

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY THROUGH THE EYES OF JOHN WESLEY AS A DISCIPLINING AND MEMBERSHIP RETENTION MODEL FOR THE SDA CHURCH

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Membership retention is obviously one of the greatest challenges for ministers of the gospel. There seems to be an exponential membership loss across denominations in Christendom for the past few decades. This status quo finds—to a great extent—its roots in the methods employed to nurture a church. It is in this perspective that John Wesley's method of creating small, interactive groups in order to retain converts is evoked. This study employs a quasi-historical approach to appraise the small group ministry method revolutionized by J. Wesley—for he was not the instigator of it. Upon analysis of the Wesleyan small group ministry approach, it is established that this method provides the present church with a model that is closer to the ideal pattern of the early Christian church in its various aspects. It follows that the ministry of the Methodist movement could serve as a model for the ministry of the church today. This study therefore concludes that J. Wesley's method of small group ministry—despite its limitations—is an invaluable approach that should be adopted or reinforced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a model for discipling and retaining members.

Key Words: John Wesley, small group ministry, discipling, membership retention, Church, Methodist movement

1. Introduction

The great commission given by Jesus to his disciples and to all Christians by extension revolves around the injunction "make disciples"¹ (Matt

¹ James A. Cress, *You Can Keep Them if You Care* (Oshawa, ON: Miracle, 2000), 13.

28:19-20).² As a result of this divine command, much effort is being deployed to win souls for Christ. Every local congregation devises ways and means to reach out to the people in their vicinity. Others travel overseas to proselytize people. This, indeed, is a laudable enterprise so to speak. Concomitantly however, little care is taken to ensure the welfare of new converts. It follows that while new members join the church daily, a number of old members, on the other hand, desert the church not on doctrinal grounds but as a result of a loss of interest. When this happens, the condition of the church may be likened to that of the post-exilic Jews who were earning wages only to put it into a bag with holes (cf. Hag 1:6; Matt 23:15) according to the invective of Haggai the prophet. This setback (i.e., the inability to retain members) is no respecter of denominational affiliations. Nonetheless, the phenomenon is increasingly rampant in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) circles. Thus, this calls for a reinvestigation of the subject of discipling and membership retention. The purpose of this study therefore, is to ascertain that the Wesleyan small group approach may be used as a model for discipling and membership retention in the SDA Church. To this end, the backgrounds of John Wesley and his small group ministry will be spotlighted. The study will also establish the timeliness of the Wesleyan small group approach.

2. John Wesley's Background

John Wesley was an eighteenth-century Anglican priest whose quest to regenerate spirituality in England led to the formation of the Methodist movement and the Methodist denomination after his demise.³ For half a century, he served as the main theological and organizational mentor for the movement. J. Wesley was born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley on 17th June, 1703; he was the fifteenth child and sixth son.

Susanna Wesley trained her children on a strict regimen which inculcated a life of discipline in them. J. Wesley "inherited a studious, thoughtful disposition and a calm, stubborn patience under adversity"⁴ from his

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this paper are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

³ Gayle Carlton Felton, "John Wesley and the Teaching Ministry: Ramifications for Education in the Church Today," *Religious Education* 92 (1997): 92.

⁴ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 7; John Pudney, *John Wesley and His World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), 7.

mother, a committed and devout Anglican shepherdess.⁵ J. Wesley studied Theology and taught Greek, philosophy, and logic at Oxford University (1720-1727). He received a master's degree in religion, moral, and natural philosophy in February 1727. He was ordained a priest with full parish responsibilities on September 22, 1728 in the Church of England, and he served as a curate at Wroote and Epworth from August 1727 to November 1729.⁶

At Oxford, his brother Charles Wesley (1707-1788) and some friends had begun the Holy Club which J. Wesley later took over as leader. Their main objective was to follow the practices of the primitive and apostolic Christian church. They wanted to "refashion the English Church according to the apostolic ideal, restoring the sacrament of Holy Communion to the place that it had occupied in the life of the early Christians."⁷

J. Wesley's Oxford experience became "the launching pad for his theology of holiness which was the main framework of his belief."⁸ He achieved a self-denying and self-disciplined life through prayer, fasting, intimate discussion with fellow believers, visiting the sick and prisoners, regular partaking of the Lord's Supper, and personal witnessing.⁹

J. Wesley served as a missionary in Georgia in America with his brother. They left England for Georgia in December of 1735, on board *H.M.S. Simmonds*, and arrived on February 6, 1736. On board the ship to Georgia, he met some devout Moravians whose lives of devotion and piety had

⁵ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 7.

⁶ Frank Baker, "Wesley Brothers," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), 12:370; Gwang Seok Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology: A Study in Its Sources and Development* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2008), 140.

⁷ V. H. H. Green, *John Wesley* (London: Nelson, 1964), 30. See also Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 14; Wilson Engel, "The Holy Club," *Christian History: Commemorative Issue* (1983): 16; Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley: An Autobiographical Sketch of the Man, and His Thought, Chiefly from His Letters* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 10; Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology*, 141; Wellman J. Warner, *Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution* (Berkeley: Russell, 1967), 164; Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 22, 39.

⁸ Borgen, *John Wesley*, 10, 11.

⁹ Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology*, 141; Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 27; Philip Wingeier-Rayo, "The Early Methodist Revival, Base Christian Communities and Pentecostalism in Latin America: A Comparison of Ecclesiology," *Apuntes* 21 (2001): 133.

lasting impression on him.¹⁰ The Moravians helped him to understand their deep spirituality.

England at the time of J. Wesley was going through many changes. In the 1700s, the nation was experiencing the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution; there was moral rebellion against Christianity, and Deism was making inroads in society. In spite of the work of apologists such as Joseph Butler, evil seemed endemic in the English society. The poor were moving to the urban centers and the Church of England could not meet both the spiritual and material needs of its people. Consequently, the church was seen as a place for the upper class, leading to divisions and many doubters.¹¹

On the continent, pietism was growing gradually, especially in Germany. Anthony Horneck began in 1678 the formation of "small groups for Bible-reading, self-examination, and mutual pastoral care" in England, to help young people. The members of the groups voluntarily took it upon themselves to engage in social and religious activities such as visiting prisoners and aiding the poor.¹²

J. Wesley's encounter with the Moravian Brethren on board the *Simmonds* was followed by his "evangelical" conversion soon after returning to England. He found help from Peter Böhler (1712-1775), a leader of a Moravian group in England who spoke to him about salvation by faith in contrast to J. Wesley's obsession with salvation through mystical perfection.

On the evening of May 24, 1738 in Aldersgate Street, he felt his "heart strangely warmed" while Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans was being read. He experienced conversion and wrote, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation. An assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin

¹⁰ The Moravians were descendants of John Huss and the Lutheran revivalist Spener who espoused small groups as a witnessing tool. See J. M. Buckley, "Methodists," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1977), 7:333.

¹¹ Skevingtone Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 15; J. W. Haas, "John Wesley's View on Science and Christianity: An Examination of the Charge of Anti-Science," *CH* (1994): 392.

¹² Roy S. Nicholson, "John Wesley and Ecumenicity," *WTJ* 2 (1967): 75; Martin Schmidt, "Wesley's Place in Church History," in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition: Essays Delivered at Drew University in Celebration of the Commencement of the Publication of the Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Kenneth E. Rowe (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1976), 68.

and death."¹³ This experience marked a major transformation in J. Wesley's life. Following his "conversion," J. Wesley paid a visit to the Moravian Brethren at Herrnhut, Germany in 1738. Church historians are of the view that in this succession of experiences, the evangelical Methodism Movement was born.¹⁴

Thousands of people joined the movement. J. Wesley traveled and preached with tireless enthusiasm, establishing many societies and chapels from London to Newcastle and Bristol. By 1767, about 26,000 people had joined the Methodist movement. At his death in 1791, at the age of eighty-seven, he had "spent a life preaching to a nation, covering 250,000 miles, mostly on horseback, and delivering an estimated 40,000 messages."¹⁵

For the fifty years that J. Wesley led the movement, he was its spiritual, evangelical, and theological mentor. He produced nearly all the relevant materials that the group needed to survive and function well (sermons, letters, tracts, exegetical papers, journals, and a monograph on *Original Sin*).¹⁶ J. Wesley indeed was an evangelist, a reformer and a disciple maker.

¹³ John Wesley, *Works (Bicentennial Edition)*, vol. 18, February 24, 1737/38, *Journals and Diaries 1 (1735-1738)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 197-205; James H. Rigg, *The Churchmanship of John Wesley and the Relations of Wesleyan Methodism to the Church of England* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, n.d.), 72; Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology*, 125; Philip F. Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism: The Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism* (New York: University Press of America, 2000), 2; Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze*, 103-110.

¹⁴ John Wesley, "A Short History of the People Called Methodist," in *Works (Jackson)*, 8:307; Buckley, "Methodists," 7:333; Albert Cook Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 50; Wingeier-Rayo, "The Early Methodist Revival," 135.

¹⁵ See Buckley, "Methodists," 7:334-335.

¹⁶ Barrie W. Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1995), 15; Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 20; Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 7.

3. Background to John Wesley's Small Group Ministry

J. Wesley's ecclesiology was generally gleaned from different sources and traditions such as the Anglican, Protestant, the Moravian Brethren, and the Puritan movement. The Moravians seemed to have practiced the concept of a believer's church which emphasized personal experience and holiness of the individual believers who then constitute the church.¹⁷ This position of the Moravians led them to create and emphasize small groups in their movement. This is attested to in the names J. Wesley gave to his Christian groups (the "Classes," and the "Bands,"); they all came directly from the Moravian's influence on J. Wesley because they were originally used by the Moravians.¹⁸ Besides, J. Wesley, according to Monk, was greatly influenced by the Puritans in different ways: (1) J. Wesley's concept of society and the Puritan's gathered church; (2) holiness as the aim of the church; (3) freedom of opinion; (4) covenant; and (5) a discipline system.¹⁹ Both the Puritans and J. Wesley viewed the church as the fellowship of individuals.

It was J. Wesley's conviction that the process of disciple making should involve devoted and diligent teaching. "Much of the ministry of the early Methodist movement was a ministry of teaching."²⁰ This was evident in the class meetings that the societies engaged in. Although he did not neglect "the importance of preaching, worship, sacraments, and Christian discipline, J. Wesley recognized that persons of all ages had to be taught what Christians believe and how Christians live."²¹ Thus, J. Wesley's views on discipleship emanated from four convictions: "(1) the

¹⁷ Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 51. See also Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 23. H. Ray Dunning, "Toward a Wesleyan Ecclesiology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22 (1987): 113.

¹⁸ M. Schmidt, "Wesley's Place in Church History," 83. See also Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 77.

¹⁹ Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage*, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies* No. 11, 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1999), 210-222.

²⁰ Felton, "John Wesley and the Teaching Ministry: Ramifications for Education in the Church Today," 95; See also E. B. Chappell, *Recent Development of Religious Education in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South: An Interpretation* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1935), 17.

²¹ Felton, "John Wesley and the Teaching Ministry: Ramifications for Education in the Church Today," 92.

necessity of discipleship, (2) the necessity of small groups for discipleship, (3) the necessity of lay leadership for discipleship and (4) the necessity of making holiness and service the double goal of discipleship."²² J. Wesley's view of mission gave room to all believers to have a part in witnessing.

J. Wesley's concept of the church as fellowship of believers was based on the biblical description of the early church (Acts 2:45-48). Particularly, he found this fellowship of believers sharing their religious experiences and breaking bread together in house churches, as worth emulating. J. Wesley's ecclesiology was developed on various soils, yet it is rooted in the Anglican tradition. Further, he sought the primitive church²³ ideal of a fellowship of believers and he pursued it. J. Wesley also accepted the idea of a believer's church from the Moravians. All these factors interacted in J. Wesley's understanding of the nature of the church which culminated in a Wesleyan ecclesiology. Besides, J. Wesley's understanding of human salvation played a central role in his ecclesiology. Especially, his concept of sanctification saw the church as both a saved and a saving church, which makes the church active in helping her members to be holy rather than static. J. Wesley's means of grace is an important ground in doing ministry. These various backgrounds helped J. Wesley to develop a unique ecclesiology.

4. John Wesley's Small Group Ministry as a Prototype of Early Church Model

There were two types of meetings in the early church: the temple (i.e., synagogue) church and the house church.²⁴ "The Scriptures refer to house churches and mention that the apostles went from house to house. Ministry was carried out by the elders, deacons and other church members. The

²² Mark Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 141.

²³ For the Anglican Church, the "early Church" or "primitive Church" meant the church of the first three or four centuries. However, for J. Wesley, "primitive Church" meant the church of the New Testament period. See Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 67.

²⁴ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 1. Paul Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos, 1981), 16. Larry Stockstill, *The Cell Church: Preparing Your Church for the Coming Harvest* (Venture: Regal, 1998), 16.

pastors were overseers—evangelists and administrators.”²⁵ In other words, lay leaders had the responsibility to carry out house ministry while the apostles focused on preaching and prayer (cf. Acts 6:3-4).

According to Russell C. Burrill, the best way of nurturing the church is to create a community that cares in which the Sabbath worship services and the small group ministry should be a catalyst for that.²⁶ The New Testament church met in homes because according to Burrill, “homes limited the size of the group.”²⁷ Also “the family character of the early church called for meetings to be held in homes because homes provided these early Christians with the most conducive atmosphere to give expression to the faith that they held in common.”²⁸ Motivated by Jesus’ statement that where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is in the midst of them (Matt 18:20), Burrill points out that this small group setting continued for nearly three hundred years, until the church was institutionalized at the time of Constantine.²⁹

Again, Burrill suggests that because of the amazing growth of the early New Testament church which has no buildings, institutions, and mass meetings, the New Testament small group should be a pattern of the church today for retention of members both old and new.³⁰ He avows that J. Wesley through his “Class Meetings”³¹ attempted to bring the New Testament small group back but he succeeded only when he was alive; his death led to the demise of the small group class system.³² This notwithstanding, it remains worthwhile to spotlight the Wesleyan small group strategy for discipling and nurturing church members. Before expatiating on this, the researcher deems it necessary to make known that the established Church of England in the 18th century failed to bring its members into close fellowship and holiness. Thus, having witnessed that those who were not closely united with the other members soon fell away from faith

²⁵ Kurt W. Johnson, *Successful Small Groups: From Theory to Reality* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2011), 164.

²⁶ Russell C. Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1998), 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, quoting Neal F. McBride, *How to Lead Small Groups* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995), 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

³² *Ibid.*, 146.

and holiness,³³ Wesley decided to set up small, interactive groups which were aimed at maintaining converts in fellowship within the body of Christ.

5. Spiritual Fellowship Groups of the Wesleyan Movement

Spiritual fellowship groups had a paramount place in the Wesleyan movement and these small groups were the basis of his ministry. The first society was formed in 1739 in the chapel of Moorefield and in 1743, J. Wesley organized the first Methodist society. He gathered his followers into small groups or societies, where they could experience and exercise a form of spiritual fellowship that bonded them into a genuine people of God. J. Wesley added four kinds of small groups to his societies: the classes, bands, select societies, and penitent bands.³⁴

It needs to be said that he was not the first to introduce these small groups. In fact, "the Moravians, Whitefield and a host of others had pioneered some of these techniques. What was unique was the intensity with which J. Wesley perfected the small group structure in order to create the radical disciple."³⁵

According to David M. Henderson, J. Wesley intended to feed the *intellect* (or knowledge) through the society meetings, to nourish the *heart* (or feeling) through the band meetings, and to shape the *will* (or behavior) through the class meetings.³⁶ The section below surveys the various ministry groups J. Wesley employed in his mission that led to its successes.

5.1. The Society

As a result of the revival that J. Wesley's preaching generated in Bristol, those who heard him wanted him to render pastoral care to them.

³³ Arthur Wilford Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism or the Significance of German Pietism in the Origin and Early Development of Methodism* (Nashville: M. E. Church, South, 1918), 110.

³⁴ J. Wesley, "The Life of the Rev. John Wesley," in *Works* (Jackson), 5:510.

³⁵ Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 143. See also Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 77.

³⁶ David M. Henderson, "John Wesley's Instructional Groups," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1980), quoted in Harold Burgess, "Wesleyan Theology of Ministry," *WTJ* 18 (1983): 37; Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 141-143.

Around 1739, after realizing that his traveling preachers could not care so much for the spiritual needs of the believers, he decided to put in place the societies to cater for their spiritual growth.³⁷

The society was made up of people seeking godliness. They met to pray together, to receive the Word of exhortation, and to have fellowship with each other toward their salvation. The societies aimed at helping each believer in their Christian life. The societies did not take the place of normal church worship or attendance.³⁸

For one to become a member of a society, he or she needed to sense a need for the salvation of his or her soul, and "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins."³⁹ For one to maintain membership in the society, one was required to follow the general rules which Warner summarizes as "(1) doing no harm and avoiding evil of every kind, (2) doing good, and (3) attending upon the ordinances of God."⁴⁰

Society meetings included all Methodists in a geographical area. The societies were initially made up of small groups of people who met weekly for worship, fellowship, prayer, and instruction.⁴¹ The main function of the society was to give instruction. It was regarded as an educational channel through which the beliefs of Methodism were presented to the members through lecture, preaching, public reading, hymn singing, and exhorting. The societies aimed at encouraging the members to help each other in their spiritual growth. This idea of helping each other is emphasized in the other fellowship groups.

5.2. The Class

The class was a basic group structure of the Methodist Society. The term was derived from the Latin word *classis*, meaning "a little company," or "group."⁴² A class was composed of twelve to twenty members from both sexes, mixed ages, social standing, and spiritual readiness, under the di-

³⁷ J. Wesley, "Rules of the Band-Societies (December 25, 1738)," in *Works (Jackson)*, 8:272-274. See also Wingeier-Rayo, "The Early Methodist Revival," 136-137.

³⁸ J. Wesley, "Letter to the Printer of the Dublin Chronicle," (June 2, 1789), in *Works (Jackson)*, 13:269.

³⁹ Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze*, 190. See also Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 143.

⁴⁰ Warner, *Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution*, 164.

⁴¹ Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 45; Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism*, 1.

⁴² John Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies," in *Works (Jackson)*, 8:269-271; Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism*, 150.

rection of a lay leader. When a class increased in number to about twenty, it was then divided into two once a year. They met once a week in the evening for an hour or more. This group provided the means of monitoring the spiritual condition of the believers, to help them in times of trials and temptations, and to help members to understand in practical terms, the message that was preached at the public society meeting.

Members were required as much as possible to avoid all known sins, live exemplary lives, and to attend all the ordinances of the church of God. When a person desired to join a society, "he is then placed in such a class as is convenient for him, where he spends about an hour in a week. And, the next quarter, if nothing is objected to him, he is admitted into the society."⁴³ Thus, through the class meetings, people were accepted into the membership of the Methodist Movement.

The class meeting became the primary means of grace for thousands of Methodists. The classes served as a medium of recruiting new believers and discipling them.⁴⁴ In 1742, J. Wesley divided the society (numbering over one thousand one-hundred) in Bristol into "classes," which became "the keystone to the entire Methodist edifice."⁴⁵ It served as an avenue for rehabilitating new believers. "The purpose of the class was mutual confession of sin and accountability for growth in holiness."⁴⁶ Every Methodist was required to belong to one of these classes.

Tabraham asserts that "the classes had their origin in finance" for the society members. However, raising money was not the main purpose. The classes "became a means whereby small groups could meet for Bible study, prayer, and religious conversation. Their most important function was pastoral and devotional."⁴⁷ The primary purpose was discipline, but it also served as a fellowship group. It aimed at helping each member to experience intimate, spiritual relationships with each other.

⁴³ John Wesley, Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," in *Works* (Jackson), 7:209.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 46; Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 56.

⁴⁵ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 38.

⁴⁶ J. Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies," 8:269; Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 143; Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 60.

⁴⁷ Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 45. See also Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 143.

5.3. The Band

The band was composed of five to ten members of the same sex, age, and marital status who gathered mainly for pastoral care and mutual accountability. They served as a reinforcement and support to the classes. Approximately twenty percent of the members of the Methodist Movement met in bands, whereas all of them were class members.⁴⁸ The last band in England disappeared about 1880.

The band was a confessional unit. J. Wesley found the idea of bands in the Scripture, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (Jas 5:16). J. Wesley realized that it was the desire of members to pour out their hearts in the confession of their sins and the temptations that confronted them. Therefore, he divided them into smaller companies where their desires could be met. J. Wesley felt this underlined the mutual responsibility of each member to the others in the band.⁴⁹ He also introduced accountability questions which everyone answered publicly at the meeting each week: 1. What known sins have you committed in the week? 2. What temptations have you met with? 3. How were you delivered? 4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not? 5. Have you nothing that you desire to keep secret?⁵⁰

Six rules guided the band: (1) weekly meeting; (2) punctuality; (3) begin program with singing and prayer; (4) "to speak each of us in order, freely and plainly the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, work and deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting"; (5) end the meeting with prayer for each member; and (6) "to desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins and temptations."⁵¹

Bands were thus voluntary cells of people who professed clear Christian commitment, and who among each class, desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of motive. They were "God-seekers who joined together in an earnest quest to be Jesus' disciple."⁵²

⁴⁸ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 60; Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 144.

⁴⁹ J. Wesley, "Plain Account of the People Called Methodist" in a Letter to Rev. Mr. Erronet (1748)," in *Works (Jackson)*, 8:258; Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 59-60.

⁵⁰ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 60; Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 144.

⁵¹ J. Wesley, "Rules of the Band-Societies (December 25, 1738)," 8:272-274. See also Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 59.

⁵² Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 38.

5.4. Other Small Groups

There were other small groups such as the select societies, the nurseries for future leaders, and the penitent bands. The select society group was composed of the faithful, proven, zealous Methodists. This was the nursery for future leaders. Members of this group pursued goals and shared visions together. They were expected to (1) hold to extreme confidentiality, (2) to submit absolutely to the leader, and (3) to contribute all money beyond necessities to the common fund.⁵³

On the other hand, the penitent bands were specially designed for those who lacked the will power or discipline in their lives to live up to the behavior demands of the class meeting, but still had a desire to grow and overcome their personal problems. Restoration to the bigger society was its call. The love feast, according to Tabraham, "dated from the days of the early church, and was revived by the Moravians, and [had] become a general feature of the evangelical revival in England."⁵⁴ The men met once in a quarter in the evening, and on the next, the women in the bands would meet, and on a third day they should meet together.⁵⁵ In these assemblies, bread and water were partaken of by all present, a symbol of fellowship. J. Wesley employed these small fellowship groups to boost the spirituality of the members of his societies. These small groups were major sources of the successes of the movement.

Though this is not an exhaustive account of the Wesleyan small group ministry, the foregoing gives a panoramic view of how best J. Wesley tried to imitate the ecclesiastical layout of the early church. Owing to its primitive origin, the small group methodology earns the credence of being adopted as a paradigm for discipling and retention of converts.

6. John Wesley's Small Group Model as an Antidote to Membership Losses in the SDA Church

The cause of the saga of membership losses in all Christian denominations, including the SDA Church, has been depicted by Elton Trueblood. He says,

⁵³ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁴ Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism*, 59.

⁵⁵ Samuel Macauley Jackson, "Methodists," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1951), 7:334.

Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian Church is that millions of supposed members are not really involved at all and, what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not. As soon as we recognize Christ's intention to make His Church a militant company we understand at once that the conventional arrangement cannot suffice. There is no real chance of victory in a campaign if ninety per cent of the soldiers are untrained and uninvolved, but that is exactly where we stand now.⁵⁶

It would be safe to affirm that the divine injunction to 'make disciples' incorporates the nurturing facet. This is evidenced by the great commission found in Matt 28:19-20 which may be translated from the Greek text as follows: Having gone therefore, make disciples all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to keep that I have commanded you.... A close reading of the original text prompts the following observation: the verb 'to go' is in the participle aorist passive indicating that the act of going is antecedent to the major action which consists of making disciples. The verbs 'to baptize' and 'to teach' are both in the participle present active implying that both teaching and baptizing are contemporaneous (i.e., they happen at the same time) and conveys the idea of progressiveness or continuity.

However, this is not what we are being privileged to witness. The prevailing situation in Christendom in general and in the SDA Church in particular is that much care is given to baptizing new converts at the expense of ensuring their spiritual well-being.⁵⁷ It ensures that the prevailing situation so far as the World Church is concerned, calls for an action to be taken. The following excerpt portrays the status quo pertaining to membership retention in the SDA Church:

In 2005, the SDA Church reported alarming membership losses. Despite adding 5 million new believers during the 5-year period of 2000-2004, over 1.4 million members left the church during that same period. SDA minister Vance Ferrell describes the problem in his newsletter: "That is a very high loss. According to the official report, 'for every 100 accessions, more than 35 others decided to leave.' This was a significant increase over the 24 per 100 which left in the preceding five year period (1995-1999). The drop rate has increased by almost one-half." A

⁵⁶ "John Wesley's 3-Strand Discipleship Process," <http://coregroups.org/threestrandmodel.html>.

⁵⁷ See Samson D. Dakio and Daniel Berchie, "Establishing New Converts in Church Planting: The Pauline Model," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* 6 (2012): 115.

sheet distributed at one of the booths said that '70 percent of young people in developing nations drop out of the church.' "One missionary declared that, in his field, 'a third are dropped from the membership rolls; another third are on the rolls but no longer attend; and only a third are active members.' That one-third which remains on the rolls but no longer attends is significant. It is clear that membership totals are not a true indicator of the actual number of members in the world church.⁵⁸

One may argue that these figures are not to be taken for a fact. Nevertheless, they should constitute a warning to the world church's leaders.

One of the famous sayings of Wesley goes this way: "The Church changes the world not by making converts but by making disciples." This is another cautionary remark to all believers and especially to church planters lest they fall in the trap of misplaced priority. In fact, it would be safe to reiterate that the challenge regarding membership control in the SDA Church centers more on nurturing than soul-winning. Burrill seems to have been triggered by such observation when he viewed true disciple making as not the mass profession of faith in Jesus as characterized by most evangelistic efforts but individual's intimate relationship with Jesus due to a one to one or a small group's interaction and fellowship that seeks to establish the new member in the faith.⁵⁹

Of the many factors that cause converts to leave the church, the problem of interpersonal relationship within the body of Christ emerges presumably the most determinant. No wonder that even for the 21st century church, there is still a great interest and passion in small group ministry. Obviously, it seems to be a known fact that people are more likely to belong and remain in a fellowship when they are essentially connected to others in smaller and more familiar milieus.

It is in this perspective that the Wesleyan small and interactive groups approach appears to be the antidote to the problem of membership loss in the SDA Church. Believers are expected to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). But how can they do so when there is no strong bond of brotherly love binding them together? J. Wesley's method of organizing church members into small groups or units is susceptible to offer an adequate platform to members to express their brotherly love toward one another. In a small group setting, every member feels the sense of belonging. The challenges of one become the challenges of others. Everyone is willing and

⁵⁸ Why Are So Many Seventh-day Adventists Leaving the SDA Church? http://www.nonsda.org/sda_losing_members.shtml.

⁵⁹ Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach*, 23.

ready to avail himself or herself to the betterment of his fellow. The family bond binds them all and everyone feels important and loved. It is in this vein that the testimony of Brian Effington should be construed. Brian was one of the 60 baptized at the end of a 1993 evangelistic series coordinated by Chaplain Frank Cordona. Brian says, "For the first time I have found real meaning and purpose in life. I now have a new life. I've discovered something more. A group of people who genuinely care about me. From the acceptance and support I experienced, I have learned what it means to be loved and valued as a person. I know God has led me to the Adventist Church."⁶⁰ This testimony is not surprising since this was also the outcome Wesley has purported his small-group meeting or class meeting to yield. His intent is echoed by Fowler as follows:

For Wesley, these small groups became the place where an individual could find the key ingredients to a successful Christian life. Wesley trained each group as a means of ministering to the individual members of that group. The groups formed the center for devotional life, Bible study, and prayer. They were also the basis of pastoral care. The group members shared with each other their bereavement and grief; failure and success; sickness and health; problems of sex, marriage, and parenting; the agony of poverty and economic injustice, and even in some places, political oppression. Encouragement and help was given as needed. Wesley's groups even helped members find jobs. Thus the groups became the centers of Bible study, prayer, Christian service, moral and social reform.⁶¹

According to Fowler, small-group ministry provides solutions to spiritual problems of attendees, ensures appropriate fellowship ambience, soothes the pain of depressed members, offers the needed help to the sick among them, and provides ministry to the poor. Fowler then recognizes that "both the preaching and the small-group ministries work together to lead the respondents to a full surrender of their lives to Christ, to a meaningful and purposeful life, and ultimately to baptism and union with the church."⁶² If it is undeniable that Wesley was a successful evangelist during his life time, Josh Hunt believes that he owes this success to his "habit of establishing small groups. His converts would meet regularly in groups

⁶⁰ John W. Fowler, "Small Groups in Evangelism," *Ministry* 71, no. 4 (April 1998): 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

of about a dozen people. If the group became too large, it would divide, and it might continue to divide again and again."⁶³

Although J. Wesley's concept of the ministry emanates from different sources—namely, his childhood experience and parental influence; his early days in the ministry; his experience with poverty as a child; the Anglican concept of a High Church—it was ultimately patterned after the apostolic model of church organization to a great extent. In fact, from the time the spirit descended on the disciples on the day of Pentecost onwards, strategies were adopted by them to spread the gospel and to nurture the new converts to make them strong in the faith so that they will also be well prepared for effective ministry. Among those strategies adopted were intensive fasting and prayer service (Acts 1:12-14; 13:2, 3; 6:4; 12:5; 16:13, 16), fellowshiping among themselves including the breaking of bread in the homes of believers (Acts 2:42); Bible studies (Acts 6:4), to mention a few. There was strong love bond among them that they were willing to share their properties among themselves so much so that there was no one among them that lacked anything (Acts 4:32-35). So also, by imitating the Wesleyan small group approach discussed above, the SDA Church would be able to minimize or control its rate of membership loss.

The Wesleyan ministry, represented by the spiritual fellowship groups, provides the present church with a model that is closer to the ideal pattern of the early Christian church in its various aspects. J. Wesley utilized the gifts of lay leaders in the Movement. He organized small groups to take care of one another; he promoted community and fellowship among believers in Christ by helping each member to interact with each other and he disciplined those who refused to live a holy life. In this, the ministry of the Methodist movement could serve as a model for the ministry to the church today in general and to the SDA Church in particular. However, Wesley's small group approach constantly faces a dilemma: maintaining the intimacy of a small group while fulfilling Christ's command to evangelize. Further, the Wesleyan Movement too much dependent upon one man's leadership (i.e., J. Wesley). This notwithstanding, the small group ministry if reinforced, would be salutary to the morbid status quo of discipling and membership retention in the SDA Church.

⁶³ Josh Hunt, "John Wesley on Doubling Groups," n.p., <http://www.churchleaders.com/smallgroups/small-grouparticles/154548-john-wesley-on-doubling-groups.html>.

7. Conclusion

This study has attempted to establish the fact that the Wesleyan small group ministry is to be taken as a model for the SDA Church in matters of discipling and membership retention. A full-fledged description of the various Wesleyan groups has showcased their importance thereof. Many are of the view that the early church house churches system undergirds the evangelistic success of the primitive church. Interestingly, Wesley's small group ministry has been patterned after that of the apostolic church. This explains—to a great extent—the prodigious achievement of J. Wesley in his evangelistic endeavors. Retaining converts into the fellowship of the church has always been one of the greatest challenges for church planters, pastors, evangelists, and missiologists. The Wesleyan class meetings seem to offer the most appropriate platform for nurturing converts both new and old. This is where solutions to spiritual problems of attendees are addressed adequately, the most intimate fellowship is fostered, and members' important and urgent concerns are resolved. In such circumstances, every believer experiences the joy of belonging and no one is tempted to forsake the assembly.

In spite of the few challenges that the small group approach may present, it remains an invaluable method not only to making disciples, but also and most importantly to retaining them. Based on the foregoing, the study therefore concludes that the Wesleyan small group ministry should be reinforced by the General Conference of the SDA Church and implemented by all the thirteen (13) divisions as a model for discipling and nurturing, but also as an antidote to the current trend of membership losses.