

# Help!

**I Want  
My Church  
to  
Grow**



*31 myth-busting ideas to make your church the place to be*

# David Ripley



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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to Patricia Lynn Ripley,  
my wife, fellow minister of the gospel, counselor, and my one true love.  
You have been my best friend since we met at the age of 10.

Without you my life of ministry would have been shallow  
and meaningless. Your insight, intuition, encouragement,  
and warmth have allowed me to go boldly forward.

I pray that God will continue to walk with us  
as we minister together and move beyond the myths.



## Contents

Preface .....	11
Foreword .....	13
Introduction .....	15
Chapter 1 <i>Myths About Church Facility, Infrastructure, and Location</i> .....	21
Chapter 2 <i>Myths About Church Family Life</i> .....	32
Chapter 3 <i>Myths About Personal Spirituality and Relationship With God</i> .....	51
Chapter 4 <i>Myths About Evangelism</i> .....	66
Conclusion .....	87



## Preface

**E**arly in my ministry I witnessed that a majority of local churches were working very hard, but did not have strong growth. The churches were full of spiritually minded, conscientious people eager to share Jesus with their world, but something important was missing. It began to dawn on me that we were assuming things that were not really so. I began to make a list, contemplating how to avoid these roadblocks so I could help these churches I served to grow. I wanted to avoid the myths that had gained wide acceptance in the church.

At first the list was short, but once I began to watch, the list of myths grew to fill a full page and eventually take the form you now have in your hands.

God has called us as disciples to ministry, a ministry of sharing Jesus with the world around us. He has promised power from heaven to assist. In John 4:35 Jesus shared that the time to harvest is now: “Look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!”

I share this book with you in hopes that all with a love for God, His church, and the Great Commission will be able to be effective disciples for Jesus. I pray that this small beginning will assist us in being effective servants of our Lord, Savior, and King. Jesus is coming! Let’s work with purpose and make a difference. To do this we must let go of the myths we hold.

If you would like to dialogue on what you read in these pages, send an email to: [DavidPRipley@gmail.com](mailto:DavidPRipley@gmail.com).



## Introduction

I knew we were in trouble. As pastor and board chair, I had felt the call of God to grow His church. It was a compelling passion, and I preached about it regularly, also sharing the conviction while visiting in members' homes. I felt that churches limit themselves because they expect church membership to remain the same, so in meetings with our deacons and elders I spoke of it often. Now our church board was discussing the growth of our church, and it didn't go as I'd anticipated.

"Pastor, we just built this new building," a deacon said. "Why hasn't the Lord filled it up? After all, we sent out flyers to every address in town."

"We are the remnant, are we not?" another board member countered. "We're *supposed* to be small! The Pentecost experience is coming again, but not until the very end."

Yet another voice piped up. "Well, if we had an Adventist hospital here in town, we could really grow." She turned to make certain she'd caught my eye. "Pastor, could you contact the conference and see what they can do about this?"

I felt myself wilt. I'd lost control of the meeting. Something was wrong, but what was it? Before I could think how to bring the discussion back around to business, someone else voiced an opinion. "Perhaps we need to wait until the youth grow up. They'll have the energy to witness," he said.

"No!" another voice quickly put in. "The youth can help with worship now. But by the way, Pastor, I'm concerned about the high degree of planning you're talking about doing for Sabbath worship." He turned his worried face toward the other board members. "Practice the worship service? Pastor, you are trying to restrict the ability of the Holy Spirit to work on Sabbath morning!"

"Well, now," I began, but our head deacon had thought of something



## Myths About Church Facility, Infrastructure, and Location

### **Myth 1**

**If we build a nice enough church,  
they will come to worship.**

**A**s a young pastor just beginning my ministry I sat one Sabbath in a suburban church on the edge of a large city. This church had a dream. The dream had come about when the congregation of about 50 people had received a gift of a large amount of money as part of a former member's will.

There was great discussion on the most responsible way to use the funds. Should they remodel the old building and use a significant amount of the funds on evangelism in their community? Should they invest and let the funds grow even more? Should they use the funds to educate the children of the church? Should they send the funds overseas and help some struggling mission field? Should they build a new church, a church large enough to accommodate the number of Adventists this large community should actually have?

They chose the last option because they believed Myth 1: if we build, they will come. The new building cost multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars and would potentially seat 400 or more. Ten years later I visited the church, and the attendance on this particular Sabbath was about 50.

Jesus, speaking of Himself, said, "On this rock I will build My church." New Testament Scripture uses the word "church" more than 70 times, but not once in reference to a building. It is always speaking about a group who are together as the people of God. Members of the early church met in homes, courtyards, in caves, by the river—any-

where they could meet in peace and worship God. For several centuries there were no buildings designated as churches, yet the church grew faster without buildings than it ever has since.

Am I advocating that we not build church buildings? Certainly not! But we must realize the purpose of the facilities we build. Buildings are a great tool, but not *the* tool. We are to introduce people to Jesus, not to a building. There are a whole host of tools in your toolbox ready to help you share the truth about a soon-coming Savior—prayer, vision, evangelism, to name a few. You will need them all.

Is God against our building beautiful buildings? No way! Recorded in the Bible are His instructions to the children of Israel for building an awesome portable tabernacle. Read the descriptions in Exodus 25 through 28. God's instructions included rich embroidered tapestries and liberal use of gold, silver, and bronze. The breastpiece of the priest held 12 precious stones, including ruby, topaz, sapphire, and emerald. Later, under God's direction, King Solomon had built one of the most beautiful and expensive structures of its time, the Jerusalem Temple.

If you are in a church that is contemplating building, or if you are in the middle of a building program, I hope you will build the best and most representative building you can. Begin now to plan how you will use this building as a new tool to introduce people to Jesus. However, the greatest tool God has is you and me. As we build relationships with others, an appealing building may help people come to understand the God we worship. This is called discipleship. The church (people) is built one person at a time. It is when people learn to trust us first and then learn of our God that true church growth will take place.

## TALK ABOUT IT

**1. Should we build new buildings or use our resources** in another way? What percentage of your local church budget is used for facility and infrastructure? Is this a healthy use of your money?

**2. In what ways can a building help grow a church?** In what ways is the building not able to grow the church?

**3. Does your building represent Jesus well?** Do you believe that people know more about Jesus from being in your building?

**4. What do you consider God's greatest evangelistic tool** on earth to be?



## **Myth 2**

**The automobile will go away,  
and we will become a true community church.**

**F**or many years as a local pastor I sat in board meeting after board meeting poring over the demographics of the community in which our church was located. We had drawn a circle on the map enclosing a five-mile radius around the church. It might encompass 20,000 people. That surely was our mission field. How could we reach so many?

A very helpful book that opened my eyes to reality was Lyle Schaller's *The New Revolution*. In it he recalls the time he was asked what he thought his greatest failure might be. As he pondered this question the answer came that he had failed to persuade church leaders "that the automobile was here to stay."<sup>1</sup> As I deliberated on this statement the truth dawned on me—all of my church family traveled in automobiles to attend the worship service, some from a great distance.

Studies reveal that only about 20 percent of the people at a given worship service in North America travel less than five minutes to church.<sup>2</sup> Eighty percent of my congregation lived outside the circle I'd drawn on the map! I've had church members drive more than an hour each Sabbath to come and worship. No wonder it was difficult for members of our church to develop discipleship relationships within the prescribed circle. As I contemplated this fact I had to agree with Schaller: the automobile *is* here to stay.

At one church where I was pastor—it was in a large city—some of the members drove past one, two, or even more Adventist churches to attend this particular one. And I knew that some people drove right on past our church to attend a different Adventist church. They were not looking for a community-based church, but a church in which they felt comfortable and had developed relationships with other people who attended.

### **Affinity community**

I argue that an affinity community is a more valuable model for today's church. An affinity community is based not on geographic area, but on people going to worship where they feel the most comfortable. While we should continue to educate and model unity and acceptance of all, secular and sinful people (the very people we wish to be a part of

our church) are more likely to be able to hear the gospel in their own “language” and in their own cultural and/or subcultural setting. Church conferences often draw lines on a map and tell pastors that this is your territory and that is another pastor’s territory, but I believe these should be dotted lines that allow churches with different affinities to reach across a large area and draw in people who connect with them. Culture in North America today is not the melting pot model we spoke of in the past. Today North America is much more a patchwork quilt that, as a whole, is beautiful and useful.

The challenge comes when you are in a small church in a small community a long distance from another Adventist church. Should a community of 5,000 to 10,000 have more than one Adventist church? Before you say no, ask yourself, Does the community have more than one grocery store? Why does it? It’s because different people prefer one store over another. The reasons will vary—the size of the store, its layout, maybe its specialties. Think about it. Perhaps even small communities need more than one Adventist church.

I want to suggest that a church should not simply pick a geographical region and attempt to evangelize that area. The leaders of any church should seek to understand whom they will uniquely be able to draw to Jesus because of how they relate culturally, socially, their use of language, and so forth. Not that we should not do cross-cultural evangelism, for we must, but our greatest success will be with people we understand and can befriend. Use the automobile to go wherever these people are. This is being faithful to the command in Matthew 28: Go therefore and make disciples.

## TALK ABOUT IT

1. **How has the automobile impacted the church?** In what ways does this give advantage or disadvantage to the local church?
2. **What is an affinity-based church?** In what ways is this positive and what ways is this a challenge?
3. **How does the affinity model of church** affect our obedience to the command “Go and make disciples”?
4. **Is your church culturally diverse?** Is your community culturally diverse? How might this impact evangelism? What should your church learn and do in regard to this information?

### **Myth 3**

**If only we had an Adventist hospital or institution near our church, then we could really do big things for God.**

**W**hile in school studying for a B.A. in theology, I worked evenings doing maintenance at a nearby Adventist hospital. It was a good place to work. In addition to a friendly working environment I could get vegetarian meals in its cafeteria. The staff understood Christian values and the facility had a Sabbath atmosphere about it. It was a large hospital, and a large portion of the employees were not Seventh-day Adventist. The hospital had a nice chapel, a very small one, but, of course, no baptistry. And I did not find the institution to be very effective in direct evangelism. While it did build goodwill in the community (and in some minds occasionally bad will), I never met anyone who said they had become an Adventist because of the hospital.

I once pastored a church that was only a few blocks from the church conference office. The people who worked there were lovely Christians who had a passion to win others to Jesus. I was glad to have them as members of my congregation. But in my four and a half years at that church I knew of no one who became an Adventist because of the conference office. There was no baptistry at the conference office; it was at the local church. We, including some who worked at the church office, used the baptistry in the church many times. During my years there we built relationships with people and brought them to meet God at the church, not at the office.

Those who believe they need an Adventist institution nearby to grow a church either do not understand or they are dodging their personal responsibility. We cannot be disciples by proxy. We cannot rely on things or institutions. Hospitals, offices, or universities do not make disciples; disciples make disciples. If you live near an Adventist institution that has a good reputation in the community, it can be an asset. But do not be fooled into believing this is a must.

In 2000 I did a study to understand better what it takes to grow an Adventist church of beyond 200 in attendance. My first step was to seek out Adventist churches in North America that had between 300 and 400 in attendance. For the purpose of my study the church could not be near an Adventist institution, because institutions do draw Adventists to the area to work at the institution. What I found surprised me. Sixty percent of the