



Investigating Strategies for Church Members' Retention: The Case of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the North-West Rwanda Field

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Abstract: *The Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) is one of the Christian churches globally founded on making discipleship for Jesus Christ. This makes it experience the numerical growth of new church members. This is attributed to its numerous discipleship programs that lead to the conversion of new church members. Despite that, however, strategies to retain new members are ineffective as some backslide and drop attending church services or cease to participate in various church discipleship programs. This paper uses the descriptive literature review methodology to investigate the various effective biblical and Spirit of Prophecy strategies that can be used to retain newly converted SDA church members. First, the paper analyses the Old Testament retention strategies, the New Testament retention strategies used by Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul, the retention strategies according to the Spirit of Prophecy by Ellen G. White; as well as other retention strategies revealed in other literature. A conclusion is then drawn indicating the found strategies that work. The study informs the SDA church about the best strategies for retaining newly converted members for church members' numerical and spiritual growth.*

Keywords: *Retention, Retention strategies, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Spirit of Prophecy, Rwanda*

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1. Introduction

The SDA Church is one of the Christian churches globally that is founded on the premise of making discipleship for Jesus Christ to fulfill the greatest Christian commission of bearing fruit that will last (John 15:16 NIV), making disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them to obey what Jesus Christ commanded (Mathew 28:19-20, NIV), proclaiming the eternal gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people (Revelation 14: 6); as well as keeping watch over themselves and over the flock they were made overseers (Acts 20:28, NIV).

It is from such above premises that the SDA church worldwide and in Rwanda in particular sets plans,

budgets, and conducts evangelistic campaigns every quarter to fulfill the above commission. It does this through public evangelistic campaigns, face-to-face personal evangelism, community outreach campaigns, televised evangelistic campaigns, online bible study programs, and camp meetings, among others (Baffour, 2014). This results in the new members' attraction to the SDA church.

The new members are attracted due to various reasons. According to the bible, they are attracted through spiritual conviction and obedience to God (Acts 5, NIV). Other literature indicates the reasons for the attraction of new members to the church as inspiration, looking for relationships, fanatics, attachment, and assimilation, among others (Kamande et al., 2022; Corley, 2018; Webb, 2012; Webb et al., 1998; Decoo, 1996).

Retention strategies to ensure new members are also devised by the SDA Church leaders and they include church involvement activities, discipleship programs, nurturing programs, outreach programs, youth programs, and seminars, among others (Corley, 2018; Woodard, 2018; Baffour, 2014). Retention means keeping people in a group and this case, church to continue to be together, and nobody leaves. Despite that, however, strategies to retain new members are ineffective as some backslide and drop attending church services or cease to participate in various church discipleship programs (Baffour, 2014).

Out of 1.4 million baptized members in the SDA Church from 2000-2005, 28% had dropped (Nyambega, 2014). Woodard (2018) found 15 out of 27 baptized members in the Ebenezer SDA Church, Green-Ville in North Carolina, USA, missing attending Church. Relatedly, the study further found that out of 15 members baptized in 2013 in the Gethsemane SDA Church, only one was still attending Church services.

Other Evidence shows that out of 215 baptized members in the Ahodwo District Church of the South Ashanti Conference of the SDA Church in Ghana in 2015, only 40 were found still attending church in the second quarter of 2016 (Mensah, 2021). Besides, the North-west Rwanda Field (NWRF) annual statistical report reveals that 4% of baptized people in 2022 left the church (NWRF, 2022) and the church membership audit of March 2017 shows that Gisenyi Church in the same field lost 35% of its members for almost five consecutive years, while 55% were attending the Sabbath school (NWRF, 2017).

Such statistics of many new members dropping the church justified the need to fill the retention gap through this study. Therefore, this study assessed the various effective strategies drawn from the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, and other literature that can be used to retain newly converted SDA church members. First, the study analyses the biblical retention strategies found in both the Old and the New Testaments, using examples of Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul; the retention strategies according to the Spirit of Prophecy by Ellen White; as well as other retention strategies revealed in other literature (distant and current literature), and then determines the best strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Retention strategies in the bible-Old Testament Bible

The Old Testament highlights various retention strategies used by God - connection establishment, relationship building, compassion, mercy, grace, obedience, support, instructions, submissiveness, dependence, unconditional love, restoration, and faithfulness.

The *connection strategy* was one of the most used by God to retain his people close to Him. This is expressed in God's creation and redemption story. God established a solid connection with His creatures by creation. The expression: "Let us make human beings" (Gen. 1:26) indicates a unique connection between humans and God. The breath of God in humans is a capacity to connect humans to God. God made man in His likeness, according to His image (Gen. 1:26). Humans are connected and identified with God in His image. He established the connection of breath. which is synonymous with life is divinely inherent in humans. It is by this means that the Spirit of God connects with humans for good.

Relationship is another strategy revealed in the OT. God used to retain his relationship with his people beginning from the Garden of Eden. God the creator and relationship builder, established a relationship with the first couple (Adam and Eve). The Bible accounts that one day, Adam and Eve got the voice of the Creator coming into the Garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3). The text presupposes that God periodically visited the couple to maintain their relationship. This relationship continued even after the couple's disobedience. The building of the affinity linking God and humanity is a key strategic performance towards the retention of members.

Compassion. The compassion of God towards sinful humans is a key strategy for retention. Compassion is God's attitude of retaining people. Compassion has a deeper meaning which is love. Unconditional love was demonstrated to the first couple when they walked away from their usual meeting place (Gen. 3:8). In their disobedience, Adam and Eve were clothed with sheep's skin signifying God's righteousness (Gen. 3:21). God's concern was to retain Adam and Eve and not to lose them forever. He imparted His righteousness by showing unconditional compassion and love to Adam and Eve while they had freshly sinned. At that moment God called Adam and asked him, where he was (Gen. 3:9).

Mercy was used by God for the retention of relationships with His people. Noah, God's faithful messenger (Gen. 6:8), received the mercy of God to extend the same mercy to a densely populated world, at a time when people began to increase on the earth. (Gen. 6:1). The world was corrupt, and immorality was on the increase (Gen. 6:2). Although God expressed that His Spirit shall not struggle with man endlessly (Gen. 6:3), His mercy was extended to the antediluvians. Amidst this immorality, God used His method of mercy to retain humans and not destroy them. In His great mercy, God's Spirit was yet working and trying to rule in the emotions and thoughts of people. God was merciful and considerate by considering life to extend to one hundred and twenty years, despite the rampant sins of the people during Noah's time. (Gen. 6: 3).

The *faith direction* strategy of God is a retention plan: God called Abraham to His service and asked him to

leave his home country, from his relatives and from his father's home to a country that God would show him (Gen. 12: 1). An act of faith is to believe in something which is yet to happen and Abraham was used as an example for contemporary Christians to keep believing in a heaven and a new earth for which they are yet to experience. God promised Abraham to make him a great nation, He granted him a blessing and made his name great. He received a guarantee of protection from those who would try to curse him that God would curse them before they do so to Abraham. (Gen. 12:2-3).

Obedience was a strategy used by many patriarchs in the OT to keep maintaining God's relationship. Abraham's obedience to God's call to leave his country for a new country, Canaan, as well as his obedience to sacrifice his son Isaac, strongly maintained his relationship and dependence on God (Gen. 12).

Support strategy. The call of Moses illustrates the physical and spiritual support to be emulated by retention implementers. God decided to deliver His children by sending Moses because the cry of His people reached Him. (Ex. 3:9). And God commended Moses to go to Pharaoh and bring Israelites. (Ex. 3:10). Moses needed support and God provided that support. Moses received support from Aaron for the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. In addition, God ensured Moses the divine power before Pharaoh and the support of his brother Aaron. The instruction the Lord gave to Moses was to respect everything that He commended, and the responsibility of Aaron was to address Pharaoh to let His people leave Egypt. (Exodus 7:1-2). The brotherly support offered by God is key in redemption and retention ministry.

God's act of deliverance was a spiritual support extended to the Israelites. Moses and his brother Aaron went to the Imperial Palace to see Pharaoh and tell him the Lord's plans to let His people go so that they have a feast with His Creator in the wilderness. (Ex. 5). Pharaoh refused to let Israel go (v.2). The release of the children of Israel by Pharaoh was a spiritual release. God stamped his spiritual authority as confirmed by Moses that He shall make known to the Egyptians that He is the Lord when He will stretch out His hand against Egypt and bring His people from them (Exodus 7:5).

Instructions are God's strategies for the retention of souls. After Moses received all instructions from God, he returned to Egypt (Ex. 4: 19) with his brother Aaron (v. 27, 28, 29). When they arrived there, "Aaron reproduced all the words the Lord had said to Moses, and he performed miracles before them" (Ex. 4:30). "Now, the Israelites trusted God, and they felt the presence of the Lord among them and they prostrated to worship Him. (Ex. 4: 31). Sometimes, it is not easy to trust unusual occasions. Moses had acknowledged God's message to people and they did not believe at the first time. But later, their belief was not based on the Lord's servants (Moses

and Aaron), but on God's words and miracles. While Moses was leading God's people in the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land, he never forgot to remind them to stay obedient to the Lord. God commanded Moses to carry out the commandment of God to teach statutes and judgments, and they should keep them and act according to them in the land which they were going to possess (Deut. 4).

Submissive strategy: God's strategy for retention is to call backsliders to submit to Him. Through the Prophets, calls were placed to the Jewish nation to submit to God. Calls to return to God and to submit to Him as the only true God is one of the strategic steps for retention. Several times, Israelites rebelled against God and turned from Him to worship other gods. The Lord never gave up on them, He continued with His calls for them to submit. Rebellious people can never be called to submit through force. God sent more than one prophet to Israel when they rebelled. The two purposes of a call to rebellious people to submit are: 1) to reveal and describe their sin condition, and 2) to invite rebellious people to submit and obey Him.

Dependence strategy The Call to Salvation is a call to depend on God as the only Savior. Isaiah pointed to the Messiah as one whose government is eternal (Isaiah 9) and that humanity can depend on Him for salvation. The call to depend on the Messiah is the foundation of the Christian life and a strategy for retention.

God's idea of retention is not punishment but *restoration*. Joel espoused God's message of restoration, "So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, my great army which I sent among you (Joel 2:25). God's plan for retention was made up for the lost years of backsliders. This strategy of restoration can ignite hope in backsliders. God's purpose was that generations could not repeat the mistakes of their parents and grandparents (Joel 1:3).

2.2 Retention Strategies in the New Testament

Like in the OT, retention strategies were used in the NT by Jesus Christ as well as his disciples to win souls and maintain relationships with the people. Some of the retention strategies used included oneness, community engagement, visitation, connection, compassion, figurative strategy, physical and spiritual support, faithfulness, submissiveness, obedience, small groups, and instructions.

Oneness strategy. The apostle Paul compares the church to a human body with various parts that form one entity. All those who have been baptized by one spirit and from different settings constitute one body in Christ. This shows that the body is not made up of one part but of many (1 Cor. 12:12-26). The Church is a Body of Christ,

a community that gives support to each other. We are part of God's Family (Eph. 2:19). As followers of Christ, we are members of God's family, His children, our self-worth is because we are called God's children and He loves us so much.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament also reveals *connection* as God's strategy for the retention of members. Paul explains the necessity of the body's connection to the head because the whole body derives its growth from it, but it is also nourished by what comes from different organs and becomes one unity. (Col. 2:19). We are God's children right now, not in the upcoming (1 John 3:1, 2). Once we receive God's Spirit, we are no longer like fearful slaves, but we are proud to call Him our Father, and the Holy Spirit in connection with our spirit confirms that we are God's offspring (Rom. 8:14-16).

Relationship strategy. In the above sections, the Bible indicates that the church is the body of Christ made up of Christians who are members of the body of Christ, and the family of God made up of Christians who are children of God. From this last relationship, we have another family relationship which is marriage. According to the Bible, marriage makes two people in one body. Jesus confirmed this oneness by saying that those who are married become one body or flesh instead of remaining two as before. (Matt. 19:6). The physical-human relationship in marriage is related to the divine spiritual relationship. Paul explains this relationship by advising the wives and husbands. He urges wives to give respect to their husbands, as they do for the Lord (Eph. 5:22). As Christ is the head of His church, the same for the husband toward his wife. (v.23). The bride of Christ, the church, has not yet been in a full marriage relationship with Christ. Paul said that he is jealous of Corinthians with the jealousy of God Himself. He assured them as a clean wife-to-be to one spouse – Christ (2 Cor. 11:2). For the present time, all believers are engaged to Christ, and they have a unique responsibility to remain in spiritual purity.

Physical support strategy. One of the strategies that Jesus often used was to mingle with them and provide spiritual support - people to come and stay with Him in His teachings, was providing physical support - healing the sick of all kinds, resurrecting the dead, feeding the hungry (Mat.4:23-25; Marc 6:37; John 11). This kind of caring for people that Jesus showed in solving their physical problems became a powerful strategy to win people over and keep following Him wherever he went.

Visitation strategy. One of the examples is that Jesus went into all villages, towns, and synagogues, preaching the Good News of the kingdom, and healing the sick. This strategy of reaching them through visitation helped him to understand their spiritual and physical needs (Mathew 9:35 NIV).

Empathy strategy. As Jesus went through villages and towns preaching and teaching and healing (Mathew 9:35), a cloud of people followed Him from one village to another - Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan (Mathew. 4:25). Through mingling with them, He understood their needs and was compassionate because they were harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd (Mathew 9:36). He attended to their needs and won their confidence and bid them to follow him (White, 1905).

Compassion was an instrument of retention used in the NT. When Jesus was preaching, a group of Pharisees mixed with Scribes presented to Him a woman caught in adultery and started to accuse her. They said that in Moses' law, such a person should be stoned." (John. 8:5). With compassion, Jesus defended the woman without compromising the law and without blaming anybody. This strategy did not only lead to the salvation of the woman but also those accusing her because they were convicted by their conscience. Then Jesus addressed her that if there were no one to judge you, me neither, and you are forgiven and sin no more. (Jn. 8:11). The result was that the woman's heart was connected to Jesus. This woman is believed to be among those who followed Jesus up to his death, burial, and resurrection (Mathew 27 & 28).

Faith strategy. Jesus' call to disciples in the New Testament was a faith call like it was for God's call for Abraham in the Old Testament. Jesus called disciples to be prepared to work for His ministry and He said to Simon called Peter and Andrew who were fishermen: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." (Mat. 4:18-20). The disciples' faith made them accept the call to be instruments that bring and retain people in the church. Faith made the disciples believe what Jesus told them even though they had not seen it. Paul said that faith is the matter of things anticipated for, the demonstration of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1).

Paul's *instructions* are a strategy for the retention of church members. The appointment of Titus in Crete was empowered by instructions given that would allow him to accomplish his work. Paul reminded him of the reason he was left there. The instructions given to Titus were to put the remaining things in order and assign qualified elders to every city. (Titus 1:5). Titus was given instructions on the qualifications of elders, (Titus 1:6-9), their tasks, (Titus 1:10-16), and the qualifications of a healthy church on how every member should be conducted, (Titus 2:1-10). All these instructions given to Titus allowed him to maintain people in the belief and obedience to God's word. Later, Paul thanked God for putting earnest care for the Judean Saints in Titus' heart through different instructions. (2 Cor. 8:16).

The practice of *small groups* is a strategy for retention used by Jesus. He began His ministry by forming a small group of twelve Apostles. Jesus invited many people

(Mark 3:13). Among the multitude, He appointed twelve who might be with Him, (Mark 3:14). The objective was to train them and to be sent to preach and heal (Mark 3:14-15), for a future retention of people. This relationship that Jesus had with his disciples, is what made them faithful when they were still with him and after Jesus ascended to heaven.

Submissiveness. Jesus' submission to the will of God is a good example of retention. He set a godly example of how Christians should live in their faith. God gave His Son (Jn. 3:16) to be a sacrifice for sinners and Jesus submitted His life to God's plan for humankind's salvation and restoration. In Gethsemane's prayer, Jesus demonstrated His obedience before He was arrested to be crucified and said "Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." (Mark 14:36). This is a perfect example of submissiveness for all Christians and a practical strategy for retention because those who obey God's will are retained in His Church.

Paul considers *faithfulness* as a strategy for retention. Among the people Paul worked with, he often focused on the faithfulness of Timothy because he saw him as useful in retaining many people in different places. When he rebuked the Corinthians not to follow false instructors, he sent Timothy his cherished and obedient son in the Lord (1 Cor.2:15-17). Paul trusted Timothy for his faithfulness to the word of God and saw in him the authority to retain the Corinthians in their faith. Faithfulness to God enabled Timothy to do the work of retaining many people. The value Paul placed on faithfulness as a strategy for retention made him exhort Timothy to avoid being embarrassed of the witness of our Lord, (1 Tim. 1:8), and directed him to remain faithful. (2 Tim. 1:13).

Restoration strategy: Throughout Paul's letters, the theme of restoration has been considered as a strategy for retention for Galatians and Corinthians. When he wrote to Corinthians who had sinned and to all the rest (2 Cor.13:2) reminding them of their weakness, he mentioned that they shall be restored by the power of God. (v. 4). Paul did not forget to pray for their restoration (v.9) because he was aware of the strength they could get to remain in the love of Christ. It also happened when Paul reminded the Galatians who were spiritually restored to help their brethren overtaken in any trespass (Gal. 6:1) so that they too could be restored.

2.3 Spirit of Prophecy's Retention Strategies

There is a coherence between the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Ellen G. White literature. The themes discussed in the Old and New Testaments as strategies for the retention of God's people appear also in the Spirit of Prophecy with the same purpose.

The Savior mingled with people as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He invited them, "Follow Me." A person cannot leave from sins without having a good *relationship* with the Savior. White notes that when this closeness of connection and relationship is shaped, Jesus takes our sins and exchanges them with His righteousness (White, 1907). Therefore, people will not have distractions that would attract them to go outside the church. Spiritual connection will impact a good relationship between members and God and as a result, retention will be possible.

White reflects on *compassion* as another instrument of retention. When people are connected to Christ and have a good relationship with Him, they acquire His character. Jesus was always characterized by compassion regarding anyone who needed His help. White says that when Christ observed a cloud of people had compassion toward them and it was not something strange but it was His nature obtained from the heart of the heavenly Father (White, 1897). This compassion Christ proved to the people who came to listen to Him, made them continue to follow Him. This proves that empathy is a key factor in retention. Hence, all those who have been privileged to minister in Christ's church must demonstrate affectionate compassion to all needy (White, 1901). This will contribute to reducing the rate of backsliders.

Another pattern contributing to the retention of members highlighted by Ellen G. White is *submissiveness* to God's will. Without submission to God's law, our Christianity is built on the sand. That is why the indispensable lesson they [Christians] need to get is the lesson of submission – submission to the will of Christ (White, 1903). The reason some church members drop out is that they have put aside the hearts that obey God's principles found in the Bible. They are not committed to surrendering their lives to the Lord. Ellen G. White writes, "Through submission of the mind and will to the Holy Spirit, we are ever to be learners of the Great Teacher (White, 1909). There is no doubt that when members reach the standard level of submissiveness, retention will be strong enough.

Besides, White reveals the role of *visitation* in the retention of members. Visitation ministry reflects Christian values including love, compassion, kindness, and spiritual strengthening among church members. These are values that many people joining the church ought to receive from their fellow believers and leaders. In this context, Ellen White advises the ministers to organize and make spiritual visits that will engage every member of the family to sense God's love through the people they came into their home (White, 1946). By visiting people, they are assured of being recognized by God through His church. In turn, members who visited could be wildly enthusiastic about the church. Recognizing the importance of this responsibility, White says that the work of visiting home to home concerned

about lost souls and pursuing lost sheep, is the greatest work that any could realize (White, 1946). Once these counsels are implemented, changes in retention programs would be evident.

Moreover, *faithfulness* is another theme about the retention of members that Ellen White underlines. For people to remain in the church implies being faithful to God's principles that govern His church. Loyalty is like a rope that prevents a person from going away from God. On this subject, White reminds us that Paul did not give up continuing standing on urging newly converted to stay in their faith even when he was far from them (White, 1911). Faithfulness has not only the benefit of retention of members but also those who are faithful. Our faithfulness makes Jesus listen to our supplications and answer all our prayers and his grace is intensified to His faithful people. With great joy, He dispenses out His seeking blessings as they need in their fight against the evil that affects them (White, 1911). When people have what they need, it is not easy for them to leave the church. From this statement, White testifies that faithfulness is important in the retention of members.

However, faithfulness cannot be separated from *obedience* which is also a factor in retention. Obedience to God's law is one of the pillars that will enable people to face the lust of the world that makes some leave the church. White affirms that people who have shown obedience to the Lord from generation to generation will change their character, and this will help them to resist evil, and their sense and understanding before the world will be based on obedience to the touchstone of righteousness (White, 1901). Without obedience, a person becomes resistant to the Bible's principles and some members decide to leave the church for their own decision or be disciplined by the church board. White says that at every generation there is a church built on Christ, and it receives the right to privileges due to its obedience to God's commandments (White, 1900). Guided by the Holy Spirit, she gives a conviction that obedience plays a great role in the retention of church members from generation to generation.

In brief, the description of different themes of retention indicates the coherence between the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Spirit of Prophecy. Each of them in their diversity contributes to enhancing the retention of members. Even though all of these themes contribute a lot to retention, some are dominant over others. From this perspective, the focus is on obedience and compassion. These two dominant themes make possible the classification of two groups: one group reliant on compassion and the other group on obedience. Therefore, on one side, those acting with compassion are unconditional love, visitation, spiritual and physical support, connection, mercy, grace, and relationship. On the other side, those acting with obedience are submissiveness, instruction, dependence, and faithfulness.

In comparison with the previous dominant theme of retention, obedience comes from within, while compassion comes from elsewhere, but they are complementary to the retention process. An obedient person is characterized in his/her life by following instructions given to accomplish his/her responsibility, depending always on God's will, faithfulness is his/her second nature. Thus, such a person builds strength to face the deceptions of the world. Hence, compassionate and obedient people in the church are to be formed and have Christ-like characters to promote the retention of members.

2.4 Retention Strategies in Other Literature

Instructions for new converts to baptism. The responsibility of preparing new converts for baptism is an activity that requires sufficient dedication and spiritual experience on the side of church leadership. The foul preparation of a new convert depends on how much he has been instructed and, on his willingness, to embrace and practice those truths (Willard, 1943). If church leaders heeded this advice there would be much to change about the issue of believers leaving the church.

Assimilation of members. Each church set a goal of baptism for a definite period. But it is not enough to establish such kind of objectives, also, local churches should make plans for the assimilation of new church members. Therefore, the problem of people who leave the church in a big number after a short time of their baptism, shows that there is a problem with a consistent system and structure of assimilation and retention of new believers in local churches (Warren, 2013). Brown and Hightower (1994) define assimilation as bringing people to the church and helping them to understand the importance of belonging and thus participate in the mission of it. The process of assimilation should begin before the person gets converted and baptism and continue for the rest of the life of the believers in the church (Peter et al, 1986). There is a conversion between a person before and after the baptism that can disturb the spiritual life. To solve this critical situation, Jane highlights three combined initiatives to consider, including assigning spiritual guardians to each new member, involving them in the ministry, and introducing them in a progressive orientation (Jane, 2010). This system helps in assimilating new members.

Members' relationships: A relationship has a great implication in church membership retention when it is based on compassionate love toward others. Burrill says that loving relationships are not optional for the church (Burrill, 2009). Feldbush (1996) notes that a helpful relationship is created to meet the needs of others and assist them to grow, instead of satisfying your egoism. When God created humankind, He gave them the ability to live with others, which makes them need others everywhere in society. The relationship helps people to

feel comfortable. Rice (2002) says it is a fundamental fact of human life that we need relationships with other human beings. Roger (2000) notes that the special gift that the church should give to them is a good Christian relationship made by true fellowship and friendship. A large number feel that the church looks like an extension of the family. They found there a spirit of sharing the same ethics, principles, and beliefs. Therefore, good relationships make the church a favorable place where people desire to belong for long.

Small Groups: From the time of creation up to now, small groups have been successfully used by God and His people. Burrill (2003) observes that small groups appear to be one of the modern ways of doing church. He continues by saying that it is very clear that small groups have been a vital part of Christianity from its inception. Nyambega (2014), confirms that the practice of small groups in the retention of church members and their assimilation is one of the methods that greatly help the church proposed by modern retention scholars. However, small groups are important in different domains of life in connecting people and motivating them to work together and stay a long time.

Visitation Strategy employed in the OT, NT and emphasized in the Spirit of philosophy and other literature is vital in discipleship and retention of church members. When a person receives a visit from a pastor or fellow church member, it is like a covenant that connects both sides. The Great Commission that is given to the church should not be limited to getting people baptized. His observation concerning visitation is slowly neglected by many pastors in our days. Lawrence (2008) indicates that some pastors view nurturing through sermons rather than through member visitation. This is what he called a big mistake. The Pastor and old church members must help new believers to strengthen their spiritual life through visitation. According to Short (2004), Christ-like act is exemplified in visiting and befriending individuals. If pastors, together with church elders and believers understood the value of visiting and implementing that valuable service, it would greatly reduce the number of people who leave the church and give up their faith.

Discipleship culture: The challenge that the church has in membership retention is that discipleship has lost its meaning. Duncan (2015) found weaknesses in the SDA church's discipleship programs as a lack of new members for place in mentoring relationships with seasoned members, as well as inadequate time for implementing the discipleship curriculum. Just because people are baptized does not mean that your work is done. It is just the beginning. Notes Burrill (2003, p.97). The main goal of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 is to make disciples. It is not sufficient to baptize people and raise the number of memberships in our churches. The church is losing many members due to the low level of making disciples and the result is that the

local church suffers and is disturbed by membership losses at a high level.

3. Methodology

Study area: the study area was NWRP. The NWRP is one of the fields constituting the Rwanda Union Mission of the SDA Church. It was established in 2011. It is located in the Western Province of Rwanda and covers the districts of Rubavu, Ngororero, Nyabihu, and Rutsiro. It has 129, 000 total church members. These members are constituted in 28 church districts and 286 local churches of the SDA.

Design: The study used a descriptive literature review approach to describe the effective retention strategies used in the biblical accounts of the OT and NT, the spirit of Prophecy, and other literature. Content analysis was used to assess the effective retention strategies from the above literature. The found strategies were corroborated, presented, and discussed in the section below.

4. Results and Discussion

Various and common themes were found across the OT, NT, and Spirit of Prophecy and from other literature. They include building relationships, connection, faithfulness, obedience, instructions, discipleship programs, visitations, small groups, empathy, compassion, community mingling, oneness, nurturing, church involvement, and spiritual and physical support. These emerging retention strategies across themes need to be understood and implemented in an integrated manner through participation by the SDA church leaders, church members, and newly converted members.

Church leaders and church members should have the same compassion God, Jesus, and Apostles had toward new members to reinforce retention. This compassion won't be possessed unless the church leaders and church members work together and have visitations and outreach campaigns that aim at reaching to homes of the new members. When these new members are visited, they don't feel alienated but loved. They cherish a new community of belonging, open up, and reveal their spiritual and physical needs. When their needs are attended to, they become a living testimony in their lives and also to their family members, thereby building a strong relationship with the existing church members and leaders, as resulting in retention (White, 1905; Mathew 9:35-36).

This faith walk would have to be affirmed constantly to help members to remain in the faith. There is a need to instill faith in people. God applied this strategy by assuring Abraham of what was yet to happen. The recognition of spiritual support and spiritual fellowship are keys to redemptive retention strategies for the church today.

Discipleship programs strategy was crossing the OT, NT, Spirit of Prophecy, and other literature. The challenge that the church has in member retention is that discipleship has lost its meaning. Yet, discipleship is a permanent obedience to Jesus Christ that changes a person's values and behavior leads in ministry in their home, church, and community, and helps members to trust and follow Jesus (Absalom & Harrington, 2016 Sneed & Edgemont 1999).

Duncan (2015) found over 90% who participated in discipleship mentorship programs were enlightened and well-equipped to participate in the church's discipleship programs. Discipleship programs should focus on teaching members about faith and trust in God, obedience to God, dependence on God, obeying God's instructions, the love of God, compassion to others, selflessness, and mission to minister to others. Such discipleship attitude should be reflected in the OT and NT case examples of God, Jesus, apostles, and patriarchs related with their creator and Saviour through faith love, compassion, obedience, ministering to others, sacrificing their lives for the ministry of God, and the reward awaiting those who trusted and continue to trust, obey, believe, and love God.

This means that church leaders should ensure that they design and teach discipleship curricula that enable new members to have life transformation and this will result in their retention. According to Duncan (2015), discipleship programs are effective when there is ample time to do discipleship mentoring as well as involving new members with seasoned members in the discipleship programs (Duncan (2015).

Small group strategy was found in the Spirit of Prophecy, other literature and NT The church has the responsibility to teach and train church members through small groups. This strategy for retention is strongly needed for the salvation of many souls. Odolopre (2024) found District SDA churches in South Sudan experiencing personal witnessing and small group programs, associations, and adult education programs. These were effective in retaining new church members.

Visitation strategy was also found as effective in the OT, Spirit of Prophecy, and other literature. To apply this retention strategy, church members need to first understand that the new members need a warm welcome, who to talk to, who to reveal their needs to, and who should help them get initiated in the church. They are looking for new friends since the old friends have been abandoned due to new faith. They also need to be taught how to study the bible, how to pray, and how to behave like Jesus Christ. Visitation programs involving church members and leaders would greatly influence the retention of new members and leave a lasting impact. From God's examples of visiting Adam and Eve, Abraham, a deeper relationship was developed.

Similarly, people whom Jesus visited- Lazarus family, Zacchaeus the tax collector, Simon, and Jairo, among others, had a lasting spiritual impact and attachment. Visitation of new members should have a unique objective of helping people to remain connected to the Lord. Short says that if a visit is to have maximum value, it must be a means of bringing God into the situation in some way (Short, 2004). This also will serve as a way of assimilating new members.

Church involvement and discipleship programs were found as key to retaining church members (Woodard, 2018). Retention projects were found effective in raising church members' awareness and this resulted in improving the retention rate from 42.4 % to 86.8 % at Maboko SDA Church in Tanzania (Nyambega, 2014).

When newly baptized members are involved in church activities like leadership, leading song service, protocol, outreach ministry participation, community service participation, preaching schedules, church member visitation, planning church programs, discipleship programs, among others, they feel a sense of brotherly belonging, gain confidence in participating in decision making, feel compassionate about others, and get more understanding of the Church's mission to spread the gospel. They, therefore, feel part and parcel of the church's great mission of saving the lost. This will, therefore, enable them to be retained as church members. This supports Duncan (2015) who found over 90% of the people who participated in the discipleship mentorship program was enlightened and well-equipped to participate in the church's discipleship programs.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This paper discussed the church member retention strategies as exemplified in both the OT and NT of the bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, and other literature. Key findings from the OT include retention strategies like faithfulness, compassion, obedience to God, visitation, love, relationships, small groups, instructions, and discipleship programs.

In the NT, key retention strategies included oneness, visitation, mingling, compassion, small groups, forgiveness, empathy, and tolerance. The Spirit of Prophecy has revealed retention strategies as compassion, small groups, discipleship programs, visitations, relationships, and church involvement. Other literature has revealed church involvement, discipleship programs, visitations, assimilation, relationships, and outreach programs as the retention strategies that ensure new members are retained and assimilated into the church activities.

5.2 Recommendations

These revealed strategies need to be implemented holistically by the church members and the church leaders of the NWRF to retain and curb the new members' dropout. The new members need to find the church as their second home, feel cherished and loved, have their needs attended to, visited, involved in the church programs, and facilitated to get easily assimilated

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- into the church family/community, engaged in discipleship programs, etc.
- The different themes discussed can help to address this issue. When church leaders consider these strategies as a solution to the problem, the situation surely will change. Leaders must train all church members and when they are all engaged, each one of them will be satisfied and happy to be part of and belong to the church.
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