

Releasing Into Ministry



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 18:13–26; Matt. 7:17, 18; Acts 6:1–8; John 4:36; Acts 15:36–40.*

Memory Text: “And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’ ” (*Romans 10:15, NKJV*).

Key Thought: It is not enough that people be trained for evangelism and witnessing work; they must actively work for souls.

Many church members lament the fact that although they are prepared to attend witnessing and evangelism training seminars, they are not encouraged to become involved when they return to their home church. Consequently, many churches that are not very active in witnessing and evangelistic activities are unaware of the well-trained people in their midst. Occasionally some people will voluntarily offer their services, but many others conclude that they are either not needed or not wanted. The most successful way to stifle member involvement in any church activity is to deny them involvement in areas in which they are equipped to function. It is the responsibility of every local church to discover where, and how, each member can contribute to the witnessing and evangelism strategies of the church. All who are willing do have a place. The key is to find that place.

This week we will explore the concept of intentionally sending out gospel workers and the ways in which maximum member involvement contributes to overall church harmony and spiritual and numerical growth.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 2.*

Shared Responsibility

Many a dedicated church leader has cut short, or at best diminished, his or her effectiveness by unwillingness to share the ministry load with others. This is not a new problem generated by our fast-paced modern world. Even the great Old Testament leader Moses needed some help in order to see the big picture of shared leadership. We can learn much from his experience and the good advice received from his father-in-law, Jethro.

Carefully read Exodus 18:13–26. What significance do you see in the words “let them” in verse 22?

We can only guess at how long Moses would have been able to keep up his unrealistic work schedule. Likewise, we can only surmise as to what extent Moses was aware of the availability of capable helpers. What the story does reveal, however, is that there were many who were able and willing to help. Moses would need to let them become involved, delegating certain duties of leadership to them.

The ministry that church leaders must willingly share includes witnessing and evangelism. The principles of properly organized and shared responsibility that we glean from Moses’ experience are invaluable to our efforts to win souls for the kingdom.

What significance do you see in the way that Moses chose men with specific characteristics (*vs. 21*) and gave them varied degrees of responsibility (*vs. 25*)? How would these principles apply to the evangelistic strategies of today’s churches?

It was probably the intense spiritual nature of the task of speaking for God that made Moses reticent to share his responsibilities. We, too, sense the awesome responsibility of talking to people about God and speaking for God. Our witnessing and evangelism is serious business. We are mindful that eternal lives are at stake. And while this would, and should, cause us to be careful as to how we proceed, we must be ever willing to involve everyone in outreach and evangelism.

Read again Exodus 18:21, 22. Notice that the newly appointed leadership made their ministry of the leaders available at all times. Thus, we should always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us.

Risking for Success

Members of Seventh-day Adventist churches have tremendous ministry potential. Many are enthusiastic about involvement in their church's evangelism strategies; however, those in leadership are sometimes reticent to let them get involved. Behind this "only professionals can do it" mind-set is the fear that church members may do or say something wrong, causing people to turn away from Christ and His church. Sadly, this resistance to member involvement is so ingrained that it prevails even when people have been adequately trained for a ministry. The Holy Spirit and the promises He brings aren't just for the leaders; they are for all who are willing to surrender in faith and submission to the Lord, for all who are willing to deny self and work for the salvation of others.

What principle taught by Jesus in Matthew 7:17, 18 should allay the fears of concerned leaders? How do we distinguish between good and bad fruit, and how should the church leadership as a whole be involved in this process? Also, how do we do this without judging others?

If every sound tree bears good fruit, church leaders should focus on growing sound trees. As with everything that has to do with our response to the gospel call, we must first be someone for Jesus before we can successfully do things for Him. If we give adequate attention to the leading of people into a meaningful and deepening relationship with Jesus, the Holy Spirit will ensure that they bear the right fruit. Our part is to lead, teach, and train. God's part is to bless their ministry. We need to trust them and God. If we give adequate attention to spiritual growth and practical skills, we can trust people to produce the right fruit of evangelistic success. Certainly, there may be an element of risk depending on the ministry undertaken and the level of training, but we must remember that even the disciples, who had the greatest Teacher ever, never won every soul to whom they appealed.

Have you ever felt that your gifts and talents were not appreciated? What might be the cause? Look inside yourself and see if, perhaps, the fault might lie there with you and some of your own attitudes (pride, and so on) instead of somewhere else?

Matching the Laborers With the Harvest

When people show an interest in learning more about God and His church, we must choose carefully the ones who will be given the task of witnessing to them. In a multicultural society, we would do well to assign someone of the same nationality and language as the inquirer and possibly someone of a similar age group. Furthermore, we would consider the spiritual maturity, biblical knowledge, communication skills, and salvation experience of the worker. In other words, we should take seriously the matching of the laborer to those with whom he or she will be working.

When it comes to witnessing and evangelism, there is no such thing as one size fits all. There is uniqueness to everyone's life journey and uniqueness to each one's spiritual journey. However, while this uniqueness exists, there are also similarities in people's experiences, and it makes good sense to match as well as possible the experiences of the believer and the seeker.

Read Acts 6:1–8. What tasks are listed here? What were the results when specific ministries and abilities were matched?

Notice the progression of these events: the disciples were made aware of a pressing problem. The disciples asked the believers to find seven men to address the problem. The believers brought their selection to the disciples. The disciples appointed them with the laying on of hands, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly.

Although Stephen and the other six appointees were to “serve tables,” the qualification for this task did not seem to be that they had the ability to organize and distribute food. The believers still looked for spirit-filled men because their ministry to the Greek-speaking Jewish widows would also be a witnessing and evangelism work. Thus, we see that the newly appointed men were crucial to the evangelism of the early church in that they freed up the frontline evangelists and also actively supported their work (*see vs. 8*). Again we can affirm that any ministry that church members get involved in will directly or indirectly contribute to, and support, witnessing and evangelism endeavors of a church.

Although natural talents, spiritual gifts, and specific training are important to a successful church ministry, personal attitudes are, perhaps, even more important. Notice that in Acts 16:1–5 and Acts 4:36, 37, both Timothy and Barnabas had the attitude of doing whatever it took to support this gospel ministry. Barnabas would give of his personal means, and Timothy would submit to circumcision so as not to offend some Jews. The lessons for us are, indeed, obvious.

Spiritual Growth Through Ministry Involvement

Spiritual growth comes only as we connect with Jesus. It cannot be produced by human beings simply performing specific tasks, even witnessing and evangelism tasks. A church cannot “program” spirituality into its members. However, it is a great truth that as believers respond to God’s call to be disciples, their personal walk with the Lord deepens and strengthens. Although we should not engage in witnessing and evangelism solely in an attempt to grow spiritually, when undertaken with a genuine love for God and for the lost, these activities bring numerous spiritual blessings to all involved.

Read John 7:17. What does this verse tell us about the doing of God’s will and increased spiritual growth?

A valid question is, “How can a person seeking truth be sure when the genuine has been found?” In verse 17 Jesus presents a truth that will help all who want to follow Him. Those who are willing to do God’s will can know if a doctrine is, or is not, of God. How can this be? Clearly there is spiritual growth through connectedness. Jesus is saying that those who are living up to received Bible truth will receive greater light.

There is a strong connection between hearing and doing (*see Rev. 1:3*). Those who do God’s will, however little of His will they know, will be blessed with a deepening Christian relationship which, coupled with prayerful Bible study, will lead to greater revelations of truth and exciting spiritual growth.

Read John 4:36. What are the spiritual wages received as a result of being involved in the harvest of souls? What spiritual fellowship is suggested by the sower and reaper rejoicing together?

Many commentators suggest that the disciples were reaping where John the Baptist and Jesus had sown. The Samaritan woman herself had clearly planted some gospel seed among the people of her town. How they must have rejoiced together as the ripened spiritual harvest was gathered into the kingdom. Success through working together in witnessing and evangelism creates a bond between God and us and between us as fellow believers. As we respond to God’s call to be involved in soul winning, this bond, this spiritual closeness and growth, blossoms as a natural result of being on God’s team.

How has your own faith been strengthened through your own personal witness, both from success and failures? How does witnessing impact your relationship with the Lord?

Bringing Harmony Through Involvement

There is a phenomenon that is sometimes difficult to explain but can best be described as “circular influence.” Concerning harmony and involvement, circular influence goes like this: by getting people involved you promote harmony, which in turn encourages people to become involved, which in turn promotes harmony. You can see the circular-influence principle at work. It is clearly demonstrated in the old saying that those who are pulling on the oars don’t have time to rock the boat.

There were some key decisions made in the development of the early church’s organization that could have caused major conflict, but the personal preferences of the believers were submitted to what was best for the task that their Lord had given them.

Consider the appointment process recorded in Acts 1:15–26. Although we don’t cast lots today, what key points were they looking for here, and what principles can we take from this example for the work of ministry today?

Of course, whenever human beings are working together, there is the potential for conflict. We would be right in assuming that the evil one is working to undermine the effectiveness of believers. It is only fair, then, that we briefly review an incident in the evangelistic ministry of the early church where the conflict was real.

Examine Acts 15:36–40. What caused the difference of opinion between Paul and Barnabas? What was the result of their disagreement, and what can we learn from it?

On a previous missionary trip, John Mark had left Paul and his other companions and returned to Jerusalem. It seems that this incident (*see Acts 13:13*) made Paul reluctant to take John Mark along on this current trip. But Barnabas saw it would benefit both John Mark and the venture to take John Mark along. Consequently, while Paul chose Silas to accompany him, Barnabas traveled with John Mark.

There was no argument regarding what missionary work should be done, and rather than let personal differences overshadow the evangelistic task, they sent out two witnessing groups. Although Paul and John did work profitably together again (*see 2 Tim. 4:11*), their differences at this time were not allowed to interfere with their mission.

Think of someone with whom you might be struggling now in church. How much humility, death to self, and willingness to forgive and to turn the other cheek will you need in order to bring reconciliation?

Further Study: Setting Realistic Ministry Time Frames

As mentioned in last Friday's Further Study section, 12 months is a good length of time to plan ahead. Depending on what witnessing and evangelism program you are planning, specific time frames will vary with different goal strategies and priorities. However, there are some general points to consider.

1. Document what you aim to achieve throughout these next 12 months. Specify desires in terms of people and discipleship, not just the completion of programs.

2. Write out a procedural time line. This can be as detailed as you like, but make sure that it is not too brief. It should include major training times, program start and finish dates, and set evaluation times.

3. As you document major stages of the program, make sure that you also specify which individuals or teams are responsible at those times.

4. Document how your program strategies integrate with the overall witnessing and evangelism program of the church. Specify where and how other church strategies will support yours and where yours will strengthen those of the church. This will help you to remember that you are a part of a larger team and of the need to work together.

5. Seriously consider whether your program will be ongoing or whether it will be repeated the next church year. This will help you determine what ongoing recruitment training will need to be undertaken. If your program is a developing ministry, each evaluation session will also need to have a forward-looking time.

Discussion Questions:

1 The following statements reveal that God has expectations of every believer and that He has appointed a work for each one. What do you think God expects of His church regarding the equipment of and the organization of their involvement in witnessing and soul winning? What can a church do to help members to understand the expectations of God? As you dwell on the quotes below, ask yourself how they apply to you personally.

“God expects personal service from everyone to whom He has entrusted a knowledge of the truth for this time. Not all can go as missionaries to foreign lands, but all can be home missionaries in their families and neighborhoods.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 30.

“To everyone who becomes a partaker of His grace, the Lord appoints a work for others. Individually we are to stand in our lot, saying, ‘Here am I; send me.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 222.

Our Great Healer

Three-year-old Jenny never missed the morning and evening worships in our village. So when she didn't attend one morning, I missed her. "Where is Jenny?" I asked.

"She's sick, teacher!" one boy answered.

After worship I went to check on Jenny and found her lying in her family's one-room house, writhing with pain. I prayed for her and mixed some simple herbal medicine for her. Soon Jenny fell asleep.

When I returned later to check on Jenny, I found several traditional healers in the family's home. They were performing sacrifices and rituals to heal Jenny. I knew that if I tried to stop these false healers I could be killed. I found Jenny's mother sitting outside and told her, "We must pray to God in heaven to heal Jenny. He is the true Healer, the greatest healer of all." She stared at me as if to say, *You are new here. You don't know that we do these rituals every time someone is sick in the village.*

We prayed for Jenny at school that day. But after school, Jenny's brother told me, "My father said you must not come to our house today because you will disturb the healers." My heart sank. I wanted to help, but I couldn't. *Lord, I prayed, please help Jenny. If it is Your will, heal her. Help her parents know that You are the true God.*

But Jenny's condition worsened, and the family took her to the forest to be closer to the spirits they worship. The healers continued their sacrifices, and we continued praying for Jenny.

Two days later as we prepared to welcome the Sabbath, Jenny and her mother appeared at our door smiling broadly. "We did everything our rituals decreed, but Jenny didn't get better," she said. "Finally we prayed to your God. We promised Him that if He would heal Jenny, we would give our lives to Him. As soon as we prayed, Jenny's pain left. The next morning we awoke to hear Jenny singing the songs that you taught her. I heard her thanking God for healing her. Then she came to me and asked, 'Mama, can we go home now? I want to attend worship.' "

Today Jenny's entire family attends worship in the village church. They plan to be baptized as soon as possible.

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ELSA MALIG-ON was a SULADS, a student missionary teacher from Mountain View College in southern Philippines, when she wrote this story.