Statistics tell us that in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, more than four out of ten members have left the church over the past several decades. Though the organization has seen unprecedented growth rates around the world, it has also had alarming rates of departures. If any organization has 40 percent of its customers, members, adherents, or clientele departing, shouldn’t some emergency measures be taking place?

The question of why they are leaving naturally arises. Though many theories and opinions exist, the departures might be attributed to two primary causes. The “unripe harvest” and “members only” evangelistic strategies employed by churches have had a systemic effect on membership today. The former seeks to harvest souls prematurely through artificial pressure. The latter allows the mature harvest to spoil. Both miscalculate the timing of the harvest and its fruit.

Though much effort has gone into preparing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting, churches are reticent to take care of souls after baptism, which in the Grow cycle is referred to as preserving. Ellen White states, “After individuals have been converted to the truth, they need to be looked after. . . . They do not realize that these newly converted ones need nursing, —watchful attention, help, and encouragement. These should not be left alone, a prey to Satan’s most powerful temptations; they need to be educated in regard to their duties, to be kindly dealt with, to be led along, and to be visited and prayed with.” (Evangelism, 351, 352). We focus on this stage this week.
Write out Luke 15:1–7 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, you may write out Luke 15:4–7. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
PRESERVING THE HARVEST

Unripe harvests occur when churches fail to properly prepare candidates for baptism. They are baptized without fully knowing or accepting the fundamental teachings of the Bible, or without making decisions to follow Christ in practical areas of their lives. Unripe harvests may be due to gospel workers sensing pressure to baptize higher numbers of people, or shrinking from the task of faithfully instructing new converts in practical areas. The former stems from an attempt to avoid the shame of not producing, while the latter has its origin in fear.

Although the number of baptisms rises with these methods, new converts come out of the baptismal tank and just keep walking right out the back door of the church. Those who do not fully know or are not wholeheartedly willing to follow the truth often leave the tenets of the faith as well as the Originator of these truths. Should they stay, they can also become the cause of various problems within the church. Thus, our discipleship process both before and after baptism needs improving.

We must ensure that everyone seeking baptism and entering a discipleship walk with Christ has full knowledge of what they are getting themselves into. This requires a great one-on-one bond with a mentor to discuss, pray, and work through both doctrinal dissonance from Scripture as well as any other spiritual dissension.

After the joy of the harvest, we must not relax our disciple-making efforts as well. Jesus called us to make disciples, not members of the church. To do so requires that we preserve the harvest through intentional and systematic discipleship training after baptism—the same care, investment, and time spent before the baptism! In order for the disciple-making process to be a disciple-making cycle, we must nurture new church members and train them to engage in making other disciples. The consumer must become a producer. The receiver must become a giver. The one caught by the gospel net must become a fisher of men and women.
To ensure that the harvest is preserved, local churches need a systematic discipleship ministry. Systematic means more than assigning spiritual guardians and hoping for the best. It means implementing an intentional plan to train every new member after baptism. Rather than baptism being the end, it becomes the beginning of a discipleship walk with Jesus. Here are seven keys to enliven the systematic discipleship ministry at your local church:

1. APPOINT a discipleship ministry leader (or a Personal Ministries leader or similar).
2. RECRUIT experienced and responsible members to serve as mentors to newer members—regular meetings can happen in personal or small-group settings.
3. FOLLOW a systematic plan to aid new members in establishing vital spiritual habits (daily prayer and Bible study, consistent attendance, regular witnessing, and so on).
4. PROVIDE ongoing instruction in areas such as the devotional life, church life, Christian lifestyle, and evangelism.
5. INTEGRATE new members into the life and ministries of the church while training the rest of the membership to befriend and pray for each newly baptized member.
6. PROVIDE leadership support—promotion, financial support, and participation.
7. PRAY for laborers and for spiritual growth through the new member discipleship ministry.

While this initiative may sound overwhelming, many resources are available to help this stage of discipleship growth. The Discipleship Handbook is a comprehensive yet simple-to-use resource for local churches that incorporates all of the seven keys to a systematic discipleship ministry. For more information on the “preserve” stage and the Grow cycle, visit https://grow.adventist.org/preserve/.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Mark 4:8, 20
Luke 19:10
Luke 6:40
Luke 15:8–32

What other verses/promises come to mind in connecting the entire Grow cycle?

Luke 15 is a beautiful chapter that brings together three parables. While the parable of the prodigal son is a longer and more well-known narrative, Luke places two other parables before it. The trio has both common and distinctive elements.

The parable of the lost sheep can parallel those who are lost and desire to come home but have no way of doing so. The parable of the lost coin has allusions to those who are lost but, like inanimate objects, they are unaware of their condition and thus have no desire to be found. Last, the parable of the prodigal son points to those who are lost, desire to come home, and think they know the route back. This third parable then plants a twist in the narrative, where the focus shifts from the younger son to the older one.

While a more thorough analysis can be made, we will point out a few things. First, the fact that all three are focused on the lost is significant—each of the three allude to some form of “lostness.” Second, the scene of rejoicing is found at the end of all of them. Verse 6 states, “And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ ” Verse 9 reiterates, “And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!’ ” Both conclude with the teaching of Jesus that there is joy in heaven over the one repentant sinner.

However in the third parable, while a rejoicing phrase is found in verse 24, “‘for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry,” the conclusion that one would expect is not there. Instead of joining in the celebration, the elder son goes on a rant about how unfair this treatment is. He is chided by the father for this rant in verse 52, when his father says, “It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.” To whom is Christ directing this last statement? The answer is found at the beginning of the chapter, in verses 1–3. The publicans (tax collectors) and sinners were eating with Jesus. It was at the meal (with its violations of religious dietary customs) that “the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them” (verse 2).

These publicans and sinners were once spiritually lost and dead but now are found and alive. This was done through the ministry of Jesus eating with them. In other words, Christ gave three powerful parables about rejoicing because some people had a hard time with the concept of hanging out together. These meals weren’t just killing time and filling stomachs; Christ was spending quality time talking, listening, laughing, answering, teaching, healing, and connecting with these human souls. This undoubtedly led to changed lives. But the Pharisees and scribes would have no part of this rejoicing.

Today, as it was then, Christ directs His disciples to spend quality time, talk, listen, laugh, answer, teach, heal, connect, and train other souls. Not just the pastor, elders, or “super” spiritual people should do this, but all of Christ’s followers are to rejoice when hearts are turned from lost to found. Which group are you a part of: the ones receiving and eating with sinners, or the ones complaining that this is going on?
DISCIPLES IN ACTION

“It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of soulsaving depends alone upon the ministry. The humble, consecrated believer upon whom the Master of the vineyard places a burden for souls, is to be given encouragement by the men upon whom the Lord has laid larger responsibilities. Those who stand as leaders in the church of God are to realize that the Saviour’s commission is given to all who believe in His name. God will send forth into His vineyard many who have not been dedicated to the ministry by the laying on of hands” (The Acts of the Apostles, 110).

“Those who have newly come to the faith should be patiently and tenderly dealt with, and it is the duty of the older members of the church to devise ways and means to provide help and sympathy and instruction for those who have conscientiously withdrawn from other churches for the truth’s sake, and thus cut themselves off from the pastoral labor to which they have been accustomed. The church has a special responsibility laid upon her to attend to these souls who have followed the first rays of light they have received; and if the members of the church neglect this duty, they will be unfaithful to the trust that God has given them” (Review and Herald, April 28, 1896).

“The idea that the minister must carry all the burdens and do all the work, is a great mistake. Overworked and broken down, he may go into the grave, when, had the burden been shared as the Lord designed, he might have lived. That the burden may be distributed, an education must be given to the church by those who can teach the workers to follow Christ and to work as He worked” (Testimonies for the Church, 6:435).

“The minister should not feel that it is his duty to do all the talking and all the laboring and all the praying; he should educate helpers in every church. Let different ones take turns in leading the meetings, and in giving Bible readings; in so doing they will be calling into use the talents which God has given them, and at the same time be receiving a training as workers” (Gospel Workers, 197).

“When an effort is made to present our faith to unbelievers, the members of the church too often stand back, as if they were not an interested party, and let all the burden rest upon the minister. For this reason the labor of our most able ministers has been at times productive of little good” (Gospel Workers, 196).

“Let ministers teach church members that in order to grow in spirituality, they must carry the burden that the Lord has laid upon them, — the burden of leading souls into the truth. Those who are not fulfilling their responsibility should be visited, prayed with, labored for. Do not lead people to depend upon you as ministers; teach them rather that they are to use their talents in giving the truth to those around them. In thus working they will have the co-operation of heavenly angels, and will obtain an experience that will increase their faith, and give them a strong hold on God” (Gospel Workers, 200).

“One soul is of infinite value; for Calvary speaks its worth. One soul, won to the truth, will be instrumental in winning others, and there will be an ever-increasing result of blessing and salvation. Your work may accomplish more real good than the more extensive meetings, if they lack in personal effort. When both are combined, with the blessing of God, a more perfect and thorough work may be wrought. . . .” (Review and Herald, March 13, 1888).
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why do you think 40 percent of converts leave the church? What can you do to help plug this leak?

Why do “unripe harvest” and “members only” evangelistic strategies exist in the church?

What does intentional and systematic discipleship look like in your life? In your personal ministry? In your church?

Why isn’t every member discipled in the church immediately after baptism?

How does following Jesus’ model for ministry help with the current dearth of discipleship today?

Where does discipleship fit the lost pattern of Luke 15?

Are you being directly discipled by Jesus today? How are you discipling someone else today in the footsteps of Jesus?