mission. It obliges us to reconsider both the goal of our efforts and the methods we employ to pursue it. What do we hope to accomplish by evangelism and outreach? Are we primarily interested in acquiring believers, behavers,



or belongers? Are we trying to convince people that the teachings of the Church are true? Are we trying to persuade them to change their patterns of behavior and adopt an Adventist lifestyle? Or do we hope that they will become members of the Christian community?

If believing is central, then the purpose of our evangelistic activities is to inform, to make people aware of things they need to know. This is the strategy of traditional Adventist evangelism. The classic evangelistic effort consists of several dozen sermons or lectures designed to present ideas to people in a persuasive way. The goal is to convince them that the Church's beliefs are true.

If behavior is primary, then the point of evangelism is to promote a change in personal habits. Adventists have always taken an active interest in healthful living. We publish magazines entitled *Listen* and *Life and Health*, sponsor the television program "Christian Lifestyle Magazine," and conduct hundreds of Five-day Plans to help people stop smoking. On one level, these are important public service endeavors. But they also reflect the hope that people who see the benefits of an Adventist lifestyle will be attracted to membership in the Church.

However, if belonging is primary to our understanding of Christianity, then the basic purpose of evangelism is not to persuade people to change their ideas or their actions. Its goal is to incorporate them into the Christian community, to share with them the rich blessings of Christian fellowship. Once we are clear that belonging is our primary goal, we may show that it includes believing and behaving. But we will not make change in belief and behavior an end in itself.

We will also manifest a deep interest in people for their own sake. We need to show people that we care about them and that we want the best for them whether or not they accept our doctrines or adopt our lifestyle. In other words, we need to exhibit the kind of unconditional love for people that Jesus displayed in his ministry.

A recent examination of Adventist culture supports the priority of belonging in evangelism. Gary Patterson, a general field secretary of the General Conference, calls for Adventists to move to "a relational model of outreach." "What really matters," he



Kansas Avenue Church in Riverside, California, with current pastors.

says, "is whether people are there in the community of the church." Consequently, we should try to fellowship with people first and then indoctrinate later. We have mistakenly thought that people would join our fellowship if they believed our doctrines. "Actually, the way it works best is to bring people into our fellowship; then they will want to learn our doctrines."³

Christians have always employed a great variety of symbols and metaphors to describe the sort of community that the church involves. Three have been particularly influential among Adventists over the years, and each of them puts the issue of church growth in a different light. Let's see what happens when we view the church, respectively as army, business, and family.

Thinking of the church as an army has significant consequences for Christian mission. For one thing, it makes growth a matter of highest priority. The primary goals of an army are to defeat the enemy and conquer territory. Its primary goals are to overcome opposition and expand the church's domain. The army church exists to conquer the enemy. All other objectives are subordinate.

The army metaphor also injects the task of mission with a sense of high drama. Warfare is dangerous. Warriors face tremendous risks. Similarly, there is a great deal at stake in the success of the church's mission endeavor, and Christian warriors must be willing to do whatever it takes to achieve victory. Mission is a matter of life and death. It is do-or-die. It leads either to victory or defeat. There is no middle ground. Not to win is to lose. Members of the army church must be willing to make tremendous sacrifices. For them, the victory of Christ's cause is far more important than personal survival.

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We can see what a powerful role the army metaphor played in Christian thought during the heyday of Protestant evangelism by recalling some popular hymns and songs of the nineteenth century.

Stand up! stand up for Jesus! Ye soldiers of the cross;
Lift high His royal banner, It must not suffer loss;
From victory unto victory, His army shall He lead,
Till every foe is vanquished, And Christ is Lord
indeed.

Onward, Christian soldiers! Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus Going on before.
Christ, the royal Master, Leads against the foe;
Forward into battle, See, His banners go!

Lead on, O King Eternal, The day of march has
come;
Henceforth in fields of conquest thy tents shall be
our home;
Through days of preparation Thy grace has made
us strong,
and now, O King Eternal, We lift our battle song.

Soldiers of Christ, arise, And put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through His eternal Son;
Strong in the Lord of hosts, And in His mighty
power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts Is more than
conqueror.

Another aspect of warfare that affects the army view of church is the use of force. Force is essential to military behavior. Nations ordinarily turn to military force only as a last resort. Because other measures have failed and everything depends on this one, whatever it takes to achieve victory is worth the effort. In spite of various attempts to mitigate the savagery of war, there is a strong sentiment that with armed conflict the end justifies the means. "All's fair in love and war," as the saying goes. Accordingly, the army church is less concerned with means than with ends. The relevant test of a mission endeavor is whether it succeeds. If it promotes church growth, it is justified.

The army church is impatient with tactics that do not lead to victory. In Christian military hymns, the emphasis is on marching into battle, meeting the enemy, and defeating him. The idea of purely defensive maneuvers does not appear. There is no mention of trench warfare. The church is an army that goes on the attack. It does not wait for the enemy to come to it.

The idea that mission is conquest often involves a triumphalist view of the church. When we bring people into the church we establish our superiority to them. We make them our possession. Moreover, the army church views the world in stark contrasts. Non-Christian religions are enemies to be defeated. Non-Christian people are captives waiting to be liberated—or recaptured, this time by Christians. Christianity is superior to other religions, and Christians are superior to members of other faiths. We find these sentiments in another nineteenth century hymn on Christian mission.

From Greenland's icy mountains, From India's
coral strand,
Where Afric's sunny fountains Roll down their
golden sands,
From many an ancient river, From many a palmy
plain,
They call us to deliver Their land from error's chain.

Another liability of the army church is a tendency to depersonalize its members. Armies are not interested in the needs and wants of individual soldiers. They are interested in making them an effective fighting force. The only thing about them that really matters is what they contribute to a common military objective. Because "troop morale" is important, armies have to take personal concerns into account, but there is never any doubt that soldiers exist for the army, not the other way around.

Like military metaphors, economic metaphors for church put a heavy emphasis on Christian mission. In fact, for the business church, mission is not only a

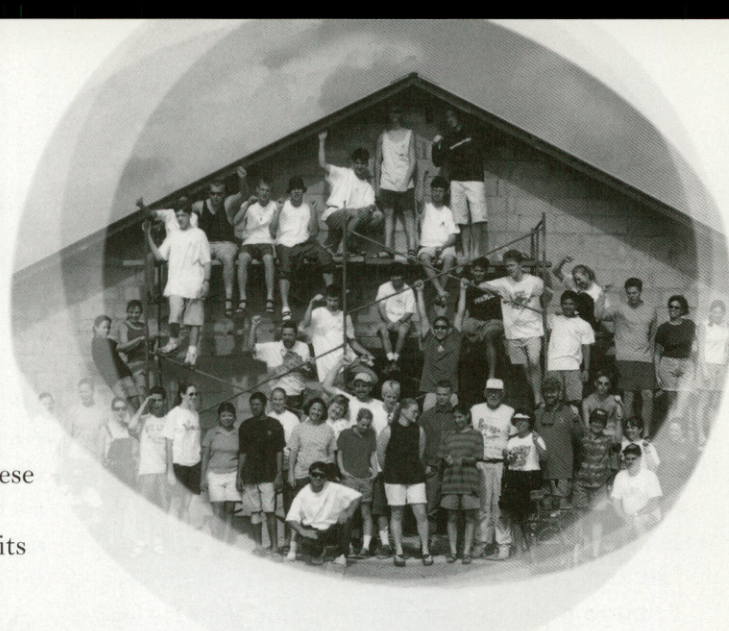
high priority, it is the fundamental reason for the church's existence. After all, the business of a business is to grow. Expanding markets, increased sales, improved productivity, and rising profits—these are the hallmarks of a successful business.

Similarly, the church exists in order to increase its membership. The central concern of each member should be to bring others into the church. And the standard for evaluating any of the church's endeavors is whether or not it will lead to an increase in church membership.⁴ If the popularity of the army church has waned somewhat in recent years, the popularity of the business church has increased, what with all the emphasis on church growth. The familiar expression "church growth" has frankly economic connotations.

The conviction that growth is the church's highest priority explains the heavy emphasis Seventh-day Adventists place on evangelistic endeavors. From Key '73 to Net '98, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists promotes one large-scale program after another designed to increase our membership. Growth in numbers is unquestionably an important aspect of the Church's mission, but emphasizing growth alone can have negative consequences. Sometimes people become official members of the Church before they fully understand or commit themselves to a Christian life. Those who are insufficiently prepared for church membership often lose interest once the novelty of the experience wears off.

Overemphasizing growth can also lead us to slight other aspects of the Church's life. Although the gospel commission enjoins us to teach as well as to baptize, baptism gets far more attention in the business church. People who are convinced that growth is the one objective of the Church are often impatient with activities that don't contribute directly to an increase in membership. As they see it, things like counseling and crisis intervention—even providing spiritual instruction to the young—are potential distractions from the Church's central task. Nurture interferes with outreach, one church official insisted.

Ironically, an overemphasis on growth can also threaten the worldwide scope of gospel mission. Sometimes it leads the Church to neglect areas of the world where numerical growth is less likely than



Youth mission trip to Christmas Island.

Courtesy Carmichael, California, SDA Church

others. In a 1995 *Ministry* article, David Newman questioned a revision in the Global Mission document. An early draft called for Adventists to establish a presence in parts of the world where there were no Christians, then turn to the Christian areas that had no Adventists. This two-tiered approach was abandoned in later versions, however. The reason, Newman suspects, was that the number of baptisms was more important to church leaders than the number of areas penetrated with the gospel. "As long as we are recognized as successful by the number of baptisms we get, then it is only human to focus on those areas where growth is easiest."⁵

With its emphasis on expansion, the business church is susceptible to a practice that afflicts many organizations—treating people like statistics. For a while, I attended a health club that was constantly trying to increase its membership. Every couple weeks it announced another membership drive, with new incentives to entice people to sign up. The club's employees actually spent far more time trying to get new members than they did serving the members the club already had.

A church whose primary interest is growing in numbers can fall into the same pattern. If numerical growth is the essential purpose of Christian mission, then the church will devote its attention primarily to people outside the church, trying to persuade them to come in. New members sometimes find that the church takes less personal interest in them after they join than it did before.

If we take family rather than army or business as our basic metaphor for the church, we put Christian mission in quite a different light. For one thing, the change relativizes the significance of numerical

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growth. Family size can be a major consideration, but for most families, growth in numbers is not likely to be the only priority, or even the most important one. A family is typically more concerned with improving the lives of its members and strengthening their relationships with each other, than it is with increasing the number of people who belong to it.

Analogously, if we think of the Church as family we will pay close attention to the entire gospel commission. We will affirm the importance of making disciples and baptizing, but we will remember that teaching is just as important to the life of the community. Consequently, we will pursue the kind of growth that will strengthen the Church as a community, not just increase its numbers. The goal of the Christian mission and ministry is to establish people within God's family, to help them live lives worthy of God's children and to cultivate relationships with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. A family church will therefore pursue various forms of church growth, not just a growth in numbers.

The family church also brings a new perspective to numerical growth. This perspective leads us to view possible church members, not as captives to be taken, or enemies to be defeated, or as sales prospects to be cultivated, but as potential brothers and sisters. In other words, it encourages us to take an interest in the entire lives of future members, not just their potential for increasing our numbers. If our primary interest is people, not church growth, we will invite others to join the Church because we love them.

For the family church, outward growth is a consequence of inner growth. As members of God's family cultivate the kind of love for one another that we see in the life of Jesus, they will attract people into their fellowship. For the family church, the presence of Christ's love within the community is therefore basic to any mission endeavor. If we lack the love of Jesus, there is no point in trying to grow, and if we have the love of Jesus nothing can keep us from growing.

This is why effective Christian witnessing always involves a personal element. The gospel is not a package that people will buy from us regardless of what they think about us. It is a life-transforming power that flows from person to person. So, only the

presence of this power in our lives will make our invitation to others attractive. Unless the Church portrays the love of Jesus to the world, all talk of church growth is useless. As a friend of mine puts it, we need to combine the great commandment with the great commission.⁶

A woman I know became an Adventist several years ago through the personal influence of a church member. She had worked at an Adventist institution for years and knew a great deal about the Church's beliefs and practices. But she only decided to join the Church when she met a woman whose life reflected Jesus' love for people. "That's the kind of person I'd like to be," she concluded, "and that's the kind of person I'd like to be with." This is the kind of church growth that the family church displays—not just increased numbers, but deeper relationships and a stronger community.

Notes and References

1. This passage bears the literary marks of a well-polished, formal statement. For example, all four clauses are introduced by the same word ("that"), and the first and third lines end with the same formula ("according to the Scriptures").
2. According to Edith Hamilton, the famous classical scholar, the Greeks applied the word character to qualities they all had in common, not something that distinguished each person from everyone else.
3. Gary Patterson, "Is Our Upbringing Defining Us?" *Adventist Review*, Sept. 19, 1996, 27.
4. In the recent words of a church official, "The real measure of success in a church is how many new converts joined your church last year." *Pacific Union Recorder*, Dec., 2000, 3.
5. J. David Newman, "Why the church fails to reach the world," *Ministry*, Feb. 1995, 6.
6. Bonnie Dwyer is responsible for this happy expression.

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