

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:

❶ 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.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 10:15*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe why and how each church member should be involved in the sharing of the gospel of Christ.

Feel: Sense the close bonds of harmony crafted as he or she works together with others to save souls.

Do: Answer “Here am I; send me” (*Isa. 6:8*) to the call of ministry in the home, the community, and perhaps the world field.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Sharing the Load

A Why might some professionally trained gospel workers be reluctant to share ministry with relatively untrained laypersons? What can be done to build the leadership’s confidence in the laity’s efforts?

B What responsibility does leadership carry in the preparation of each church member for ministry, and what role does the Holy Spirit play?

II. Feel: Crafting Harmony

A How does working together to save souls promote harmony and build unity in the church?

B What attitudes promote the development of close bonds as church members labor together in the cause of Christ?

III. Do: Here Am I

A How shall we respond to a call to ministry from church leadership or the church nominating committee?

B What field of labor is the most natural fit for your talents, age, and disposition? What field of labor may stretch you out of your comfort zone but still reflect a call to ministry that should be heeded?

► **Summary:** All church members have a field of labor in which, with proper training, leadership, and the blessing of the Holy Spirit, they may utilize their spiritual gifts and social relationships in ministry.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: It's not enough to be an "armchair evangelist." It's only through putting theory into practice that we can experience the incredible joy that comes from being an ambassador for Christ.

Just for Teachers: There's often a vast gulf between "knowing" and "doing." This week, help class members to identify common obstacles to action, and lead them to discover practical ways by which they can translate the theory of witnessing into a personal commitment to take action.

Opening Activity: On September 20, 2004, a 25-year-old woman, unconscious and bleeding profusely, lay with her head in the gutter on a busy street in south London. Surveillance cameras at the scene captured images of no fewer than 12 vehicles slowing down, swerving around the woman, and continuing on.

In New York, on April 18, 2010, a 32-year-old man was stabbed after he came to the aid of a woman who was being attacked by a knife-wielding assailant. Again, surveillance cameras recorded the scene as at least 25 people walked by—one stopping to snap a picture on his cell phone—while the wounded man bled to death on the sidewalk.—A. G. Sulzberger and Mick Meenan, "Questions Surround a Delay in Help for a Dying Man," *New York Times*, April 25, 2010.

The reluctance to offer help to a stranger is what psychologists have called the "bystander effect." In a renowned 1973 experiment, Princeton University psychologists John Darley and Daniel Batson explored the phenomenon within a religious context. They asked a group of seminarians from Princeton Theological Seminary to prepare a sermon and then walk to the building next door to present it. Some students were told to preach on the parable of the good Samaritan. As the students left the building, one by one, to deliver their sermons, they encountered a man "slumped in an alley, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning."

Which students were more likely to stop to offer help? The most significant factor was not whether or not the students had prepared a sermon on the good Samaritan. Rather, it was whether the seminarian had been told he was running late or not. Of those told they had some time to spare, 63 percent stopped to help the man. Of those told they were late, only 10 percent stopped to help.

Consider This: According to the 2002 Adventist World Survey, less than 40 percent of Adventist Church members are engaged in sharing their

faith in their communities. How are we guilty of succumbing to the “bystander effect” when it comes to translating our knowledge and beliefs into action?

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Throughout Scripture, God calls His people to action. Help your class to understand that this call to witness is not an “optional extra” for followers of Christ—it’s a personal mandate.

Bible Commentary

I. Whose Responsibility, Anyway? (Review *Exodus 18:13–26* and *Acts 6:1–8* with the class.)

These two biblical narratives—of Moses and the early Christian church—are separated by a vast gulf of time and circumstances. However, as you read the two stories, look for parallels between the situations that they describe. Then take it a step further: how many of the same challenges can you see reflected in your own twenty-first-century church family?

Consider This: Why is the delegation of responsibility sometimes so difficult for us to do? (Lack of trust? Reluctance to let go of personal control? Trouble believing others can do the job as well as we can? Unwillingness to burden others?) What are some of the possible outcomes if outreach leaders fail to share responsibilities?

■ *In the Exodus story, note the advice of Moses’ father-in-law (vss. 19–23). In what ways does this counsel (vs. 20, train/teach; vs. 21, match tasks to skills; vs. 22, mentor) describe an effective process for the delegation of responsibility within a spiritual community?*

In spite of the often rigid social structures of the first-century Roman Empire, the early Christian church tried to reflect Christ’s ideal of a “family” of believers, united in faith and mission (*Gal. 3:8*). Christianity offered women both respect and substantial participation in the life of the church (*Rom. 16:1, 2; Phil. 4:2, 3*), which was available neither within pagan culture nor under Jewish law.

Consider This: Are there groups in your congregation that are consistently overlooked when it comes to planning and implementing mission activities? For instance, are young people, women, and ethnic or cultural

minorities well represented? If not, why not? How can diversity bring strength to a church's outreach program?

II. Beyond “Comfort-Zone Christianity” (Review John 4:36, Matthew 7:17, and Luke 6:43–45 with the class.)

When our faith no longer bears “fruit” in our everyday relationships and activities, we’ve strayed into the dangerous realm of “comfort-zone Christianity.” Read Christ’s words in Matthew 5:13, and then read 2 Peter 1:5–9, noting particularly verse 8. What are the spiritual symptoms of someone who has lost his or her “saltiness” or who has become ineffective and unproductive in his or her faith?

Activity: Ask your class as a group to compile a list of characters from Scripture whose lives were transformed when they chose to become active participants in God’s mission. (As a starting point, it may be helpful to review Hebrews 11, the apostle Paul’s “roll call” of great men and women of faith.)

1. What happens, spiritually, to individuals who refuse to be mere bystanders in God’s grand plan?
2. How do the lives of these men and women illustrate that faith is not an abstract spiritual concept that is best practiced in isolation? Conversely, how do their lives show that faith will tend to thrust us into the messy reality of life?
3. How does the evidence suggest that faith and faith-motivated action cannot ever be effectively separated?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Help your class to use the biblical principles that they’ve explored above in order to critique their own faith community. How can Seventh-day Adventists be more intentional when nurturing and preparing every believer for witness?

Consider This: Seventh-day Adventist historian George Knight preached a sermon at the 2000 General Conference Session in Toronto, Canada, in which he imagined different strategies used by the devil in his attempts to derail the mission of the church. He said, “If I were the devil, I would make pastors and administrators the center of the church’s work. It must have been the devil who gave us the idea that the pastor should do all the preaching, give all the Bible studies, be the church’s primary soul winner, and make and carry out business decisions for the church.”—“If I Were the Devil,” *Adventist Review*, January 4, 2001, pp. 8–15.

Thought Questions:

- 1 In what way does this description of the pastor’s role reflect the reality of your congregation?
- 2 List some practical steps that a congregation could take in order to combat the myth of “professional soul winning”—that is, the idea that souls cannot be won to Christ by anyone other than the pastor or evangelist.
- 3 If you were the devil, what other strategies would you use in order to keep church members sitting on the church pews as spectators, rather than as participants in soul winning?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: No matter how much we know about witnessing, we’ll unleash its power in our lives and our communities only if we actually do it. Help your class to take the first step toward translating theory into practice.

Activity: Consider these two quotes:

“Our confession of His faithfulness is Heaven’s chosen agency for revealing Christ to the world. . . . But that which will be most effectual is the testimony of our own experience.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 347.

“In the postmodern world, we need to tell our own personal stories: unsanitized, rough and lumpy, not squeezed into a formula. We need to relate the stories of our experiences so that postmoderns can understand the meaning behind the stories—our faith.”—Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, eds., *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishing,® 2008), p. 400.

Ask your class to divide into pairs. Invite each pair to discuss whom they’d like to share their personal salvation story with during the coming week. Suggest that they take turns role-playing, each sharing his or her own testimony of God’s faithfulness and presence. Come together again as a class and discuss: What felt good about sharing the ways in which God has led in your life? What was difficult? What could make the experience easier?

Reflection: Read Ephesians 6:19, 20, and then reread the list of obstacles to witnessing that the class created in Step 1. Invite as many class members who wish to do so to pray about specific challenges on the list, asking God for the courage to “speak boldly” for Him, no matter what the circumstance.