

Note: The following paper was one of many initially presented in outline form at various conferences for lay people and pastors over the last 20 years. Though mildly reformatted below for readability's sake, some of the elements of oral/seminar-style delivery are retained. –Shane Anderson

THE SOCIAL MEETING: AN INDISPENSABLE TOOL
FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN THE PASTOR
NON-DEPENDENT CHURCH

An Incredible Past

For the first 60-70 years of Adventism's history (with a few notable exceptions), *the Seventh-day Adventist Church was on fire*. Sacrifice for the cause of Christ was the norm. People met Jesus or sunk their roots deeper into Him on a regular basis. There was a sense of mission and drive and passion and Holy Spirit power that makes the sleepiness of today's North American church seem like a different universe. While our pioneers certainly had their problems, by and large, the place was hoppin' in their day, and the back door on most churches was firmly shut and locked.

There were at least two reasons for this vibrancy: What the Holy Spirit was doing through our *message*, and what the Holy Spirit was doing through our *methods*. Our message doesn't change, nor should it. But how about our methods? Did our pioneers do things differently than we do them now? And might this account for much of the flatness that is prevalent in Western Adventism?

I say yes. In fact, I believe that a return to certain key methodologies employed by our pioneers may not only grab the attention and devotion of our current members, but will help enable the church to finish the work that God has given her to do in the West and beyond.

The Need for a Discipleship Method in the Local Church

Methodology is an outgrowth (or at least it should be) of our message and spirituality. Proper methodology will not bring a non-believer to the point of making a commitment to Jesus. That's the Holy Spirit's job. But *improper* methodology will most certainly choke the Spirit's ability to work through us in the various aspects of discipleship.

Bad methodology does this in a number of ways. But the results of each of those ways as manifested in the modern NAD church are in my opinion often identical: *Spiritual responsibility—for revival and reformation, for personal growth, for evangelism, etc.—is taken from or given up by church members and assumed instead by a religious leader.*

Note also that the 1920's and '30's seem to mark a definite turning point in the vitality and growth of the Adventist Church in North America. Several things happened during that time frame that took us from being a radiant and rapid Christian movement to being spiritual boat anchors. This time in our history is so brief, yet so destructive, that we must be clear on what transpired.

Three Seminal Practices

When the SDA pioneers sat down in the late 1850's and early 1860's to determine the church's method of ministry and organization, they turned to a single source for

primary inspiration: the New Testament. How, they asked, was the New Testament church organized? How did the early Christians accomplish their mission? The answers to these questions led them to adopt, among other things, three seminal practices: 1) the utilization of an apostolic ministry rather than one based on settled pastorates; 2) church planting; and 3) the Social Meeting. The utilization of an apostolic ministry is covered in a separate document (see “Evidence from Early Adventism for a New Testament-Style Priesthood in the Local Church,” available on the sidebar of www.newmarketadventist.org). Let’s take a look at the remaining two practices now.

Church Planting in the New Testament

There is no text in the New Testament which says, “Thou shalt plant new churches.” There is also no text in the New Testament which says, “Thou shalt breathe.” Point being: Church planting was as natural as breathing in the New Testament! It was simply the primary method used to advance the Gospel into new territories.

This point is often discounted or completely overlooked by many Christians today (when was the last time you were in a gathering of Christians that discussed at length the necessity of planting new churches?). But imagine the following: If there were no church planting in the New Testament, fully one-third of the New Testament’s books would be completely absent—Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, & I & II Thessalonians—since these churches would not have existed to occasion correspondence from the Apostle Paul. Moreover, large portions of Acts, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, and Revelation would have to be cut out, again due to a lack of extant recipients. And of course James, I & II Peter, I, II, & III John, & Jude would have had no audience to be sent to in the first place.

In short, without church planting, the New Testament would be a few pages long after the gospels, and you and I might not be sitting here today. After all—each of the churches we are members of were once planted churches, too.

Church Planting in Early Adventism

Though not widely known by many church members today, up until the first two decades of the 1900's, the Adventist Church was no different than the New Testament Church when it came to church planting. Church planting was normal, and no other large-scale method of church growth in new territory was formally utilized. Even when the first Adventist camp meetings were being held (which were done primarily for evangelism back then), the placing of new converts into existing churches was rarely done. New churches were formed with the new converts in new locations—and that, on a regular basis. For instance, in the 1860's, the Adventist Church was planting an average of 360 new churches per year in North America. In the 1870's, this increased to 1,822 per year—sadly, a figure much greater than the number of churches we are planting today. This planting of new churches is one of the primary ways the Spirit used to make Adventism the fastest growing denomination in the world at that time.

Church planting was so engrained in early Adventism that you couldn't even be a pastor unless you first demonstrated that you could plant a church. Witness the straight forward testimony of James White in the Review and Herald, April 15, 1862:

“Some who join the Seventh-day Adventists commence at once to preach to the brethren, many of whom are far in advance of them. And our brethren often err in urging such to spend their time in preaching to them. Let such ministers first be suitably instructed by those of experience in the message, then let them go out into new fields, trusting God for help and success. And when they shall have raised up churches, and shall have properly instructed them, then those churches will support them [Note: This was before the implementation of the modern tithing system]. If they cannot raise up churches and friends to sustain them, then certainly the cause of

truth has no need of them, and they have the best reasons for concluding that they made a sad mistake when they thought that God called them to teach the third angel's message.” - James White, *Review and Herald*, April 15, 1862, Vol. XIX, No. 20, p. 156

Such a strong focus on church planting—and the skilled apostolic clergy required to do such planting—would remain the undisputed and highly successful norm in the Adventist Church for the next 50 years.

The Missing Link: The Social Meeting

The third seminal practice adopted in Early Adventism was one of the best: the Social Meeting. Though hardly known today, for Adventism's first 60-70 years, it was, quite simply, the most important regular meeting any local church would ever have.

To see how this could be so, we must ask and correctly answer a key question: In the absence of a settled pastor—a type of pastor that today's Adventism can hardly imagine church life without—how did SDA congregations in the past not merely survive, but thrive?

An Essential, Powerful Meeting

The Social Meeting was the most important (and often only) meeting that local Adventist churches had for our first 60-70 years of existence. And it's no wonder why: Both Ellen White and other early Adventist leaders saw it as a tremendously powerful evangelism and discipleship process. Mrs. White described the Social Meeting like this:

“We meet together to edify one another by an interchange of thoughts and feelings, to gather strength, and light, and courage by becoming acquainted with one another's hopes and aspirations; and by our earnest, heartfelt prayers, offered up in faith, we receive refreshments and vigor from the Source of our strength. These meetings should be most precious seasons and should be made interesting to all who have any relish for religious things.” - “Social Meetings”, Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 2, p. 578

And Uriah Smith put it this way: “[The Social Meeting is] a meeting characterized by spirited and soul-cheering testimonies, the beaming eye, the voice of praise, the earnest and stirring exhortation, and often the falling tear—scenes in which faith and love flame up anew (*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 23, 1865).”

Russell Burrill, in his book *The Revolutionized Church of the 21st Century*, fills in even more details about what constituted the Social Meeting. (To learn more, be sure to read from Chapter 9 entitled, “Adventism and the Social Meeting.”)

How Important was the Social Meeting?

A number of quotations from various early Adventist leaders show how exceedingly important the Social Meeting was to the life and health of the church. For instance, the following is taken from a time in 1885-1887 when Mrs. White visited Europe and discovered to her dismay that they had no Social Meetings: “I spoke in the forenoon, and then Elder Conradi said they had never had a social meeting. I told him now was the time to break them in. We had a very good social meeting. The meeting did not close until past one o’clock. It commenced at ten (Manuscript Releases, Vol.16, p.251).”

Later, concerning her implementing the Social Meeting in Australia, she wrote:

Although the social meeting is a new thing, yet they are learning in the school of Christ and are overcoming fear and trembling. We keep before them the fact that *the social meeting will be the best meeting in which they may be trained and educated to be witnesses for Christ.* - Manuscript 2, 1894, pp. 3-5, emphasis supplied

So vital was the Social Meeting that Ellen White often gave it clear precedence over hearing a sermon preached: “If fewer words of human wisdom were spoken, and more of the words of Christ were spoken, *if there were fewer sermons, and more social*

meetings, we would find a different atmosphere pervade our churches and our camp meetings (Manuscript Releases, Vol. 2, p. 21, emphasis supplied).”

A Training Tool for Clergy and Laity

The Social Meeting was even considered a vital part of the training of church planters (aka “ministers,” in those days):

They [the ministers] should learn that all their duty is not comprised in preaching. They need to know how to conduct wisely the social meetings, how to teach the people to work, that there be no idlers in the vineyard of the Lord. While preaching is one of God’s instrumentalities, there are other agencies that must be set in operation to prepare the way of the Lord. *The church must be made to feel her accountability before the Lord will revive his work.* - *Signs of the Times*, May 17, 1883, emphasis supplied

F.W. Morse, a prominent SDA pioneer, would have concurred heartily with this sentiment—though twenty years earlier, he had applied it to lay people rather than ministers:

Prayer and social meetings upon the Sabbath should be sustained with spirit. A vigorous, holy energy that springs from the Christian’s heart, should mark their progress. Here from week to week the consistent follower of the Lord delights to be found, punctually and faithfully at this post, cheerfully bearing his part, and from a rich fund of daily experience, he casts into the common stock his prayer of thanksgiving and supplication, word of exhortation, song of praise, *all to the edifying of his brethren.* - *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 8, 1863, Vol. 22, No. 15, p. 114, emphasis supplied

An Evangelistic Tool

One of the Social Meeting’s strongest suits was evangelism, and this, in at least three separate ways.

First, as was shown in the above quotations, the Social Meeting taught that most basic of evangelistic skills: how to speak about Christ in front of others. By speaking in front of others on a weekly basis about how Christ had and was changing their daily

lives, they were then prepared to share with non-believers in simple, yet powerful words. (When we think about how reluctant many church members are today to share their faith verbally with those outside the faith, we begin to see how important this facet of the Social Meeting was—and could be again, today.)

Second, the Social Meeting was used as a “finishing tool” at public evangelistic series. The process was straightforward. A minister/church planter would preach a series of meetings. At key junctures in the series, Social Meetings would be held to which all attendees—SDA and non—were invited. During these meetings, believers would stand and briefly testify to how they came to the truth, and in so doing, inspired non-believers to cross over to Christ’s side. “These social meetings do more than preaching to ripen off the work”, said Ellen White, a fact proved many times over in our early history (see Ellen G. White in Europe, 1885-1887, by D.A. Delafield, p. 307 [Washington, D.C., Review and Herald, 1975] and Ellen G. White Biography, Volume 4, The Australian Years, 1891-1900, p. 104 [Washington, D.C., Review and Herald, 1984] for further information on this point).

Third, though not always, the Social Meeting was most often a small group activity. These small group experiences opened the door for members to participate in Ellen White’s most highly recommended method of evangelism for church members, small group ministry. Witness the following famous quotation:

The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to 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. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers. Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, and gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others. Let them reveal Christ-like forbearance and patience, speaking no hasty words, using the talent of

speech to build one another up in the most holy faith. Let them labor in Christ-like love for those outside the fold, forgetting self in their endeavor to help others. As they work and pray in Christ's name, their numbers will increase, for the Saviour says: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven." Matthew 18:19. (Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 7, pp. 21 & 22)

Small group ministry was to be the backbone of the Adventist Church's evangelism and discipleship efforts (see ch.10 in Burrill's book for a full discussion on this point). And the Social Meeting was to be the fulcrum from which these efforts took their leverage.

So What Happened to the Social Meeting?

Given the impressive list of strengths that the Social Meeting brought to the Adventist Church, it is difficult to imagine how it ever faded from use. Yet today, few Adventist Church members have heard of the Social Meeting, much less attended one on a regular basis. How did this loss come to pass?

In the late 1800s, some of the first whispers of doing away with the Social Meeting in favor of hearing more sermons were starting to be heard. This caused Ellen White to make some of her strongest statements concerning this unique meeting's importance:

Let everyone consider the value of the social meetings, and let not large or small companies of believers think that they cannot have an enjoyable season unless they are entertained by a preacher. Where this dependence on the minister exists, the people fail to obtain that vigorous religious experience which they so much need wherever their lot may be cast. If the minister alone does all the witnessing, then those who have newly come to the faith become dwarfed and sickly for lack of opportunity to use their spiritual muscle. They have need to learn how to testify, how to pray, how to sing, to the glory of God; but failing to do this, they have only a one-sided experience. - *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 10, 1895

In the same vein, she elsewhere points out that

...there had not been the habit of having social meetings in Europe. But we are seeking to educate them on this point, that is *the duty* of everyone who loves God and the truth to speak to one another words of experience and of comfort, and to tell of God's goodness, His love, and His great mercy in giving His Son Jesus Christ to die for us while we were enemies to God" - Manuscript Releases, Vol. 9, p. 94, emphasis supplied

It must be stressed that such sentiments were nothing new for Ellen White. Years earlier she had pointed out her belief that

a Christian is a Christlike man, a Christlike [sic] woman, who is active in God's service, who is present at the social meeting, whose presence will encourage others also. Religion does not consist in works, but religion works; it is not dormant. -Letter 7, 1883—see SDABC Vol. 7, p. 935

And six years later, she universally urged the following: "...let everyone who names the name of Christ have a testimony to bear in social meeting (*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 22, 1889 emphasis supplied)." Clearly, for Ellen White and other Adventist pioneers, the Social Meeting was a powerfully transformative experience not to be neglected at any price. It was, again, *the most important meeting any local SDA church had*.

However, as Russell Burrill points out, eventually, the critics of the Social Meeting won out, particularly after Ellen White's death:

After the death of Ellen White in 1915, social meetings gradually faded from practice and were replaced by the prayer meeting. Eventually Adventist churches began to pattern their services after those of other Protestant churches and clergy were appointed over the congregation. Soon the prayer meeting degenerated. Instead of a time for people to pray and share testimonies, it became another time for the pastor to preach or give a cognitive Bible study, followed by a season of prayer. In most churches the relational element was entirely lost. An unbalanced emphasis on the cognitive and eventually even a fear of the relational replaced the beautiful balance of early Adventism. The biblical plan [for] both member care and the role of clergy were lost. *[But] these two concepts go together*. With a primary-care pastor over churches, the relational small group became unnecessary and **even a hindrance** to the work of the clergy. - Russell Burrill, Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church, p. 217, emphasis supplied

Burrill's comments show clearly the connection between the apostolic ministry of early Adventism and the use of the Social Meeting in the local church. When these two methodologies were both healthy and functioning, they formed a profoundly effective discipleship combination: Apostles would reach new converts in new places, and Social Meetings would mature them into multiplying missionaries. And since the apostle of necessity moved on to new territory, it was comforting to know that the Social Meeting specialized in the doing its maturing work *in the absence* of paid clergy. Churches were thus enabled to care for and grow themselves, while apostles went out and started the planting process afresh. The resulting growth, both numerically and spiritually, was nothing short of phenomenal.

Assessing the Social Meeting's Value

Looking back on the history of the Social Meeting in the Adventist Church, at least four lessons emerge:

1. Early Adventism was more concerned with living the truth than merely knowing it. The Social Meeting specialized in the application of scripture to real life and was thus the heart of local Adventist Church life, methodologically speaking.
2. According to John 17:20-23, genuine Christian community is the sign that Christ was who He claimed to be. The Social Meeting helped immensely to make that type of community possible.
3. It is true that some Adventists leave the church due to doctrinal disagreements. But in my experience, more members leave because of a lack of connectedness in the local church body, i.e., there is little-to-no genuine

Christian community. If history (including my own experience) is any indication, the Social Meeting is an effective method to combat this trend.

4. Given the above, in my opinion, modern Adventism needs Social Meetings like a man who's been fasting in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights needs food.

Additional Resources:

- Key word search “social meeting,” “prayer meeting,” “social,” etc., on the Ellen White Estate website (<https://egwwritings.org/>).
- Russell Burrill’s dissertation, Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church, Hart Research Center, Fallbrook, CA., 1998.
- Burrill’s “Revolution in the Church” trilogy, particularly The Revolutionized Church of the 21st Century, Hart Research Center, Fallbrook, CA., 1997.