

An Advanced Skills Level Adult Sabbath School Teacher Enrichment Course

This Enrichment Training Course was prepared for the Adult Ministries Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America.

Director: J. Alfred Johnson

Principal Contributor: James Zackrison

Cover design and editing: Anika Anderson

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**A North American Division Adult Ministries Sponsored
Advanced Skills Level Adult Sabbath School Teacher Enrichment Course**

The Adult Ministries Department of the North American Division sponsors a curriculum for the enrichment of Adult Sabbath School teacher/discussion leaders. This curriculum has three levels of teacher enrichment. All the courses are available online at www.nadulminstries.org.

These courses are all self-contained units and do not have to be studied in sequence. Nevertheless, if you wish to obtain either the "Qualified Adult Sabbath School Teacher" or "Qualified Master Adult Sabbath School Teacher" Affirmation of Course Completion you must complete all of the previous courses in the curriculum outline before proceeding to the more advanced levels.

**North American Division Sabbath School Teacher's
Qualification Process and Curriculum**

**Core
Units**

CU 101 – The High Calling of the Sabbath School Teacher
CU 103 – Understanding Your Bible
CU 104 – How to Interpret the Bible and the Writings of Ellen G. White

**Essential
Skills**

ES 01 – Laws of Teaching and Learning
ES 02 – Lesson Preparation
ES 03 – Learning Process – Learning Styles

**Qualified Adult
Sabbath School
Teacher**

**Advanced
Skills**

AS 1 – Small Group Dynamics
AS 2 – Teaching Techniques of Jesus
AS 3 – Additional courses as needed

**Qualified Master
Adult Sabbath
School Teacher**

Small Group Dynamics

A North American Division Adult Ministries Sponsored
Advanced Skills Level Adult Sabbath School Teacher Enrichment Course

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Course Summary

Course Description

The course you are looking at on your screen is one of the adult Sabbath School teacher enhancement advanced skills courses sponsored by the North American Division Adult Ministries Department.

Sabbath School teaching means more than simply being named to a position. Teaching or leading an adult Sabbath School class is a ministry, not just an activity. It is important that the Sabbath School teacher/discussion leader be serious about his or her role, and willing to work toward the ideal.

This course on Small Group Dynamics is a “doing” class. It deals with the technology of how to manage a small group process in Sabbath School.

The focus of a Sabbath School class is not on what the teacher knows; it is on what the student learns and can put into practice. The better prepared a teacher is, of course, the more successful the lesson will be. In addition to that groundwork, the better prepared a teacher is for a class presentation, the more the class members will learn and apply.

From its inception, Sabbath School has advocated small classes. These Sabbath School classes are a type of small group. They form the core and the strength of the Sabbath School. A key statement from Ellen G White gives us a starting point.

“The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members but for unbelievers also.” —
Evangelism, p. 115.

These factors lead us to the conclusion that small groups are truly a core value in successful Sabbath School learning. Your Sabbath School would do well to set up and run an effective small group ministry.

How to Study this Course

This is one of the online courses sponsored by the Adult Ministries Department of the North American Division. When you finish this course you will receive an Affirmation of Course Completion indicating that you have satisfactorily finished this course.

This course is primarily focused on practical application. It is composed of a course outline, assignment sheets, and attached readings from different sources that cover valuable insights about Sabbath School teacher/discussion leader enrichment.

You can download the material if you prefer to study from a printed copy. You can also study it directly on the screen if that is your preference.

Vocabulary

Teacher/discussion leader. In North American Division churches it is customary to use two terms for the position traditionally known as a Sabbath School teacher: (1) "Teacher" and, (2) "Discussion Leader." The reason for the dual terms is that the title of "teacher" is too often taken to be a synonym for "lecturer." A Sabbath School teacher is supposed to be a facilitator who motivates class members to participate in the study and discussion of the lesson. Thus the use of the two titles as a motivating factor to help both teacher and class members understand the ideal role of this Sabbath School leadership team member. Both titles often appear in this course as "teacher/discussion leader."

Teacher enhancement training materials and reading assignments almost always use the term "teacher," so please remember that in terms of how the position is supposed to function, "teacher" and "discussion leader" mean the same thing.

Church/district. Many churches in the North American Division belong to an extended family known as a district. This is usually because the local conference can only finance one pastor for various churches. Because this type of arrangement is common, and often the churches in a district cooperate in sponsoring training programs, etc. the term "church/district" is used in this course.

Textbook

The textbook for this course is Kurt Johnson, *Successful Small Groups: From Theory to Service* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011). This is the best up-to-date resource for small groups from an Adventist perspective. Be sure to record on your Student Fulfillment Card that you have read this book and completed the book review in Assignment 4.

Student Fulfillment Card

At the end of this Study Guide you will find a Student Fulfillment Card. This is the record you will submit to the Adult Ministries Department of the North American Division www.nadadultministries.org so you can receive your Affirmation of Course Completion.

Types of Study Locations

- If you are studying this class on your own, this online Course Study Guide will indicate the exercises that you should complete. These contain question-and-answer sheets you can print out. They identify the important points of the readings and units of study. It is very important to fill in these sheets. They are your way of knowing how you are doing in the class.

- If you are studying in a classroom-type setting, an instructor will lead you through various participatory activities.

- If you are studying in a small group, ideas are included for those studying in this environment.

- There are no examinations scheduled for this class, unless an individual instructor decides to use them.

Course Introduction

The mission of the adult Sabbath School teacher is founded on three cornerstones: being, knowing, and doing.

- “Being” means that an adult Sabbath School teacher must have a valid and perceptible Christian experience, and be prepared to serve as a spiritual guide for her or his class.

- “Knowing” means that a Sabbath School teacher must know what the Bible says and have a significant understanding of biblical history, doctrines, and teachings, and know how to study and interpret the Scriptures.

- “Doing” means that a Sabbath School teacher must have a knowledge of teaching methodology and be willing to invest the time and energy necessary to adequately prepare and lead a Sabbath School class.

The average adult Sabbath School class meets for 40 to 50 minutes once a week, often seated in pews in the church sanctuary. Most church sanctuaries are not designed as a learning environment. They are designed as a *listening* environment. This is one reason—though not the only one—that all too many adult Sabbath School teachers resort to lecture. There are times when a lecture is called for by the nature of the material being presented, but a lecture is not usually the best learning tool. The reason is that it does not generate class participation, and *class member participation is the core concept for an effective learning environment*.

“It is not the best plan for teachers to do all the talking, but they should draw out the class to tell what they know. Then let the teacher, with a few brief, pointed remarks or illustrations, impress the lesson upon [the learners’] minds.” — *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 115.

“Under no circumstances should teachers go through the lesson mechanically, and then sit down. . . . Such teaching is not beneficial; it is often injurious. If the teacher is properly prepared, every moment can be used to profit. The active minds of the children should be kept constantly employed. Their ideas should be drawn out and corrected, or approved, as the case may require. But never should the teacher sit down, saying, ‘I am through.’ There is no such thing as getting through with the lesson.” — *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, pp. 115,116.

Even worse, some teachers simply go through the lesson day by day and read a sentence or two, or maybe cite a Bible verse. Ellen G. White also has something to say about this situation:

“In some schools, I am sorry to say, the custom prevails of reading the lesson from the lesson sheet. This should not be. It need not be, if the time that is often needlessly and even sinfully employed, were given to the study of the Scriptures. There is no reason why Sabbath school lessons should be less perfectly learned by teachers or pupils than are the lessons of the day school. They should be better learned, as they treat of subjects infinitely more important. A neglect here is displeasing to God.” — *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, pp. 117,118.

The following remarks are directed to teachers in children’s departments, but they are equally applicable to adult classes:

“Those who instruct children [or adults] should avoid tedious remarks. Short remarks and to the point will have a happy influence. If much is to be said, make up for briefness by frequency. A few words of interest now and then will be more beneficial than to have it all at once. Long speeches burden the small minds of children [*and the inattentive minds of adults*]. Too much talk will lead them to loathe even spiritual instruction, just as overeating burdens the stomach and lessens the appetite, leading even to a loathing of food. The minds of the people may be glutted with too much speechifying.” — *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 119.

A Sabbath School class is a type of small group. For this reason, it is vital that a Sabbath School teacher/discussion leader have a working knowledge of how a small group environment works.

Sometimes, due to circumstances like lack of space, or time-related factors, an original small group might become far larger than “small.” One solution is to identify and employ currently undiscovered space where small groups can meet, and divide the larger group into new small groups.

As a last resort, it is also possible to organize a large “small” group using small group principles that will significantly enhance learning. This large “small” group, however, does not meet all aspects of why small groups are so important.

Course Objectives

- The teacher will acquire a knowledge and understanding of how to use small group principles in a Sabbath School class.
- The teacher or perspective teacher will employ this methodology in his or her Sabbath School class.

UNIT 1

Introduction to the Small-group Concept

From its inception, Sabbath School has advocated small classes. These Sabbath School classes are a type of small group. They form the core and the strength of the Sabbath School learning environment.

In a study of North American Division Sabbath Schools conducted in the early 1990s,¹ four out of five church members state that the Sabbath School class is important to them. Most feel it is the most important group in the life of the church. The authors of the study state: "The most basic element of life is the cell, so the most basic unit of spiritual life in the church is 'cell life.'"² Thus the class, a small group, is the part of Sabbath School most valued by its members.

One Sabbath School teacher training manual from past years, for instance, recommends a small class size that is about the same as a normally defined small group:

"The best Sabbath School teaching requires a class of from eight to fourteen. In classwork the nearness of the teacher to the life and thought of the individual pupil diminishes as the class grows larger. Add to this the need for personal contact and visitation outside of class periods, and it becomes clear that busy teachers cannot handle more than twelve or fourteen. Conversely, apart from some local and exceptional case, the inspiration to a teacher and the participating pupils tends to decrease with numbers below a certain point."³

As a small group, the Sabbath School class is supposed to be more than a collection of individuals who happen to sit in close proximity to each other. It has historically been advocated by Sabbath School leaders throughout the world Adventist church that Sabbath School classes should be ministry units that do more than simply meet for a few minutes on Sabbath morning. That's where small group technology comes into play.

Small groups are the most efficient and effective strategic tool available for the 21st century. That's a large, seemingly dogmatic statement, but experience is proving it to be true. Where small group technology is employed on a systematic basis, the audience is happy, attendance grows, and participation and study increase.

Advantages

The strength of small groups is that they provide built-in opportunities for participation and fellowship. They allow for deeper understanding of whatever is being taught because they provide venues for participation. Shy people feel comfortable in expressing themselves, while outgoing people have opportunity to facilitate information and experiences. Insecure people gain feelings of security from the fellowship that builds up in a small group. Small groups also offer opportunities for systematic intercessory prayer.

Hard Work, Leadership and Correct Organization

Effective small groups are not as easy to manage as a simple discourse or lecture by a teacher. They require time, dedication, care, and maintenance—qualities that are often rare.

They are *flexible*, or informal, in terms of concepts shared and the fellowship and companionships formed.

¹*The Adult Sabbath School: A Needs Assessment* (Silver Spring, Md.: Church Ministries Department, North American Division of the General Conference, Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1990).

²*Ibid.*, p. 3.

³Harry W. Lowe, *Handbook for Sabbath School Teachers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1956) p. 112.

They are *inflexible*, or more formal, in organizational format, however. In other words, there are certain things that must be done in managing a small group or it will fall apart.

- They require dedicated, consistent leadership. If the leadership is inconsistent, demonstrates a lack of people-skills, arrives late, or is unprepared, the group will fail.
- Small groups developed through the investment of time and hard work can fall apart in minutes if these key factors fail.

A successful small-group Sabbath School class, for instance, requires a unique leadership team:

- Someone to be the "chaplain" of the class.
- A dedicated teacher/discussion leader willing and able to teach rather than preach or lecture.

This takes skill, determination, and dedication.

Small Groups and Spiritual Development

From the perspective of religious education, the purpose of small groups is spiritual development. Spiritual development means the growth of Christian character based on valid biblical information and practice. Sabbath School represents religious education at the local church level that produces faith (biblical knowledge) and practice (Christian living).

Small groups in action in Sabbath School facilitate the accomplishment of this objective.

"Small groups force people to think about and articulate what they believe in a way not usually possible with sermons and traditional [Sabbath] School lectures. They prompt dialogue and can bring a person to greater ownership of belief."⁴

This is precisely the reason for using small-group technology in Sabbath School.

⁴Ron Havermast, *Christianity Today*, Feb.7, 1994, p. 29.

UNIT 2

Why Small Groups Are Important

Small groups are nothing new. They have been around since biblical times. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, they have been used under many names: Home Bible studies, cottage meetings, Home Study Fellowships, etc.

Your textbook points out that a variety of New Testament incidents were, in essence, small-group activities: Prayer meetings (Acts 12:12), evenings of Christian fellowship (21:7), impromptu evangelistic meetings (16:32) and meetings for organizational instructions (5:42).⁵

A key illustration of small groups in the Bible is found in Acts 2:41-47. This passage tells us that the early Christians: (1) gathered together, (2) received the Word, (3) became baptized members, (4) were instructed, (5) fellowshiped on a regular basis, (6) reached out to the community, (7) exerted a positive witness, and as a result (8) grew daily.

Ellen G White advocates that we should in our church work “Preach less, and educate more, (1) by holding Bible-readings, and (2) by praying with families and little companies.”⁶ Without using the actual words, that is a description of a small group ministry. Her most well-known statement is:

“The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members but for unbelievers also.” —*Evangelism*, p. 115.

Definition

A small group is a small number of people who have formed a bond directed toward fulfilling a purpose.

A group will be effective—and survive—only as it focuses on that purpose and its accomplishment.

Note that a Sabbath School class is not automatically a small group, even if it has a small number of members. It must be organized in a way that makes it function as a small group as well as a group of people who meet periodically and call themselves a class.

Small-group Organization

It may sound strange to use the word “technology” for something related to Sabbath School or church work in general. It just means that there are certain ways and means of organizing and running small groups. If these factors are not taken into consideration, small groups will not function properly.

All too many Sabbath School classes are just a collection of people who happen to sit in the same place in the church on Sabbath morning. Using small-group technology will convert that group into an effective learning and service unit.

A small group is usually understood as a quantity—a group of about 6 to 10 people. That’s the ideal. A Sabbath School small group is often determined by the architecture of the church and the seating arrangements. As will be mentioned later, seating arrangements have a lot to do with the effectiveness of small groups. Nevertheless, even under less than ideal conditions, it is still possible to convert groups of people into functioning small groups. Small groups are also linked to the members’ personalities, needs, and level of discipleship.

⁵Kurt W. Johnson, *Successful Small Groups: From Theory to Service*, p. 32.

⁶*Gospel Workers*, p. 193.

Reading 1

Biblical and Historical Perspectives on Small Groups⁷

Kurt Johnson

- ***Be sure to record on your Student Fulfillment Card that you have completed this Reading.***

As David Haney says, "The question Do you believe in small groups? is neither right nor wrong; it is late. It is like asking if one believes in rain or automobiles. Groups *are!* They are springing up spontaneously all over the world wherever God's movement is active and alert."⁸

A casual reading of Scripture informs the reader that small-group and large-group meetings have always been a part of spiritual life and biblical history. Numerous how-to books have been written on the subject, but still many Christians do not understand the biblical principles of small group ministry.

Part of the reason some have shied away from small group ministries is the "bad rap" that small groups have taken over the past 40 years (1950-1990). In the 1950s small groups were seen as psychological therapy units. The 1960s brought the flower children, drugs, Jesus movement, and park and coffeehouse evangelism, out of which emerged sensitivity groups. The 1970s reaction held that privacy was important, and that spilling one's feelings to others was not healthy. All of this cast a shadow on the concept of small groups in some minds.

Because of this reaction, many Christians shied away from the biblical model of groups. There was a fear of damaging one's image by "wrong association." However, several Christian organizations attempted to put a positive spin on this dilemma. They tried to counteract Satan's counterfeit in an attempt to develop a positive small group model for the Christian church. These organizations made a significant contribution in moving the thinking of Christians toward a more positive and biblical model of small groups.

The Christian emphasis in the seventies and eighties was that groups were to build positive fellowship and bonding and unity among Christians. Songs were written that reflected this attitude, such as "We Are One in the Spirit." Fellowship and friendship were emphasized, with Bible study and prayer being secondary. Few regarded outreach to non-Christians as a significant part of group life. If an unbeliever attended the group, that was OK, but it wasn't encouraged. From an Adventist perspective, there were AYA groups for youth. A seminar ministry for adults was developed as an addition or alternative to evangelistic reaping meetings, and Revelation seminars were born. In addition, seminars on health topics and felt need issues sprang up almost overnight.

In the mid-eighties, as relational evangelism methods were being developed and small groups for outreach evangelism were exploding in other countries around the world, small groups began to emerge in Adventism. Interestingly, a North American Division survey of the witnessing methods used in 1990 by Seventh-day Adventists revealed that home fellowship groups were the number one method! In fact, surveys reveal that some type of

⁷Kurt Johnson, *Small Groups for the End Time* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997), chapter 6. This is an earlier edition of your textbook See also chapter 15 in your textbook.

⁸Miquel Cerna, *The Power of Small Groups in the Church* (Newbury Park, Calif.: El Camino Pub., 1991), p. 15.

home meeting/small group and other relational evangelism activities are the preferred choice of most adults under 50 years of age.⁹

As small groups began to gain a foothold in the Adventist Church, some criticism arose. Typical comments were: "Small groups are simply people sitting in a circle and pooling their ignorance"; or "A small group waters down the truth of Scripture"; or "I have never seen a decision for Jesus occur in a group—don't waste your time. Stick with public crusade evangelism." Part of the problem was that many people were basing their view of small groups on the outmoded practices of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, rather than on newer paradigms that were more scriptural. Also, change is difficult, but God's methods must and will adapt and change to a progressive environment. Society and culture never remain static, and we must move on.

Monte Sahlin, in his book *Sharing Our Faith With Friends*, has an excellent chapter on the history of evangelism in the Adventist Church. One section is especially useful for our purposes. Sahlin shares the concept that there have been three eras of evangelism in the Adventist Church. These are:

The Era of Prophetic Evangelism (1844-1900). This period was characterized by an emphasis on the Word of God and a prophetic critique of the established churches. Targets included such social institutions as slavery, alcohol, dress, and diet. Preaching was the key method of this era. The camp meeting was instituted as a means of evangelism and as a key to revival in the Adventist member. The primary focus of evangelism was church planting. More than 1,500 local churches were organized during this time.¹⁰

The Era of Institutional Evangelism (1900-1980). According to Howard B. Weeks, historian of Adventist evangelism, by the year 1900 tent meetings dealing with the topic of prophecy and Adventism were not as successful as they had been. The new era brought a focus on evangelistic preaching on the communication of a Christ-centered system of Adventist doctrine. Evangelistic lessons and standard topic outlines became a key part of the meetings. In this period the average congregation more than tripled in size from 36 members in 1900 to 110 members in 1963. In this era our hospitals, publishing houses, health food industry, and education system grew rapidly. The Adventist approach to ministry, like that of other denominations, was an assembly-line approach. If a method worked, it was packaged and passed along to others. After all, why reinvent the wheel? Since we all have the same goal, many reasoned, let's use the same methods.¹¹

The Era of Relational Evangelism (1980-Present). During the eighties it became more and more difficult to get pastors and congregations to cooperate in traditional institutionalized evangelism. A menu approach was developed. The new era appears to be characterized by an emphasis on sharing one's faith by meeting personal needs, establishing friendships, and then talking about Jesus and Bible doctrines. Fellowship is more important than organization and position and "climbing the ladder." The goal is to meet the needs of people rather than to build up institutional programs. Various methods of previous eras are merged with some newer methods. Home fellowship groups/small groups have emerged as one of the leading strategies of this era.¹²

This historical movement in the Adventist Church in the past few years is a reflection of contemporary society. Large bureaucratic institutions are downsizing. Top-down-controlled systems are giving way to de-centralized democratic networks called quality-control circles. A new paradigm is emerging in which work is accomplished through partnerships,

⁹"Church Members: Involvement, Witnessing, Devotions." North American Division Information System, Report Five (Silver Spring, Md.: North American Division of SDA, 1991), p. 8.

¹⁰Monte Sahlin, *Sharing Your Faith* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn.), pp. 14, 15.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 15-18

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

networking of colleagues and coworkers. People are viewed as more important than productivity. It is believed that if people feel they belong, then productivity will increase. "We have moved from the pyramid to the circle, from power down to power around, from bureaucracy to organic structures that enable a group to serve one another as well as the world."¹³

Some today are saying that the interest in and need for small-group process is a new paradigm shift. However, Christians simply have to look at Christian history and Scripture to realize that this is not the case. Small groups are reflective of God's original intent for His church. Let's look at the supporting evidence, keeping in mind that we are looking at principles. The application of these principles will vary with culture and circumstance.

Old Testament Principles

The principles of small group ministries can be traced to the first verse in the Old Testament, Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."¹⁴ The word for God in the original language is plural, which includes more than one Person involved in Creation. Christian belief holds that the members of the Godhead—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are one in purpose and design—a small group, if you please.

After the human race was created in the image and likeness of God (verse 27), God said something that provides us with something of a rationale for small groups: "'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (2:18, NIV). Men and women were created as social creatures; they live happier and more productive lives in groups. The family unit was given to fulfill basic human needs. Just as a newborn baby needs the love and attention of a family for healthy development, so a newborn child of God needs the nurture that only a small attentive group from the larger church family can give them. Genesis 2:18 does not mean that everyone has to be married to find fulfillment in life, but it does imply that as humans we need each other socially.

When God in Eden created the first man and woman, He formed a small community in relationship to Himself. They walked together "in the cool of the day" (3:8). Next God gave them a task to do together with Him: they were to tend the garden (2:15). They were also told to be fruitful and multiply (1:28), increasing the size of their group.

We see here several key principles of group life. A small group is a minimum of three individuals—two humans and God. They interact and do things together. They desire for others to join their group and add to their social and spiritual development.

Adam and Eve being the first created couple also formed a household and gave birth to all people and nations that followed. Because of sin, God's plan of community and harmony was periodically disrupted, as for example in the dispute between Cain and Abel, and at the Tower of Babel. But God proposed to bring restoration to these fractured relationships. Abraham and his household group were brought into the covenant. The kingdom was promised to David and his household. The plan involved the Israelites as the nation God would use as His example to accomplish this task.

God's organizational structure for Israel involved large, medium, and small group relationships. The nation was composed of groups and sub-groups of various sizes: it was divided into tribes, which were divided into clans, which were divided into families and individual households. In the same manner spiritual Israel, God's church today, needs to have competent and balanced leadership on each level of the organizational structure. If the church overlooks any of these groupings, it will suffer in its mission.

The Old Testament concept of organizing from large to small is also seen in the leadership advice that Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, gave to him while the Israelites were

¹³Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations of Small Group Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 9-12.

¹⁴Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references in this Reading are from The New King James Version.

wandering in the desert. Pastor Moses had a church membership of more than 2 million. Exodus 38:26 states that the church in the wilderness was comprised of 603,550 men. Adding a wife and several children to each couple makes for a large congregation! It was no wonder Moses asked, "How can I alone bear your problems and your burdens and your complaints" (Deut. 1:12). It is obvious that the task facing Moses was impossible. Many pastors today attempt to minister to a congregation with very little assistance. It is impossible for pastors to meet the needs of all their members alone. That is one reason it is important for all members to assist in ministry.

Jethro (Exod. 18:21-23) told Moses to select able men who feared God, men of truth who were not greedy, and place them over the people. He instructed Moses to divide the people into groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. This would mean that Moses needed in approximate round numbers 60,000 leaders of 10; 12,000 leaders of 50; 6,000 leaders of 100; and 600 leaders of 1,000; for a total of 78,600 leaders. Selecting the leaders and writing job descriptions for each must have been quite a task in itself. But God inspired Moses to follow these orders explicitly.

Sometimes pastors and lay leaders say it is not practical, necessary, or possible to organize a church into small groups. But Moses did! His smallest group was a unit of 10 people with a leader—the very subject of this Reading!

Think about what occurred when Moses, and later Joshua, followed God's organizational structure—it led them to the Promised Land of Canaan. This was good, but God wanted them to completely occupy the land. Unfortunately, the Israelites quit before their mission was accomplished. They became complacent and didn't complete the task of winning Canaan completely for God.

Sometimes churches today do the same. Once they establish themselves in a community and attain a certain size, the members become complacent. They grumble that they are large enough already; if they get too big they will become impersonal. And they have many other excuses. But the mission of the church is not accomplished until Jesus returns. Jesus said to go into all the world, to every race, tribe, and people. It is not enough simply to be present in a community; we must "occupy." We must organize the church for service. And group ministry is a part of God's plan.

Jesus and Small Groups

When Jesus was ready to found the Christian church, He began with a small group. Matthew 4:18-22 and Luke 6:13-16 list the 12 disciples Jesus chose. They needed some rough edges of character sanded off, but they were the beginnings of Christianity.

The number 12 is interesting. Sociologists tell us that once a group becomes larger than 12, the dynamic changes and it is no longer a small group but a midsize group. That is why it is important for a small group to divide once it reaches approximately 12 members. If it doesn't, the survival rate is not good, because the small group dynamic is no longer present. However, some groups manage this issue by meeting as a larger group, and then dividing into smaller units that meet throughout the house for discussion and interaction.

Another interesting small group phenomenon occurred within the 12 disciples. Jesus and the other disciples had close friends among themselves. Jesus had a special closeness to Peter, James, and John. In the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26) Jesus asked the three to pray with Him, while the others were left in another part of the garden. Likewise, on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-3). There is nothing wrong with group members bonding with one another; this is quite natural. Encouraging close friendships and prayer partnerships among the various members will assist the group members in ministering to one another and will strengthen your group. In addition, when it is time for your group to divide, encourage the group to divide according to their special relationships, and it will be easier for the group.

Which is more important, small-group or large-group time? The answer is that small groups and large groups should not compete. The church needs both. This is especially true in evangelism, when small groups and reaping crusades are combined to provide nurture

and reaping. When the newly baptized and those still seeking Jesus are placed in groups, there is a weekly accountability and ready-made family to assist in the spiritual growth of the individual. Jesus spent time with the multitudes, time with the individual, and time in homes. He visited the home of Simon the leper; He spent time with the woman at the well; He had an encounter with Zacchaeus. Scripture says that when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them. Small group and large group time is like faith and works—the two cannot be separated.

Jesus spent time with His small group, the disciples. He bonded with them, instructed them, prayed with them, and then took them with Him to observe Him ministering to others. Afterward they retreated into their small group and debriefed and processed their ministry and mission (Matt. 14:13-23; Mark 3:7). A casual reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus spent more time one-on-one or in small-group settings than in large group settings. Why? Because people are saved as individuals, not as a multitude.

Jesus always put people before structure and traditions. His goal was redemptive relationships. He told the disciples if someone wants to be a leader in His organization, they must put others before themselves. One must be willing to serve others and give up selfish goals and desires (Luke 22:24-30). In addition, Jesus told the religious leaders that their priority should be living the principles of the kingdom and not policing the rules of the kingdom. He said it's what's on the inside of the person that counts, not the outward appearance (Luke 17:20, 21).

Once the relationship is correct, obedience will follow. In everything the church does, including small groups, people must be the number one priority. Members should not participate in group life to "fix" one another. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to convict and change lives. The members are to learn and live Scripture and support and pray for one another.

Jesus also used the small group setting with His disciples to train them for service. It was a safe environment to share concerns and questions and be able to grow from the experience. An example is the parable of the sower in Luke 8. The disciples were sitting with the crowd listening to Jesus share the story and its application to life and ministry. When the disciples were alone with Jesus, they asked Him to explain the parable to them. Surely the discussion assisted in their understanding the practices of soul winning. Similarly, the small-group environment provides opportunity for each member to minister to the others in the group, invite their friends and relatives, and learn ministry in a nonthreatening setting.

Jesus used the small-group setting not only for sharing spiritual lessons, but as an environment in which to model leadership. The disciples were jealous of one another and fought with each other about who would be first in the kingdom. He was able to explain to them that the gifts of each person were to work in harmony with those of others under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Luke 22:24-30; Matt. 18:1-5).¹⁵

Home-based small groups were important to Jesus in the formation, development, and success of the Christian church. Often His ministry occurred in the context of a home: "Then Jesus . . . went into the house. And His disciples came to Him" (Matt. 13:36). And while in the house He taught them. "He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat" (Luke 7:36); then He proceeded to teach Simon about forgiveness. In short, Jesus began the Christian church and His ministry to the world through a small group. His example should speak volumes to His church today. It is time we went back to the original design—it is time for small groups!

The Early Christian Church and Small Groups

The early believers called the church a "household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Paul offered encouragement to the young members by continually reminding them they belonged to a

¹⁵Neal F. McBride, *How to Lead Small Groups* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1990), pp. 15-18.

spiritual family. They were members of "the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). Peter used the same metaphor and expanded the concept to mean the members were a "spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5) in which God lived.

This metaphor edged over into reality, because in the first century Christian life centered on private homes. Christians were not allowed to build church buildings until after A.D. 313. The home became the meeting place of the early believers. Four examples are the church in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), the church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19), the church in the house of Philemon (Philemon 2), and the church in the house of Nympha (Col. 4:15). Acts 2:41-47 indicates that the early Christian community was a tightly knit community that shared their resources and met daily for Bible study, fellowship, prayer, and praise.

Clement, one of the early church fathers, describes a house meeting that he visited: "The master of the house welcomed us, and led us to a certain apartment, arranged like a theater, and beautifully built. There we found considerable crowds waiting for us, who had come during the night."¹⁶

There were a variety of types of house meetings. The book of Acts reveals the following types:

- Prayer meeting (12:12)
- Evening of Christian fellowship (21:7)
- Common meals, possibly Communion services (Acts 2:46)
- A night of prayer, worship, and instruction (20:7)
- Impromptu evangelistic gatherings (16:32)
- Planned meetings to present the gospel (10:22)
- Following up of those inquiring about the gospel (18:26)
- For organizational instruction (5:42)

There was balance between the home and public meetings and a "winning combination" in the nurture and evangelistic methods that were followed. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Scripture states that the believers met daily "in the temple courts and from house to house," teaching about Jesus (5:42, NIV). Later we see Paul doing the same. He also taught and evangelized "from house to house" (20:20). Meetings in the homes provided the backbone of the church structure. However, the homes were not the only context in which the church functioned.

Large mass meetings were also part of the evangelistic strategy, such as meetings in the Temple and in synagogues. An example of this is the preaching of Peter in Acts 2, when 3,000 believers were added to the church.

The synagogues were the "church buildings" for the Jews. At first Christians met with them, not considering themselves a separate denomination, but only a reformed group within Judaism. But as Christians continued preaching and teaching, opposition followed from the Jewish leaders. Eventually Christians were barred from the synagogues and were forced to meet in private homes, where neighbors could be invited to discuss and listen to the gospel story with less danger of being interrupted.

However, except at certain periods of intense persecution, Christians were able to witness in the marketplace. An excellent modern-day example of marketplace evangelism was shared with me by one of our Russian leaders. During the height of the persecution of Christians in Russia, public and private meetings of Christians were banned, especially any evangelizing. The believers worked around this as best they could. One way was to go to the open market every week.

One of our pastors took a rooster with him every week and stood in the market with it. Other Adventist Church members would stand and talk with him, pretending they were

¹⁶In Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) p. 208.

discussing the purchase of the rooster. In reality they were discussing the Sabbath School lesson, church business, evangelism, or sometimes giving a Bible study. Sometimes a member would also bring something to sell to the market and would stand by the pastor with the rooster. Staring straight ahead, they would discuss church and spiritual issues. One day a KGB officer approached our pastor and said, "What is wrong with your rooster? You have brought him to the market for weeks. Many people talk to you about it and look it over, but no one buys it!" Through these and other risky methods, the church grew and prospered in Russia.

The early church members must have used similar strategies in times of persecution. Persecution cannot quench the gospel. As one of the church fathers stated, "The blood of Christians is seed."

By the time of the Roman emperor Nero, Christians began to draw attention as a separate group from Judaism. In A.D. 64, 33 years after the death of Jesus, Nero declared that Christians and other specified "sects" could not build churches or other public meeting places. Violators who attempted to worship Jesus publicly could possibly lose their property, Roman citizenship, and in some cases their lives.

We have already seen how Nero and Trajan repressed Christianity by banning public assembly. There is but one historical reference to a building for Christian gatherings prior to A.D. 300, and that was in Persia in A.D. 265, outside the Roman Empire.¹⁷

The strength of the Christian home church during this time was illustrated by an incident in A.D. 170. The Roman emperor issued a decree that Christians in Alexandria were to give up their faith and discontinue their meetings or Roman armies would be sent to destroy them. The bishop of Alexandria (the largest city in Egypt at that time) responded by stating that in order to destroy the Christians, more than half the city's population would have to be executed.

In the fourth century the emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. This decree resulted in church building projects throughout the empire. With religion and government headquarters in Rome, church and state leaders joined hands to promote the growth of Christianity.

The steps leading to Constantine's decree began in A.D. 311 in the city of Nicomedia by the Roman emperor Galerius. Galerius declared "that the purpose of reclaiming the Christians from their willful innovation and the multitude of their sects to the laws and the discipline of Roman state was not accomplished; and that he would now grant them permission to hold their religious assemblies, provided they disturbed not the order of the state."¹⁸

Constantine's decree in A.D. 313 went beyond Galerius' decree. It was a decisive step from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality and protection. It prepared the way for Christianity to be the legally recognized religion of the Roman Empire. The decree ordered the immediate, full restoration of all confiscated church property at the expense of the Roman treasury.¹⁹

Constantine, following his decree, led the way in building church structures with elaborate architecture. He immediately built magnificent churches in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Constantinople.

Eusebius, an early church historian, describes a church built in Tyre between A.D. 313 and 322. He states it included a large porch, a quadrangular atrium surrounded by columns, a fountain in the center of the atrium for those attending to wash their hands and feet before entering, interior porticoes, galleries, altars, thrones for the bishops, and benches for

¹⁷Albert J. Wollen, *Miracles Happen in Group Bible Study* (Glendale, Calif: Regal Books, 1976), p. 30.

¹⁸Phillip Schaff; *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1960), vol. 2, p. 71.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 72.

the church members. Building materials included cedar of Lebanon, granite, and other precious materials.²⁰

Church: Building or Body?

Church/state alliances and institutionalism had a negative effect upon the church. The ensuing period is known today as the Dark Ages. During this time the church's spiritual fellowship and sense of community were to some degree exchanged for buildings, ritual, and formality. The house meeting was virtually lost as the medium of spiritual life. The "church" came to mean a building—bricks and mortar.

Instead of attending church in their homes, the Christians met in the church building for their weekly worship. In place of the weekly home meeting led by the laity, the members now attended a midweek service in the church building led by the priest. The role of the paid clergy changed from equippers, evangelists, overseers, and church planters to worship leaders and preachers. The role of the laity changed from witnesses to spectators and assistants of the paid clergy.

In addition, the church building replaced the home as the center of church life. This is not to imply that public places of worship are wrong. The Christian church must have both home small groups and public meetings. But the church lost its balance. Bill Beckham refers to this balance by the metaphor of "the two-winged church."²¹ He says just as an airplane or bird cannot fly with one wing, so the church cannot accomplish its task imbalanced in its approach. If the church is not balanced in its nurture and evangelism, the world will not be given the gospel message as commissioned by Jesus.

A Spirit-filled Approach

Church members have asked, "What does a Spirit-filled church look like? How is it supposed to function? What methods will it use?" An answer can be found in the second chapter of Acts in the Bible. This chapter is must reading for an understanding of Spirit-filled church life.

A summary of the background of Acts 2 is as follows:

- Jesus told the disciples He was going to return to heaven (John 13:33).
- Jesus told the disciples that He would not leave them alone, but would give them the Holy Spirit (14:15-18).
- Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would be their helper. He would teach them and help them remember what Jesus taught them (verse 26).
- Jesus assured the disciples it was to their advantage that He return to heaven. The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus would send, would convict the world of sin, of right living, and about the need to make a decision for Jesus (16:7-15).
- After His resurrection, just before He returned to heaven, Jesus gave the disciples what Christians call the Great Commission. He told all Christians to go and make disciples, baptize, and teach in all nations (Matt. 28:18-20).
- Jesus then told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come upon them (Acts 1:4).
- Jesus told the disciples that they would receive power and be His witnesses all over the world when the power of the Holy Spirit came upon them (verse 8).

Acts 2 describes the disciples receiving the power of the Holy Spirit. What follows the first four verses is a description of what a Spirit-filled church looks like. In verses 22-36 Peter preaches to the people about the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world, and the Son of God. After hearing the sermon, the people cried, "What shall we do?"

²⁰Ibid., pp 198-202.

²¹William Beckham, *The Two-winged Church Will Fly* (Houston: Torch Outreach Ministries, 1994).

(verse 37). He told them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and 3,000 people responded to the call and were baptized (verses 38-41).

What follows the baptism is a description of what church life was like for these newly baptized members of the newly formed, relatively pristine, Spirit-filled church. Verse 42 describes four items that were part of their daily life. First, the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings. Today we would call this Bible study. Second, there was fellowship—love, caring, sharing, nurture—with one another. Third, they broke bread together. They shared a common meal daily. Fourth, they prayed together.

Verse 43 adds a fifth element. It says there were miracles and signs that occurred in the church. Other Bible references mention conversions, healings, and even resurrections.

Verses 44 and 45 add a sixth dimension. They state that the believers "had all things in common" (verse 45) and gave of their physical possessions to anyone who had need. Some believers had lost their possessions when they became Christians. New Christians sometimes found themselves without a job, money, or a home. Thus the members of the church assisted one another and met the personal needs of its members. Today those needs might include financial help with food, housing, utilities, or medical bills. In addition it might include alcohol and drug rehabilitation and recovery from other addictive habits.

Verse 45 states that the members met in the "temple" (mass meeting) and "house to house" (small home meeting and one-on-one friendship evangelism), and "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (verse 47). The mass meetings and home meetings not only provided support, fellowship, and social life, but soul winning occurred—people were baptized. Some say that the purpose of small groups is to meet social needs. That is true—but the biblical model also produces decisions for Jesus Christ! If your small group does not have outreach as part of its format, then your group is not following the God-given model found in Acts 2.

In one small group, members were studying Bible prophecy and had Christians and seekers (people who haven't accepted Jesus) attending. During the meeting it was obvious that Martha, one of the non-Christians, did not understand the Bible study. At the end of the meeting Martha said that she was going to become a Christian and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was clear that she did not understand the prophecy in Daniel 9 that the group had just studied. When Martha was asked about her understanding of the teachings of the Adventist Church, she responded, "There are some things I don't understand. But those that I do understand I know are true. Once I continue to study and understand that which is not clear to me, I know I will find it biblical, because everything I have understood so far is rooted in Scripture. Besides, these people love me; they are my family."

This is what small groups are all about!

Reading 2

The Adventist Church and Small Groups²²

- ***Be sure to record on your Student Fulfillment Card that you have completed this Reading.***

The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew out of the Millerite movement of the 1840s, which drew adherents from several mainline denominations. One of these was the Methodist Church. Ellen White was baptized into the Methodist Church in 1842. She described the event in these words:

“It was a windy day when we, twelve in number, went down into the sea to be baptized. The waves ran high and dashed upon the shore, but as I took up this heavy cross, my peace was like a river. When I arose from the water, my strength was nearly gone, for the power of the Lord rested upon me. I felt that henceforth I was not of this world, but had risen from the watery grave into a newness of life. The same day in the afternoon I was received into the church in full membership.” — *Life Sketches*, p. 25.

As a member in the Methodist Church, Ellen White became involved in what were called “class meetings.”²³ This practice originated in England, and later developed into our weekly prayer meeting. In order to understand this, we must go back to England in the nineteenth century and review the ministry of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church.

In the years following the Reformation, Christianity continued to enjoy popular acceptance, but church institutional formality returned. Because of this, home group meetings withered, and the influence of Christianity declined in the early eighteenth century in the face of the European Industrial Revolution. But John Wesley and George Whitefield were used by God to spearhead a spiritual revival in England.

Wesley and Whitefield traveled the English countryside, calling people back to God. As individuals made decisions for Christ, they were organized into societies. These societies met together in rented facilities for prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and worship.²⁴

In Bristol, England, a problem arose in various societies concerning how to raise the money to pay their monthly rent for public meeting places. Consequently, Wesley divided the societies into groups of 12 individuals. He assigned a leader in each group to collect a penny weekly from each family to pay the rent. As the leaders collected the pennies, they reported back to Wesley that they discovered drinking problems, marriage difficulties, and other situations that shouldn't be a part of the Christian lifestyle.

After this revelation the collection plan was revised. The 12 group members began to meet in one of the members' houses, and they began to discuss openly their personal problems for mutual edification.²⁵

The spiritual and personal growth in the lives of the society group members was phenomenal. Word of the positive influence of the Bristol societies traveled to London. Within a short time the London society divided into groups of 12. Out of this simple beginning came the Methodist class meetings. These groups provided Bible study, prayer,

²²Kurt Johnson, *Small Groups for the End Time*, (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997). Chapter 7. See chapter 16 in your textbook.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁴John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1954), pp. 129-136.

²⁵B. Waugh and T. Mason, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley* (1832), vol. 7, p. 12.

testimonies, and fellowship. It was from this group process that the Wesleyan revival in England flourished. It was a revival led by lay members, not paid clergy—lay members opening the Bible in homes all across England.

Wesley's movement (called Methodist because they followed specific methods to accomplish ministry) eventually jumped the Atlantic. Churches were built, and public meetings combined with the small class meetings provided the basis for the growth of Methodism in the United States.²⁶

The small group movement in Methodism also had an impact on the Seventh-day Adventist Church because of the influence of Ellen White. In her youth she became involved in the Millerite movement and the subsequent formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Early in her experience Ellen White recognized the positive spiritual benefits of small group ministry. Consequently, she penned the following statements under the direction of God:

“Preach less, and educate more, by holding Bible-readings, and by praying with families and little companies. To all who are working with Christ I would say, Wherever you can gain access to the people by the fireside, improve your opportunity. Take your Bible, and open before them its great truths. Your success will not depend so much upon your knowledge and accomplishments, as upon your ability to find your way to the heart. By being social and coming close to the people, you may turn the current of their thoughts more readily than by the most able discourse. The presentation of Christ in the family, by the fireside, and in small gatherings in private houses, is often more successful in winning souls to Jesus than are sermons delivered in the open air, to the moving throng, or even in halls or churches.” —*Gospel Workers*, p. 193.

“Let small companies assemble together in the evening or early morning to study the Bible for themselves. Let them have a season of prayer that they may be strengthened and enlightened and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. . . . If you will do this, a great blessing will come to you from the One who gave His whole life to service, the One who redeemed you by His own life. . . . What testimonies you should bear of the loving acquaintance you have made with your fellow workers in these precious seasons when seeking the blessing of God. Let each tell his experience in simple words. . . . Let little companies meet together to study the Scriptures. You will lose nothing by this, but will gain much.” — *This Day With God*, p. 11.

Ellen White had another opportunity to observe the impact of small groups upon a country and a city. From 1891 to 1900 Ellen White was in Australia assisting with the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While in Australia she assisted in the establishment of Avondale College and wrote several books, such as *The Desire of Ages* and *Steps to Christ*.

I believe God placed Ellen White in Australia for another significant reason. Ellen White had already experienced firsthand the power of small groups. Now God was placing her in a country where a small group revival was taking place. This would also provide an opportunity to rein-force the spiritual power of small group ministries in the mind and experience of Ellen White.

During the 1890s in Australia, the time of Ellen White's ministry there, events took place that were related to what is known today as the Welsh Revival. The clergy in and around Melbourne met together to pray for the spiritual health of their members and compatriots. The pastors gained so much strength from this time together that they believed the best thing they could do for their members' well-being was to organize them

²⁶A. J. Wollen, *Miracles Happen in Group Bible Study*, p. 36.

into similar groups for Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. Consequently, in the city of Melbourne 2,000 home meetings were occurring weekly at the peak of the revival.

The Melbourne pastors involved in small group ministry invited R. A. Torrey to come from America and conduct an evangelistic campaign. The result was a tremendous revival.

A young woman was visiting Melbourne at this time from Wales. Taking her spiritual experience back to Wales, she assisted in the cottage prayer meetings of Wales. The cottage meeting contributed to the Welsh Revival, which had a tremendous impact on the development and growth of Christianity in Wales.²⁷

During this same time period that impacted the Christian church in Australia, God emphasized to Ellen White the importance of small group ministry:

"The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members but for unbelievers also." — *Evangelism*, p. 115.

"But on such occasions as our annual camp meetings we must never lose sight of the opportunities afforded for teaching the believers how to do practical missionary work in the place where they may live. In many instances it would be well to set apart certain men to carry the burden of different lines of educational work at these meetings. Let some help the people to learn how to give Bible readings and to conduct cottage meetings. Let others bear the burden of teaching the people how to practice the principles of health and temperance, and how to give treatments to the sick. Still others may labor in the interests of our periodical and book work." — *Testimonies*, vol. 9, pp. 82, 83.

"Let the teachers in our schools devote Sunday to missionary effort. Let them take the students with them to hold meetings for those who know not the truth. Sunday can be used for carrying forward various lines of work that will accomplish much for the Lord. On this day house-to-house work can be done. Open-air meetings and cottage meetings can be held." — *Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, p. 551.

As can be seen through history and the pen of Ellen White, God has eternal purposes in mind through small groups. As God revealed events occur preceding the second coming of Jesus, small groups and sharing the Scriptures with neighbors are an important part of God's plan. The following comments are very convincing:

"In visions of the night, representations passed before me of a great reformatory movement among God's people. Many were praising God. The sick were healed, and other miracles were wrought. A spirit of inter-cession was seen, even as was manifested before the great Day of Pentecost. Hundreds and thousands were seen visiting families and opening before them the Word of God. Hearts were convicted by the power of the Holy Spirit, and a spirit of genuine conversion was manifest. On every side doors were thrown open to the proclamation of the truth. The world seemed to be lightened with the heavenly influence. Great blessings were received by the true and humble people of God. I heard voices of thanksgiving and praise, and there seemed to be a reformation such as we witnessed in 1844." — *Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 126.

²⁷Wollen, pp. 36, 37.

"I saw the saints leaving the cities and villages, and associating together in companies, and living in the most solitary places. Angels provided them food and water, while the wicked were suffering from hunger and thirst." — *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882) p. 282.

Ellen White uses terms such as cottage meetings, small companies, little companies, and small gatherings to refer to what we call today small groups. Consider the elements of her counsel:

- God told her that large churches should have small groups.
- Small groups commonly meet in "private houses."
- Meet by the "fireside."
- Meet in the evening or morning, whichever is convenient for one's schedule.
- The purpose of the meeting is to minister to baptized "church members"; for "winning souls to Jesus"; to minister to "unbelievers."

What is done during the meeting? (1) "open your Bibles," "study the Bible," "present Christ," "Bible readings"; (2) pray; (3) "be social," "come close to the people," "find your way to the heart"; (4) "share testimonies."

Ellen White's comments concerning small group life reflect very closely the elements of Acts 2:42-47: doctrinal study, home fellowship, prayer, food, and outreach.

Types of Adventist Meetings

Ellen White used several terms in describing various types of meetings in the Adventist Church. The terminology and practice has varied somewhat over the years, but the principles remain.

1. *Cottage Meeting*: This was a small group meeting during the week for Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and sharing of testimonies. The emphasis was on Bible study. The group usually met in private homes. The groups followed a format in their meetings that reached out to both church members and unbelievers. The terms *little companies* and *small companies* appear to refer to these cottage meetings.

2. *Bible Readings*: C. Mervyn Maxwell, Adventist Church historian, states that the first Bible reading in the Adventist Church occurred as the result of a storm during a camp meeting in California. When the noise of the storm made preaching impractical, someone picked up a Bible and began asking questions along a doctrinal theme, inviting the congregation to look up the texts that answered the questions. This simple question and-answer method caught on and became quite popular. Eventually a call went out for people to send in their favorite Bible readings. The best of these were compiled in 1888 into the first edition of the book *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*.

Evidently the Bible reading was similar to what we would call today a seminar or workshop. At times Ellen White refers to church members giving Bible readings and meeting in small companies as if they are two different meetings. At other times it would appear as if the two meetings could be held simultaneously. Evidently the home could be used not only for small group meetings, but for a Bible lecture series similar to the seminars conducted today, such as Revelation or Daniel seminars, Discover Jesus seminars, etc.

In an earlier chapter I referred to a newspaper interview in Indiana with Adventist evangelist G. B. Starr, in which Starr explains Bible readings: "Bible reading is another class of work. The workers go from house to house holding Bible readings with from one to twenty individuals. Last year they gave 10,000 of such Bible readings."²⁸ It appears that a Bible reading involved as few people or as many as would fit into a home.

²⁸G. B. Starr, in Wabash, Indiana, *Plain Dealer*, Oct. 1, 1886, p. 5.

3. *Social Meeting*.²⁹ In the mid-nineteenth century, the Methodist class meeting was changing into a weekly prayer meeting that included social dimensions. The Adventist Church also included a social meeting as part of its services. The social meeting was often held after a preaching service, sometimes midweek, but frequently on Sabbath. The social meeting allowed the congregation time to share personally the benefit they received from the sermon or Bible study presentation. At other times the social meeting was held in lieu of a sermon, as early Adventists did not have regular assigned pastors. In these situations, the meeting followed the Sabbath school time.

The social meeting included prayer, testimonies, words of encouragement to one another, singing, and fellowship. The meeting was very similar to the elements contained in what we today would call a praise, prayer, and testimony service. One difference was that the social meeting was not limited to a certain number of attendees. In some cases, if the congregation was too large, the participants would divide into smaller groups to give everyone an opportunity to participate.

James White, in *Life Incidents*, provides us with a glimpse of an effective meeting:

"Social meetings were marked with great solemnity. Sins were confessed with tears, and there was a general breaking down before God, and strong pleadings for pardon, and a fitness to meet the Lord at His coming. And the humble disciples of the Lord did not seek His face in vain. Before that meeting closed, hundreds testified with tears of joy that they had sought the Lord and found Him, and had tasted the sweets of sins forgiven."³⁰

"During one social meeting 117 testimonies were given in 53 minutes. All right to the point."³¹

A review of early Adventist articles and letters demonstrates that the social meeting was a key part of church life, and attendance was even considered a duty by some. The social meeting was the time to build community among the members through prayer and testimonies. Ellen White said it was essential for the church to have social meetings and that young ministers should be taught how to conduct social meetings.³²

In 1882 Ellen White described such a meeting in these words:

"The prayer and social meetings should be the most interesting gatherings that are held. Plans should be laid, and wisdom sought of God, to conduct these meetings so that they will be interesting and attractive. The people hunger for the bread of life. If they find it at the prayer meeting, they will go there to receive it. Long, prosy talks and prayers are out of place any-where, and especially in the social meeting. They weary the angels as well as the people who listen to them. Our prayers should be short, and right to the point. Let the Spirit of God pervade the hearts of the worshipers, and it will sweep away all formality and dullness."³³

²⁹Much of the research information shared concerning social meetings is taken from a research project by Russell Burrill entitled "A Biblical and Adventist Historical Study of Small Groups as a Basis for Mission," May 1996.

³⁰James White, *Life Incidents* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of SDA Pub. Assn., 1868), vol. 1, p. 167. Here James White is speaking of social meetings during the Millerite movement.

³¹J. N. Loughborough, *Miracles in My Life* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Leaves of Autumn Books, 1987), p. 88.

³²E. G. White, "Labor at the Camp-Meetings," *Signs of the Times*, May 17, 1883.

³³E. G. White, "Christian Work," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 10, 1882.

The social meeting in the Adventist Church evolved, or devolved, into a prayer meeting that went from the original plan of prayer, praise, and testimony to a pastoral sermon followed by a few minutes of prayer. Today some churches don't even have a prayer meeting. If they do, only a few attend. We need to go back to the original format, which involves a more relational approach. Some of the prayer conferences of the 1990s in the Adventist Church closely reflect the characteristics of the social meeting.

4. Open-Air Meetings/Camp Meetings: Winning souls has always been an Adventist priority. Early Adventists preached wherever and whenever there was opportunity. Because of lack of funds to rent public buildings and because many times large public facilities were not available, meetings were conducted outside. An example was an evangelistic meeting in May of 1854 at Locke, Ingham County, Michigan. "The schoolhouse they used would not hold half the audience, so the speaker stood in the open window and spoke both to those in the house and to a larger crowd on the grass and in their carriages."³⁴ In addition, large crowds would gather on the property of someone's farm or in a central public gathering place.

Tents for public meetings were a novelty, especially in the western United States in the mid-1800s. Simply by putting up a tent one could attract a crowd. Thus tents and open-air meetings were very successful. The first SDA camp meeting was held in 1868 in a maple grove on the farm of Elder E. H. Root, at Wright, Michigan. It was an outdoor meeting with the use of both open-air seating and tents.

"The earlier camp meetings were planned not alone for the spiritual blessing of believers but as evangelistic efforts for the general public; therefore, it was the policy to change the place of meeting each year; and much of the preaching, especially in the evening and on Sunday, was with this purpose in mind. This plan was advocated by Mrs. White as late as 1900."³⁵

5. Sabbath Worship Service: A vital part of Adventism was the Sabbath services. These usually involved a Sabbath school of Bible study, prayer, and fellowship, with outreach and learning leadership skills as an essential part. The service that followed was a preaching service or a social meeting.

6. Personal Visitation: Today we use the term friendship evangelism in reflecting this point. The key ingredients involve establishing social relationships with attending non-members, neighbors, and work associates, with the goal in mind of meeting their needs and introducing them to Jesus through Bible study and personal experience.

7. Personal Prayer and Bible Study: The Bible states that Jesus spent much time in prayer. If Christians are to grow spiritually, or have an effective ministry, they must spend time daily with God.

A local church that incorporates the stated seven items will have a balanced program of nurture and outreach. There will be opportunities for the Holy Spirit to make an impact on their ministry. Not only will the Spirit move and act in the personal lives of the members, but lives will be changed as the plans of God are followed. Ellen White stated it well when she said, "Surrender all your plans to Him, to be carried out or given up as His providence shall indicate. Thus day by day you may be giving your life into the hands of God, and thus your life will be molded more and more after the life of Christ."³⁶

³⁴Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1962), vol. 2, p. 7.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 17, 18.

³⁶E. G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1982), p. 70.

I talked to one of the pastors in southern Oregon recently. He was excited about the baptisms and increasing number of small groups in his church during the past few months. My friend told me that usually he has to encourage new groups to start. However, his members have now seen the benefit of the small groups. Following the recent reaping crusade one of the men in his church said, "We must place the new members and interests in small groups. We don't have enough groups, so we need to start three more." Other members followed his lead and, on their own, organized enough groups to meet the current needs of the church. My pastor friend told me it was exciting to watch his members take the lead. The equipping, mentoring, and vision-casting had paid off!

Assignment 1

What Is a Small Group?

➤ ***Be sure to record on your Student Fulfillment Card that you have completed this assignment.***

1. What did you learn from Readings 1 and 2 that you did not know before?
2. How does this new knowledge help you as a Sabbath School teacher/discussion leader?
3. In the light of what we are studying about small group Sabbath school classes, what is your reaction to this case study? (If you have studied other courses in this Teacher Enhancement Curriculum you have seen this case study before).

Case study: Mrs. Johnson, the newly appointed teacher, slipped so quietly into a seat in the adult classroom that no one noticed her arrival. The teacher for the past year had not yet come, and the class members who were present were interested in a story one of their members was telling.

Just then Mr. Bozeman, the retiring teacher, came in with his wife. He glanced at his watch and said, "Let us stop talking now and get to the lesson." Silence settled on the group. "Our lesson today deals with the woman at the well in Samaria." He followed the outline in the Quarterly question by question, speaking extemporaneously on each verse.

Clara Walsh and Mrs. Mason conversed in an undertone most of the time. Mrs. Adkins dozed. Mrs. Joiner nervously folded and unfolded her handkerchief. Dr. Martin looked steadily out of the window. Only Miss Calloway seemed to be paying any attention. She listened with deep interest.

Mrs. Johnson, in talking with Mr. Bozeman at the close of the class study, asked, "Don't they ever discuss the lesson?"

"Why should they? They like to sit still and just listen. That's why they are so easy to teach," Mr. Bozeman informed her. "All you have to do is get up a talk on the lesson. Half an hour of study on Friday night is enough. No one studies, and anyone who is a good talker can teach them."

UNIT 3

The Sabbath School Class as a Small Group

Here are some basic principles that determine how a Sabbath School class can become a functioning small group.

Converting a Sabbath School class into a small group does not change the membership; it changes the way the class is managed.

Small group Sabbath School classes intentionally find ways and means within their structure to implement all four purposes of Sabbath School: (1) Study of the Word, (2) fellowship, (3) community outreach and, (4) world mission emphasis.

Principle 1

Small groups must have adequate, consistent leadership. This should be no different from the normal management of a Sabbath School class, but with a small group it is indispensable. A small group becomes a type of small community. It does more than just meet once a week. The small group leader becomes a model to be emulated. As Paul remarked: "Brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example" (Phil. 3:17, NLT).

Principle 2

Small groups must have informed, spiritually gifted teacher/discussion leaders. This should go without saying, but it is vital to the successful management of a small group Sabbath School class.

A Sabbath School class cannot become a small-group type Sabbath School class if the teacher/discussion leader (or whatever name is used) does nothing but lecture. A small-group Sabbath School class can operate only when the teacher functions as a facilitator and leads the group in open and free discussion of the topic or Bible book being studied.

The primary reason for having a small number of people in a group is so that each will have the opportunity of participating within the timeframe of the class meeting.

Principle 3

Small groups must have an organized, well-developed curriculum. Fortunately, the Seventh-day Adventist Church provides this for adult Sabbath School classes.

Principle 4

A small group Sabbath School class must develop a system of recognizing and greeting visitors, and keeping in contact with those who are absent. This is the fellowship aspect of the small group, and is one of the key reasons for its existence.

It is significant that the North American Division study on Sabbath Schools revealed that most feel the Sabbath School is the most important group in the life of the church.

Assignment 2

Developing a Small Group Environment

➤ *Be sure to record on your Student Fulfillment Card that you have completed this Reading.*

1. Describe in some detail your understanding of the difference between a regular Sabbath School class and a small group Sabbath School class.

2. Describe how you might go about changing your current class from a regular Sabbath School class into a small group Sabbath School class.

UNIT 4

How to Organize and Run a Small-group Sabbath School Class

All small groups have some things in common. The following information applies to all small groups and must be adapted to the small-group Sabbath School class. Nevertheless, it is vital to understand the inner workings of a small group, and find ways and means of applying this understanding to a small-group Sabbath School class.

Basic Organizational Questions

Any small group has to ask itself certain logistical questions. In a small group Sabbath School class question one needs some definition and explanation. The rest of the questions can be answered more or less spontaneously, or are developments based on question one:

1. What is the purpose of this group?
2. Where will the group meet?
3. When will the group meet?
4. How long will the meetings be?
5. For how many weeks will the group meet?

Defining and Shaping the Purpose and Organization of the Group

A carefully defined and applied answer to question one is precisely what turns a normal Sabbath School class into a small-group Sabbath School class.

A small group Sabbath School class is part of the overall Sabbath School organization of the church. Where and when it meets is usually decided by the overall programming of the local church. Whatever it does in implementing small-group technology on Sabbath morning must be done within the timeframe allotted.

In addition to the Sabbath morning class session, a small group Sabbath School class will organize and carry out additional activities that facilitate the small-group philosophy, such as additional periodic study sessions in someone's home or some other chosen venue, periodic social events, etc.

It can also design and apply ways and means of keeping contact with members through sending birthday cards, publishing a class newsletter either in print or by email, making telephone calls, developing a class website, and making periodic visits to class members.

It is difficult to include much more than the lesson study in a 40 to 50-minute class period setting, but a small-group Sabbath School class should take at least five minutes to welcome visitors, have prayer, and attend to absentee contacts.

How fast can you make the shift?

Converting a "normal" Sabbath School class into a small group does not happen overnight. It usually requires some careful and judicious training, and possibly convincing, of the class members themselves, because it is a new "paradigm" (a way of doing things). Start slowly, add new elements as quickly as you sense that the class can handle them and the members are willing to participate. Too many class members are used to classes like that of Mr. Bozeman in the Assignment 1 case study.

Space and seating

Space and seating arrangements are vital parts of small-group management, and are often the primary problem the class must resolve.

The ideal seating arrangement is a circle of chairs. In this arrangement, everyone is on an equal plane and everyone can participate equally. There are no "front row seats" or "back

row seats." The teacher/discussion leader is also part of the group rather than being separated by a desk or pew or standing in front of the class.

Many Sabbath School classes meet in the church where the pews are fixed in rows. Even there, however, a class can group itself in a makeshift "circle" by huddling at the ends of two pews as close together as feasible—not very comfortable, but more efficient for a small group atmosphere.

Sometimes with a little initiative and searching, unused space can be found for small-group Sabbath School classes. A circle of chairs in a little used space in a church hallway might work. Many churches have some rooms filled with all kinds of things that might be cleaned out and the space used for a small-group Sabbath School class.

The space between the first pew and the platform at the front of the church is sometimes wide enough for a circle of chairs. Maybe some movable partitions can be installed in a church fellowship hall to make temporary "classrooms" for small group Sabbath School classes.

A little initiative and creativity can produce all kinds of effective results.

Outreach strategies

Small groups are an ideal structure for outreach and soul winning. "The Sabbath school," writes Ellen G White, "should be one of the greatest instrumentalities, and the most effectual, in bringing souls to Christ." — *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 10.

Research conducted in both Sunday schools and Sabbath Schools indicates that outreach and soul winning are vital for the very life of the activity. Research shows that when Sunday or Sabbath Schools abandon soul-winning activities, attendance immediately begins to shrink. When these activities are put back into the Sabbath School, attendance begins to increase again.³⁷

Activities such as branch Sabbath Schools, home visitation, Discover Bible School from the Voice of Prophecy, Internet Bible studies, follow-up on missing or non-attending members all fall under the umbrella of outreach activities.

Sabbath School Action Units

One way to organize an entire Sabbath School around small-group Sabbath School classes is the Sabbath School Action Unit plan. In this system, more time is given to the class and less time is spent in the opening preliminaries used by most Sabbath Schools. Sabbath School Action Units combine study of the lesson, fellowship, community outreach, and world mission emphasis in a small-group setting.

They are not the same as traditional Sabbath School classes, but a greatly enhanced way of using small-group technology to revitalize Sabbath School. Originally, they were called "Evangelistic Units," but someone thought that "Action Unit" gave a broader focus to the overall organization of this type of Sabbath School class.

An individual Sabbath School class can become an "Action Unit," but it needs more than 40 minutes to do so.

How an Action Unit Is Organized

Here are some advantages of Sabbath School Action Units:

- They contribute to a finished work through focused, coordinated effort.
- They turn spectators into participants.
- They provide an excellent training school.
- They prepare members for effective outreach.
- They enable members to win and retain non-attenders.
- They assist members in reaching their own goals.

³⁷See Charles Arn, et.al., *Growth: A New Vision for the Sunday School* (Pasadena, Calif.: Church Growth Press, 1980).

Leadership

A Sabbath School Action Unit has two leaders: (1) a teacher/discussion leader and, (2) a Care Coordinator. The teacher/discussion leader still fulfills all the requirements and preparation/presentation skills of a Sabbath School teacher, but uses these skills to invoke the participation of the group members. The Care Coordinator is the pastor/administrator/chaplain of the group. He or she cares for the fellowship and outreach aspects of the class activities.

The teacher/discussion leader reviews the high points of the lesson, secures participation, and applies the lesson to life. The Care Coordinator is the designate for an outreach project that fulfills the community outreach objective of Sabbath School. Each Sabbath School Action Unit should have a project.

Sabbath School Action Unit Timeframe

If a Sabbath School decides to use the Sabbath School Action Unit plan, it will reorganize its program. The preliminaries will consist of an opening song and prayer and possibly an announcement or two. Sabbath School Action Units are scheduled for one hour. The hour is divided into the following segments:

- 5 min. Caring for missing members and other needs the class may be interested in
- 15 min Care Coordinator calls for experiences related to class plan, assigns visits, promotes the class plan and/or conducts prayer session
- 40 min Lesson study

World mission emphasis may be a general assembly presentation using the DVD presentation or mission report prepared by the world church, or it may be a periodic presentation during the outreach segment in each Action Unit.

Monthly Home Fellowship/Evaluation

Ideally, each Sabbath School Action Unit will meet in someone's home for fellowship once a month. This is one of the ties that binds the class together and transforms it into a functional small group. This is a time for both general fellowship and for evaluation in a non-formal environment of how the group is doing.

Course Summary

Incorporating small group technology in the organization and functioning of a Sabbath School class is an ideal way to enhance the effectiveness of the class in fulfilling the four purposes of Sabbath School.

Sabbath School classes that function as small groups are the ideal for any Sabbath School. Put this into action in your Sabbath School and you will be amazed at the results.

Student Fulfillment Card

Small Group Dynamics

Name: _____

Church/District _____

This Fulfillment Card is the record that you have successfully completed the Advanced Skills course *Small Group Dynamics* of the North American Division Adult Ministries Department Sabbath School Teacher training curriculum. When all the items are completed, have the Fulfillment Card signed by the appropriate person (your class instructor, your Internet instructor, a Sabbath School superintendent, person in charge of Sabbath School teachers in your church/district, your pastor or someone from the conference in charge of Sabbath School teacher training).

Check the items completed.

- I have read the four Units of the Course Study Guide.
- I have read the textbook.
- I have completed Reading 1: Biblical and Historical Perspectives on Small Groups.
- I have completed Reading 2: The Adventist Church and Small Groups.
- I have completed Assignment 1: What Is a Small Group?
- I have completed Assignment 2: Developing a Small Group Environment.
- I have completed Assignment 3: Small Group Sabbath School Organization.
- I have completed Assignment 4: Textbook Report.

_____ has satisfactorily completed the course *Small Group Dynamics*.

(Signature) _____

Date _____

Position _____

Please submit to www.nadadultministries.org