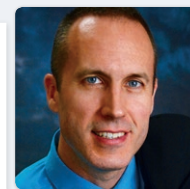


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# Back to the future: Lay-led churches and a return to our roots<sup>1</sup>

I found myself standing on a makeshift wooden platform in the middle of a sandlot in Nigeria. People were scurrying back and forth, preparing the stage for the nightly meetings that would begin the next day. As I was contemplating what the next few weeks would bring, a man interrupted my thoughts.

“We want to be like you,” he said. His comment startled me.

“We hear the churches in America are vibrant and growing fast. We want to be like you.” I hardly knew what to say. It pained me to tell him that, although there are churches in America that are vibrant and growing, many are in desperate need of revival and reformation.

Questions flooded my mind. *Why is it that we hear these exhilarating stories from other parts of the world of mass baptisms and thousands attending evangelistic meetings? Why is it that we hear of packed churches and overflowing Sabbath Schools—but most often in other countries? Why is it that we hear of overseas conferences planting hundreds of new churches and companies each year? Why is this happening in some parts of the world; but not as much in North America and other areas of the world? What must we do to promote revival, reformation, and growth in North America?*

I know that the answer is prayer, but prayer must be combined with

other actions. What can we actively do? I pondered this question for some time. Then I found part of the answer in the most unlikely place. I was sitting in the rugged dining room of one of our overseas conference offices preparing for an evangelistic meeting. My eyes were drawn to the wall on the right side of the room. What I saw opened my eyes.

On the wall was a list of the churches and companies and the pastors who were in charge of each district. I was amazed to see that many pastors had ten or more churches in their district. Each church was led by lay people and elders who might see their pastor only once a quarter—and many of these churches were growing. I began to question: *How can this be? They see a pastor once a quarter and, yet, are growing? These churches are essentially led by local church members, and they are doing just fine. If my churches back in America saw me only once a quarter, there would be rebellion!*

Then I discovered something remarkable. Many parts of the world field that are experiencing rapid growth have been organizing larger districts with lay-led churches for years.<sup>2</sup> Finally, it hit me. The New Testament church formed lay-led churches from the start and experienced the same rapid growth. They were led by ordinary people who were encouraged by the apostles and empowered by the Holy

Spirit. This is how the church was able to evangelize the world.

I, then, wondered, *If that is what the New Testament church did, is that what should be done in North America? More specifically, is that what I should be doing with the churches I am pastoring?*

## The early New Testament church

As I searched the Bible, it appeared to me that there were no paid pastors overseeing a congregation or house church and doing ministry for the people in the early New Testament church. Those who were paid by the tithe were sent out to evangelize and plant churches in unentered lands and cities. Tithe was reserved specifically for this purpose. The existing churches were left in the hands of capable lay people. This is why the apostles raised up elders and deacons in each church. We read in Acts and Titus for example: “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).<sup>3</sup> “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.” (Titus 1:5).

As with these two verses, many other references in the New Testament indicate, directly or indirectly, that elders and other laity were the leaders

of the local churches (see Acts 11:30; 16:5; 20:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–3; James 5:14). This is why it was important to Paul to choose elders wisely (see Titus 1:5–9). He knew they were to oversee the churches. This is also why most of the books of the New Testament are letters to churches. As the apostles evangelized new cities and towns, they wrote letters of instruction and encouragement back to the leaders of the churches. The elders and deacons were to lead the churches, and ministry was put into the hands of the church members (i.e., laity). It would have been unheard of for tithe to be used to pay someone to oversee a church when elders and deacons could do that. It would have been seen as a waste of money. The tithe was used to support “workers” laboring to evangelize new areas.

Following this method, the early New Testament church grew astronomically. When lay leaders were made partners in the work of ministry, the life of the church exploded. Under this structure, Christianity took the gospel to the world of the first century (see Acts 17:6).

### The early Adventist Church

Then I discovered something even more remarkable: this was also the structure under which the Adventist Church began. In the humble beginnings of the Advent movement, there were no paid pastors assigned to churches. Most churches and house groups were led by lay people. Ministers who were paid from the tithe functioned as evangelists and church planters in unentered areas, just like in the New Testament church. When new churches were planted, the lay people were trained to lead the church, and the minister moved on to another unentered area.

Notice what James White wrote: “Paul was not what is now called a ‘settled pastor.’ . . . These early teachers of Christianity remained in one city, or place, till their testimony aroused the people, and they had brought out a body of believers, and established them in the doctrine of Christ. Things were

then set in order so that these disciples could sustain the worship of God. And then these ministers would pass on to a new field of labor.”<sup>4</sup> This indicates a major reason why the early Adventist church grew so rapidly.

In the early 1900s, people began noticing the growth of the Adventist Church. Other churches had been around for hundreds of years, but here was this new denomination that was not even 50 years old yet was growing rapidly. The Adventist Church carried forward the Great Commission very differently from other Protestant

weaken, and to lose their life and spirit, and become paralyzed and fossilized and work will be on a retreat.”<sup>5</sup>

I was struck with more conviction when I found that Ellen White echoed the same counsel. “There should not be a call to have settled pastors over our churches, but let the life-giving power of the truth impress its individual members to act, carrying on an efficient missionary work in that locality. As the hand of God, the church is to be educated and trained to do effective work. Its members are to be the Lord’s devoted, Christian workers.”<sup>6</sup>

*When lay leaders were made partners in the work of ministry, the life of the church exploded.*

churches. While most other churches followed the method of appointing a paid pastor over each church; the Adventist Church did the opposite. Churches were led by lay people while tithe was used to send workers to evangelize unentered fields.

When asked about this method, A. G. Daniells, president of the General Conference in the early 1900s, said, “We have not settled our ministers over churches as pastors to any large extent. In some of the very large churches we have elected pastors, but as a rule we have held ourselves ready for field service, evangelistic work and brethren and sisters have held themselves ready to maintain their church services and carry forward their church work without settled pastors. And I hope this will never cease to be the order of affairs in this denomination for when we cease our forward movement work and begin to settle over our churches, to stay by them, and do their thinking and their praying and their work that is to be done, then our churches will begin to

A. G. Daniells’s statement in 1912 was prophetic. He said that if we ever stopped organizing lay-led churches and began to settle pastors over churches instead of sending them into unentered fields, the growth of the Adventist Church would decline and its spirituality would suffer. It appears this is exactly what happened in the first half of the 1900s.

Not long after the death of Ellen White and the end of Daniells’s presidency, people in the church began to call for settled pastors. Ellen White had warned about this when she wrote: “The churches are dying and they want a minister to preach to them.

“They should be taught to bring a faithful tithe to God, that He may strengthen and bless them. They should be brought into working order, that the breath of God may come to them. They should be taught that unless they can stand alone, without a minister, they need to be converted anew, and baptized anew. They need to be born again.”<sup>7</sup>

The popular Protestant churches of the day had big buildings and large congregations, and some advocated that we should do the same. Like Israel of old, God's people insisted on having a "king" rule over them, even though this was not God's plan.

A study of North American church membership records during the first half of the 1900s reveals a correlation between the time that we stopped organizing lay-led churches and began settling pastors over churches and the time when church growth started to become stagnant and decline.<sup>8</sup> There appeared to be a loss of focus on mission. I could not help but wonder, *Is it time for Adventism in North America to return to lay-led churches?*

## Our commission

If we do not follow this pattern, how will we ever finish the work? Revelation 14 has given us an important commission, a God-sized task. We have been told to take the everlasting gospel to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. Ellen White has also counseled us to take the light to all people groups and to erect a humble house of worship in those places.<sup>9</sup> How can we possibly accomplish this monumental task of taking the gospel to every town in North America and erecting humble houses of worship? If every church were to have a paid pastor, it would cost a fortune; we could never afford it!

I could come to only one conclusion: we must start organizing lay-led churches again. We must let elders and deacons lead churches while tithe is used to send workers to evangelize and plant churches and house groups in towns and cities that have no Adventist presence. How can we do this? How can we transition our structure to a model of lay-led churches? Change is always a challenge. There is no quick fix. It will take time, but it can be done.

## Two options

I see two options for accomplishing this restructuring:

### Option 1: Large "mission districts."

I first heard the term *mission districts* used in the Pennsylvania Conference. This is done by combining two or three districts into one large district of five to ten lay-led churches. Each church in a mission district is pastored by the local group of elders. The conference pastor is then assigned to oversee the district. His or her main job is to train and equip the lay pastors and elders in ministry skills. He or she visits each church on a rotating schedule to disciple and coach the lay pastors and elders. This model frees up money for more pastors, who are then sent into the unentered areas of the conference to begin raising new churches.

**Option 2: Mother church model.** In the Iowa-Missouri Conference, of which I am a part, the pastors are seeking to move the churches forward by initiating a lay pastor program in the city of St. Louis. In this model, the conference pastor begins the process of training his or her elders and deacons to become the lay pastors of the church. This discipleship process could take three to five years. In large metro areas, a group of conference pastors could work together to provide lay-pastor classes for their elders. When the elders have been sufficiently trained to lead a local church, the conference pastor can then transition his or her time to church planting in unentered areas. It would be ideal if he or she could take a small group from the local church and form the core group of the new church plant.

So the two main responsibilities of the conference pastor would be planting churches and equipping the lay pastors and elders of the existing church(es). These lay pastors would then provide leadership to an existing church; that way, the conference pastor can transition his or her focus to church planting. Alternatively, the lay pastor could partner with the conference pastor in planting churches. The lay pastor would eventually lead out in the church plant so that the conference pastor can move on to plant more churches.

## Conclusion

There are challenges with both models, and there will be resistance to either model, yet I believe these two models more accurately reflect the structure of the New Testament church and the early Adventist Church. Therefore, for the sake of the mission, we have to do it. For the sake of the Great Commission, we have to do it. For the sake of the lost whom Jesus loves, we have to do it. It may not be comfortable but is our duty and responsibility as the remnant, who have been entrusted with taking the final message of Jesus to a lost world.

What would happen if more churches in North America followed these models? What would happen if we started gradually transitioning churches to be lay-led by trained, dedicated elders and deacons? Then the ministers could be sent to nearby towns and cities to evangelize and plant churches where no Adventist presence exists. Like the apostles of the early church, the minister would return to the churches, periodically, to provide further training and encouragement, but the majority of his or her time would be spent in raising new churches and companies.

Imagine how this would change the face of the North American church. Congratulatory statements about exciting church growth in America will then be an accurate reflection of reality. Lord, hasten the day . . . 🌱

- 1 A version of this article was originally published on [outlookmag.org](http://outlookmag.org), July 23, 2015.
- 2 Russell Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1998), 221.
- 3 Scripture references are from the New King James Version.
- 4 "'Go Ye Into All the World and Preach the Gospel,'" *Review and Herald*, April 15, 1862.
- 5 A. G. Daniels, Ministerial Institute Address, Los Angeles, California, March 1912, as quoted in Russell Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach*, 177, 178.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *Important Testimony*, 5, [https://egwwritings.org/?ref=en\\_PH038.5.1&para=320.18](https://egwwritings.org/?ref=en_PH038.5.1&para=320.18).
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1970), 381.
- 8 Compare General Conference Department of Archives and Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church, 189–191.
- 9 See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 100.

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