Leadership in Local Churches for Nurture and Growth

Kim Papaioannou, PhD
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines

1. Introduction

Numbers in the Bible are often symbols of aspects of the divine or human domains. Seven, for example, symbolizes divine perfection and rest,[1] while six, human imperfection and restlessness.[2] Twelve stands for divine government,[3] and three for completeness.[4] Likewise, the number ten stands for divine order. We have the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17), ten plagues on Egypt (Exod 7:14-12:30), ten virgins in Jesus' parable (Matt 25:1-13), ten "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John, ten clauses in the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13), ten parables of the kingdom, the ten righteous men that had they existed God would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:32), ten curtains (Exod 26:1) and ten pillars and bases (Exod 27:12) in the tabernacle, ten names repeated twice. Tithe was one tenth of the income (Lev 27:30-32). Noah was the tenth from Adam (Gen 5:1-32) and Abraham the tenth from Shem (Gen 11:20-26). Fascinating though numbers might be in themselves, this study is not primarily about numbers. It is rather on how number ten can be used as a basis of organization for nurture and growth in the local church.

One of the foundational challenges faced by the Adventist church, especially in the developing world, is the nurture of new

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[1]Davis, John J., *Biblical Numerology: A Basic Study of the Use of Numbers in the Bible* (Grand rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), 122-123.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

and existing church members.[1] The high growth rates mean that large numbers of new believers are added to the church on a weekly basis. Pastors often are in charge of multiple congregations, meaning that they do not have the time to adequately nurture and disciple new believers. Unless other experienced and spiritually mature members fill this void, new believers will often slide back into the background out of which they were initially converted.

In more affluent countries the ratio of pastors to congregations and believers is much higher, but the problem of adequate nurture still exists. The high pace of life, high mobility, heavy workload, has fragmented the concept of the extended, and even the nuclear family. Individuals often live insular lives in a beehive of activity with little meaningful interaction with other believers during the week. In such a context, pastors visit less and spend more time on administrative tasks. Given that nurture takes place to a large extent through personal interaction, their lack often means inadequate nurture. Weak believers often fall back into the "world" and few notice. A lack of nurture creates weak believers and impacts not only the health of a local church, but in time may also impact the health of whole Conferences and Unions. As welcome as church growth is, it will only be meaningful if there are strong nurture structures in place to care for new and old believers. In this study we will look at three Biblical examples that entail nurture of some kind and then apply them to the context of local churches with an aim of establishing a model for effective nurture.

2. The War of Israel and Benjamin

Judges 20 contains the epilogue of one of the saddest incidents in the history of Israel. Judges 19 describes how a Levite takes a concubine who proves unfaithful and leaves him (19:1-2). The Levite visits her and the two reconcile (19:3-10). The two then, together with the Levite's servant, depart for his hometown, albeit belatedly. They stop to rest in a town of the tribe of Benjamin where the concubine is so badly abused by the locals that she dies (19:25-28). The Levite notifies the other tribes who, after some deliberation and a forceful and unsuccessful attempt to reach an

[1] Hollis L. Green in *Why Churches Die* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1972), 65-69, appropriately identifies "the growing gap between the pulpit and the pews" as a major cause for church stagnation and death. See also Donald McGavran & WinArn in *Back to Basics in Church Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1981), 35.

agreement with Benjamin, decide to go to war against the whole tribe (20:1-14).

Of specific interest to this study is not the sad incident or the ensuing war, but a principle in the organization of Israel's army. The army of Israel numbers 400,000 (Judg 20:2), a truly large assembly of men. The leaders immediately recognize the problem of logistics associated with such numbers and decree: "we will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the people, that when they come they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin, for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel" (Judg 20:10).[1]

Israel decides to divide the men in multiples of ten and take one tenth of the soldiers and task them with providing provisions, with feeding, the rest of the army. The Hebrew word for "provisions" is צֵדָה and refers to provisions, often those taken on a long journey (Gen 42:25; 45:21). The equivalent Greek of the LXX is ἐπισιτισμὸν. It relates to adequate nourishment and is used in Ps 78:25 of God providing for His people. Clearly, what the leaders of Israel had in mind was not simply the survival but the full nutritional welfare of the soldiers. The later part of Judg 20:10 ties this welfare to the success of the mission. Victory would only be wrought if the soldiers were well nourished and in good shape. There is therefore a cause and effect relationship between the physical wellbeing of the soldiers through an adequate diet and the success of the mission.

Where did Israel learn of this model of organization? The text does not specify, but we meet a similar organizational structure in an earlier biblical narrative.

3. The Jethro Model

Exodus 18:1-27 tells the story of the visit of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, soon after Israel left Egypt. On visiting Moses, Jethro notices that Moses is exceedingly busy and inquires: "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" (Exod 18:14). Moses replies: "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws" (Exod 18:15-16). According to this text, Moses'

[1] All Bible references from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

work before the people was twofold: resolve disputes and make known to the people the laws of God. Estimates of the number of people involved vary. Exod 12:37 gives the number of men who left Egypt as "about six hundred thousand men... besides women and children" making perhaps for well over two million people in total. No wonder that Moses was working from morning to evening!

The result of this stretched schedule according to Jethro would be that both Moses and the people would suffer. Moses would wear himself out (Exod 18:18) through overwork; the people would also wear themselves out (Exod 18:18) presumably either because of waiting for their cases to be heard, or worse still, for not receiving appropriate oversight, teaching, and thus spiritual nurture. Anyone who has been involved in church ministry can probably testify that experience of worn out pastors and undernurtured believers.

Jethro proceeds to offer advice for an organization structure that is not dissimilar to that followed by the army of Israel in her war against Benjamin a couple of centuries later and which probably formed the inspiration for the army of Israel. We will call this, the Jethro Model. He tells Moses: "Look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you" (Exod 18:21-22).

Jethro's advice is that there should be an organizational hierarchy. At the lowest level one man would be responsible for ten others. The man would resolve minor cases and presumably oversee the day-to-day spiritual needs of the people in the place of Moses. At the higher levels there would be overseers of fifty, a hundred, a thousand, each presumably dealing with practical and spiritual issues in ascending order of importance. Major issues would be handled by Moses who in turn was to be in close communion with God (Exod 18:19).

The desired outcome of this organizational structure would be that Moses would find some relief from his heavy workload and the people would "go to their place in peace" (Exod 18:23). Two points need to be noted here about the benefits that would befall the people. First, the Hebrew word for "peace," שָׁלוֹם, does not refer primarily to the absence of war or strife, but rather to a holistic outlook on life that encompasses the physical, mental, and spiritual

wellbeing of a person.[1] It refers to completeness. What Jethro implies is that this holistic wellbeing would be compromised if the people were not well nurtured but would be accomplished if appropriate overseeing was in place on a day to day basis.

Second, the people would go to "their place" in peace. It is not altogether clear whether "their place" refers to their immediate home or tent in the wilderness, or whether Jethro was looking forward to the completion of Israel's journey in which case "their place" would refer to Israel's safe arrival in Canaan. The Hebrew noun with the third person suffix וּמקֹמָ translated "their place" appears another six times in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 21:19; 2 Chron 24:11; Ezr 1:4; Job 7:10; 38:12,19). In Deut 21:19 it refers to one's city; in 2 Chron 24:11 to the place where a box was placed for the collection of offerings; in Ezr 1:4 to men of one city or area helping those who were to travel to Jerusalem; in Job 7:10 to one's house or immediate surroundings; in Job 38:12 and 19 it refers to the place of the dawn and darkness respectively. The word itself therefore can have either an immediate outlook referring to a person's home and surroundings, or a broader outlook to a city or greater area of habitation. Most English translations simply refer to "their place". The NIV and NJB understand the text to refer to an immediate outlook and translate it "these people will go home satisfied." By contrast, the LXX and Modern Greek Bible both render the last clause of Exod 18:23 as "and furthermore all this people will **arrive** to their place in peace" (translation and emphasis mine). The notion of an "arrival" seems to move the thought away from the local confines of Israel's tents in the wilderness to the final destination of Israel's journey, Canaan.

Since the Hebrew is indeterminate, we could maintain that the reference to "their place" refers both to their immediate home, their tents in the wilderness, and to their ultimate destination, their homes in Canaan. In such an understanding, the organizational structure proposed by Jethro, the Jethro Model, becomes all the more important. The daily oversight and nurture of the people would not only ensure that they lived their lives in shalom on a day to day basis, but, perhaps more importantly, it would ensure that they would arrive to their final destination safely. The lack of such an organization could then, conversely, threaten not only Israel's day to day wellbeing, but even jeopardize her safe arrival into

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[1]Philip J. Nel, "שלום," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed., Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 4:130-132.

Canaan! A sobering thought indeed, as well as an amazing insight into the importance of adequate organizational structures.

Moses liked the advice and proceeded to implement it immediately: "So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times" (Exod 18:24-26). The reference to "all times" suggests that this was no temporary flash of inspiration put in place for a short time, but an organizational model that Moses implemented with a long term in view. Exod 18:27 concludes the pericope with the words: "Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country." It seems from this text that Moses only let Jethro depart after the organizational proposal had been implemented, indicating possibly Jethro's direct involvement, not only in giving advice, but also in implementing the advice. Later in the Pentateuch there are multiple references to the "chiefs" of the people,[1] which suggests that the system implemented was long lasting.

4. Acts 1

The last incident we will look at is the early church as described in its earliest structures in Acts 1. Jesus is already ascended as the disciples are gathered in the upper room (Acts 1:13) awaiting in prayer (1:14), for the promised power of the Holy Spirit (1:8) that is soon to come upon them (Acts 2:1-4). The number of those gathered at the upper room is given as "about 120" (Acts 1:15). The number of disciples/apostles is 11, the original 12 minus Judas who had committed suicide (Matt 27:5; Acts 1:18-19). Peter takes the initiative to arrange for a replacement of Judas (Acts 1:15). Two names are put forth, Justus and Matthias (1:23). Lots are cast and the lot falls on Matthias who thus replaces Judas (1:26) and the number of apostles is restored to 12.

The reason Peter felt there should be a replacement for Judas and the number of apostles restored to 12 is given in two statements. First, Peter quotes from Psalm 109:8, "Let another take his office" (Acts 1:20). The word for "office" is ἐπισκοπὴν, "oversight," and cognate to the adjective ἐπίσκοπος, a title given elsewhere to

[1]See Lev 10:6; Num 25:4; Deut 33:5, 21.

overseers of local churches.[1] Second, the person on whom the lot would fall would become "a witness to his [Jesus'] resurrection" (Acts 1:22). The ideas of "overseeing" and "witnessing" imply clear pastoral functions. Evidently, Peter's concern was that the pastoral oversight offered by the apostles to the believers of the early church should not be incomplete because of the loss of Judas.

It is worth noting the numerical relation between the number of apostles, 12 after the selection of Matthias, and believers, 120 as noted above; one leader for every 10 believers. It is tempting to connect Acts 1 with Exod 18 and Judg 20 and conclude that Peter had in mind the organizational model first adopted by Moses on the advice of Jethro and later by the army of Israel. However, clear linguistic connections between the pericopes are lacking. Furthermore, it is more likely that Peter was concerned with maintaining the number of apostles at 12, rather than ensuring a strict correspondence of one apostle for every 10 believers; after all, the number of believers was "about" 120 and therefore there is no indication of exact correspondence. Furthermore, we don't have clear evidence from elsewhere in the NT that the church followed the principle of 1 overseer for every 10 believers, the Jethro Model.

Having said that, it is no coincidence that Luke mentions the number of apostles as 12 and the number of believers as 120. Even if this organizational structure is not a gospel imperative and even if the Jethro Model may not have been foremost in Peter's mind, it is clear that in the correspondence between apostles and disciples we have a healthy model of organization that is fully biblical and proven already to work from the time of Moses. Furthermore, while there is no proof that the 1 to 10 ratio was followed as the church grew rapidly, there is evidence that oversight in the local churches was provided by more than one person and possibly in the context of person to person interaction along lines not dissimilar to those of the Jethro Model. Acts 14:2 mentions that Paul and Barnabas appointed "elders" in every local church they had planted. The plural "elders" with the singular "church" indicates that there was a multi-person leadership in every church. In Titus 1:5 Paul indicates that he placed Titus in Crete so that he would "appoint elders in every city". In James 5:14 James advises believers who fall ill to invite the "elders of the church" for prayer. In Acts 20:17 we likewise read that the local church of Ephesus had "elders" i.e. at least two, and

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[1]Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. And adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 3rd ed., rev. and edited by Frederick W. Danker (2000), s.v. "ἐπισκοπή."

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most likely quite a few more (c.f. 20:30, 37). All these texts speak of "elders" (plural) in a "church" or "city" (singular). While neither the membership of the churches in question is mentioned nor the number of elders appointed, it appears that the ratio between elders and members would not have been dissimilar to the Jethro Model.

Moreover, the specific task of elders was to look after the wellbeing of the congregation. Thus, in James 5:14-20 the elders look after both the physical and spiritual wellbeing of believers. In Acts 20:17-38 Paul's last interactions with the elders of Ephesus are mentioned. He specifically states: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Act 20:28). Nurturing elders, each overseeing a small number of believers marked the smallest nucleus of a local church. The idea of one leader for every few believers seems to have been ingrained in the very DNA of the early church.

5. Epilogue-Applying the Jethro Model to the Contemporary Context

The Jethro Model helped Moses minister to the needs of Israel successfully and Israel arrived safely into the Promised Land. A similar organizational structure followed by the army of Israel gave her victory over Benjamin. The local churches of the apostolic age also used a similar administrative concept whereby a number of elders in a local church were charged with the wellbeing of a congregation. The Jethro Model seems to be a divinely appointed model to keep the church healthy and thriving. Is it applicable today?

We noted earlier that one of the greatest needs today for healthy local churches is adequate nurture. This is the responsibility of the leaders of a local church, the pastor and the local elders. The Jethro Model and the early organization of the church suggest that this is best accomplished when each elder has the oversight of a relatively small number of persons and has adequate interactions with those under his care to ensure their spiritual needs are taken care of.

My experience is that this organizational concept is little utilized today. I have experienced life and ministry in a number of churches in different countries and cultural contexts. The ratio between elders of a local church and local church members is almost never 1 to 10 and is more likely to be 1 to 30, 1 to 50 or even 1 to 100. Moreover,

in contrast to what the Church Manual clearly stipulates, elders more often function as lay preachers or in administrative functions overseeing Sabbath or midweek church services, and less often in person to person nurture as was the case in the Jethro Model. Lack of adequate oversight will result, without fail, to weaker believers. And given that healthy growth is bound to a healthy spirituality, it is only healthy churches that can sustain healthy growth.

There is a way to healthier local churches in today's diverse world. The Jethro Model provides for a nurture model that can take care of the needs of all believers in a personal way at the most foundational level, person to person. It could be implemented in three easy and simple steps. First, the local church should determine the number of persons directly in need of care and nurture. This should include all active members, all members who have backslidden, and all individuals who have taken an interest in the gospel. Second, the local church should appoint enough elders to the ratio of 1 elder for every 10 persons who need ongoing nurture. The qualities of an elder are adequately explained in the NT, but one more should be added here. Each elder should have the desire and the time to spend with persons under his care, during the week outside the context of church services on a regular basis. Third, the elders and the pastor should meet at regular intervals to review the health of the church, address issues and ensure everything moves smoothly.

We are on our way to the heavenly Promised Land. We do not want anyone who has ever professed the name of Jesus to be found wanting. We also want many who have never professed the name of Jesus to come to a saving knowledge of the gospel. Healthy local churches can help accomplish that, and the Jethro Model can help build healthy local churches. Let's organize so that we arrive to our heavenly home safely. It is my conviction that every church should determine the number of elders to the tune of 1 for every 10 members.