

World Church:

Small Groups Are Focus of Evangelism and Witness

Council | BY MARK A. KELLNER/TAASHI ROWE/ANN

The days of mass evangelism aren't over, Seventh-day Adventist church experts say, but it is small Bible study groups that are gaining importance in bringing people to Christ, leaders were told at the Oct. 1 meeting of the church's Council on Evangelism and Witness, or CEW.

The group was established in 2000 to keep the church focused on its primary mission of evangelism and discipleship. Regional church leaders affirmed that small groups—in which new members are trained and established believers are encouraged—now form the heart of outreach.

"The shepherd can never produce a sheep, but only sheep can give birth to a sheep," declared Pastor Artur Stele, president of the church's Euro-Asia region. "Assignment of the pastor has changed, [it is now] to train lay members and small group leaders," he added.

Small groups are the underpinning of successful public campaigns, said Adventist evangelist and pastor Mark Finley and a general vice president of the world church with responsibility for global evangelism.

"Small groups are part of an integrated approach to the mission of the church," said Finley, who co-chaired the CEW session with



Small group culture can be perhaps the most effective way of transferring belief into action and influencing other lives.

—Lowell Cooper

fellow vice president Pastor Lowell Cooper. "They provide fellowship, prayer and Bible study as part of the total evangelistic effort."

Cooper added, "I believe small groups allow the beliefs of the church to be expressed in human interactions at the deepest level of relationship. A small group culture can be perhaps the most effective way of transferring belief into action and influencing other lives."

Source: Adventist News Network

small groups...now form the heart of outreach

The results of building churches with small groups are impressive: over the past six years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Peru has seen an average of 16.5 percent membership growth each year, which has translated to 327,623 new members during the period, said Pastor Melchor Ferreyra, who until recently was the president of the church there; he is now executive secretary for the church's South American region.

What's more, Ferreyra adds, the rate of apostasy has declined from 80 percent to 17 percent thanks to discipleship through small groups.

Such numbers are important, world church executive secretary Pastor Matthew Bediako noted, because while the Seventh-day Adventist church added 1,000,000 members in the last 12 months, it also lost about 500,000.

In the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean region, according to regional president Pastor Paul Ratsara, the church surpassed the 2,000,000-member mark in large part due to small group evangelism. He noted, "92 percent of the people won through small groups are now winning others to Christ."

Small group ministry is also playing a role in the Inter-American church region, said Pastor Israel Leito, area president. He expects this rapidly growing territory to achieve 3,000,000 members by next March.

In some places, such as predominantly Buddhist countries, small groups where people can study together and make discoveries, become even more vital, said Pastor Scott Griswold, director of the church's Global Center for Buddhist Studies in Thailand. There, a lack of familiarity with Christianity is also hampered by Western cultural depictions of morality in movies, leading Buddhists to not want to "lower themselves" to what they believe are "Christian" standards, he said.

"If you're talking one-to-one with a person and ask them to make a decision for Christ, it's probably going to go against their culture. The small group allows you to discuss, call people to decisions in a gentle way. It is a special place to deal with both of those and answer the question they have in their heart," Griswold said.

India is another place where the predominant religion, Hinduism, makes it difficult for many to make the decision to follow Christ. However, an Adventist pastor and his church formed small prayer groups that have led many to Christ. In 1998, Johnson Swamidass became pastor of a small church in Chennai—India's

fourth-largest city and the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu. The city of 10 million people had about only 10,000 Adventist members, even though the church had been present there since 1893.

Members of the Kodambakkam Adventist church started prayer groups in their homes and in their workplaces. A few months later small group leaders encouraged their prayer partners to attend church.

Soon Pastor Johnson held evangelism meetings and started baptizing many members. But instead of focusing on bringing members only to the Kodambakkam location, church members started planting small churches in different parts of the city. These churches were easier for people to travel to and because they were smaller it was easier to keep people engaged in the church, said Pastor Johnson.

The Kodambakkam church has given rise to 16 church plants and seen nearly 2,000 people baptized into the Adventist church, a result he attributes to small group ministry.

Another presentation to the Council spoke of students at Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities as a major untapped evangelism resource. This is according to Ron Clouzet, dean of the School of Religion at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. Clouzet shared with church leaders how systematic changes in the curriculum at Southern Adventist University allowed the college and its students to reach out to communities near and far.

One development included extending a one-week course in personal evangelism to a two-semester course. One week was not enough time to teach students the intricacies of personal evangelism, Clouzet said. But with more time to explore the course a lot of change occurred in students. That was ten years ago, Clouzet said, now many are able to spend time doing Bible studies that, in some cases, led to baptisms.

The school also developed the Robert H. Pierson Institute of Evangelism and World Missions. One of the programs that came out of the Institute is a summer field school program that allowed theology students hands-on experience learning about evangelism but also speaking at evangelism meetings. ■

Mark A. Kellner and Taashi Rowe are assistant editor for news and editorial coordinator, respectively, for the Adventist News Network.