

Who needs fellowship?

“Why do people not come to Sabbath School?”

When this question is asked in various Sabbath School workshops, seminars, or congresses, one of the most common answers is, “Lack of fellowship.” Every Sabbath School revitalization program must consider fellowship.

One Sabbath during August 1996, my family visited my sister-in-law and her family in New Albany, Indiana. That Sabbath the church had not organized a fellowship dinner. However, my sister-in-law learned that guests from Idaho had just arrived in town, so she invited them to eat at her home.

While we were enjoying good fellowship at the dining room table, the husband of this family from Idaho said: “My wife and I had planned to visit around before deciding on our permanent church. But since we have been invited to lunch by your family today, we will immediately transfer our membership to your church.”

One year later we again visited that church and found that man serving as one of the Sabbath School superintendents. He is a pillar of the church fellowship program.

Increase your options

Have a potluck for members and guests at least once a month. Host hospitality dinners specifically for guests the rest of the month on site or in members' homes. Have a variety of hosts to ensure compatibility with guests with regard to family size, gender, etc. Try assigning dinner dates to Sabbath School classes or other church departmental leaders, as well as forming volunteer teams with special interests: senior citizens, children under 5, or teens, etc.

What else can we do? Consider the following:

Introductions

Instead of just keeping a guest book open at the reception desk for guests to sign, diversify your fellowship approaches. Introduce guests during Sabbath School class time. Introduce guests during the church announcement period and invite all church members to welcome them. Follow up by arranging for members to visit guests in their homes.

Nurture the faithful

Make sure that longtime members get regular visits too, especially the elderly, single parents, and other single members. The stiff-upper-lip members and professional smiles may also be longing for fellowship. Empty-nesters and younger siblings of older brothers and sisters would welcome young adult visitors.

Members who are always in the church and engaged in every activity may be working themselves to frustration to fill the fellowship needs they crave. Visit them in their home. Give them the gift of fellowship.

Updates

Do not inform only guests and missing members about upcoming Sabbath School or church programs; update members who are absent on any given Sabbath about announcements they have missed. Keeping Sabbath School classes small not only encourages class participation; fellowship opportunities are also increased. This

intimacy increases the “missed you” factor when members are away even for one Sabbath.

Church attendees who do not come to Sabbath School present a greater challenge. Assign active students to nurture these “11 o’clock only” members. Find out what they need from Sabbath School. Draw them into the programs and discussions when they attend. Note when they are absent and show that their absence is a personal loss.

“Eleven o’clock only” members

It’s not easy to know why people do not attend Sabbath School. Once in South America a family was missing from Sabbath School. That afternoon the pastor visited the family and found that two small children had been left alone in the house for three days without knowing that their

parents had been in an accident. The children may have died if members had not visited that Sabbath afternoon.

Increase the nurture

Encourage members to meet in small-group ministries during the week. Having these extra times together to meet, study, pray, and share with each other strengthens family bonds. Strong bonds of fellowship strengthened by His love keep members active in the church.

Also explore ways that members can meet to share hobby and work interests. We must have opportunities to get a well-rounded view of our brothers and sisters in Christ. You won’t know all the needs. Ask the Lord to show you who needs their cups filled and how to fill it.

—***Jonathan Kuntaraf***