

# Report of the **Executive Director**

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of the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference, USA & Canada

I fear the danger of a report where “. . . a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention . . .”<sup>1</sup> With that in mind, the following report focuses on a key way that the Conference is joining God in His work of *equipping our churches to actively advance His Kingdom*. We are identifying, equipping, and sending disciple-makers.

## **Provision**

We continue to be blessed by ministry partners who provide financial resources that leverage our discipleship work. The SDB Memorial Fund has partnered in launching our renewed internship initiative. Specifically, the establishment of the Rev. Alton L. and Ethel Wheeler Leadership Development Fund thanks to generous donors has sparked the launching of the Emerging Leaders Cohort and Retreat which is identifying young SDB leaders.

Seventh Day Baptists have also received significant financial resources from external grants. The disciple-making initiatives undertaken by our Conference of churches have been identified as a worthwhile Kingdom investment. For instance, we launched the SDB Vital Preaching initiative in 2024 thanks to a Vital Worship, Vital Preaching Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

The SDB Vital Preaching initiative provides emerging ministry leaders with contemporary faith communication skills by providing a series of in-person retreats and immersing them among veteran ministry leaders as mentors. The first in-person gathering was at the SDB Summit in southern New Jersey (April 26 – 29) and the second event has been the retreat at the SDB Deep South Camp with Dr. Michael Jordan of Houghton University. In between sessions, participants are meeting with their mentors and working on video recordings of their faith communication.

These disciple-making endeavors require significant support from our Conference Finance Team. Thank you to Director of Finance, Ron Ochs along with Jan Ehlers and Jeremy Howard.

The launching of Emerging Leaders and Vital Preaching has brought together the coordinated genius of SDB Directors Nick Kersten and John Pethel along with Miriam Berg from the Missionary Society. A thank you to their inspiring leadership among emerging disciple-makers.

## **Communication**

We are also catalyzing disciple-making with communication. Renee Ochs coordinated the repainting of the SDB Center foyer and placed our SDB Vision Map statement front and center to remind us of why we do what we do. Rick Crouch and Jeremiah Owen work together to communicate the

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<sup>1</sup> Simon, Herbert A. 1971. “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World” in Martin Greenberger (ed.) *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*.

ministry work through a variety of means, such as the recent Newsletter focused on “Passing the Torch.”

There is also a need to generate communications and structures that make our collective work sustainable. Brittany Kersten continues to develop our structured communication for implementing grants in partnership with the SDB Memorial Fund, including the renewed internship initiative. We have been averaging one new internship per month and continue to build momentum thanks to the efforts of the entire Conference Team. A thank you to SDB Conference Interns who have participated in key communication initiatives, including Asabe Miller (indemnification process) and Joshua Coleman (Stir and Spur, church planting).

Our flagship publications are also an important discipleship pathway. Over the past ministry year, the Sabbath Recorder harnessed the writing skills of 66 different authors: 5 monthly contributors, 1 special series writer, 7 World Federation authors in one issue, and 53 stand-alone authors. Thank you to the SR Editor Pat Cruzan.

The Helping Hand likewise is disciple-making simply through living out its purpose of providing insights into God’s Word. There is also an invitation for discipleship through the writing process in which there are 25 to 30 participating authors each year. Thank you to Helping Hand Editor Steve Osborn and translator Andrea Pozo.

We have also refined communication through effective meeting management. Thanks to the insights of Jeremiah Owen, Director Team meetings now utilize a design that enhances efficiency while creating more precise outcomes. Similarly, the SDB General Council has utilized a blend of business meetings and workshop sessions to build communication capacity. We have also partnered with another conference of churches, the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, to review our work flow, compare best operating practices, and better align our efforts with the SDB Vision Map.

### **Partnership**

This past ministry year witnessed the launch of the SDB Visiting Instructor Program. Rev. Kingsley Gauti of Malawi and Rev. Quistin Chalwe of Zambia spent nearly four weeks in Wisconsin and Florida teaching, preaching, and inspiring our ministry efforts. The unique partnership of the SDB Missionary Society, SDB Africa Bible College, SDB Memorial Board, and the SDB General Conference of USA and Canada offered a first ever approach to discipleship training. Thank you specifically to SDB Missionary Society Directors Andy Samuels, Garfield Miller, and Miriam Berg for making this possible.

We have also undertaken key partnerships with our churches through the church revitalization process. The launch of the virtual “R2R” gathering has sparked renewed focus on Pulse as a coordinated effort among our churches. We also partnered with Thriving Congregations to bring the Design Sprint Retreat in April 2024 for 6 churches and over 20 participants.

### **Pastor Connections**

Pastor engagement is on the upswing. Virtual Pastors Forum attendance has continued to increase. The SDB Summit (Pastors Conference) in April 2024 was the highest attended in recent history. Clearly, thank you to our pastors for making gathering together a priority! Also, thank you to the

team that makes events like this possible. Patty Petersen is a champion of registration processes and keeps key data rolling. Directors John Pethtel and Nick Kersten continue to build events such as this into a highlight of the year.

Another key pastor connection has been through our partnership with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Thanks to a generous grant from NAE and the Lilly Foundation, we have been able to offer honorariums to pastors who have participated in specific training. We have also been able to connect pastors with specific NAE events over the course of the year for enrichment and encouragement.

### **Focus**

An item of unfinished business for us as a Conference is removing clutter that distracts us from disciple-making. When it comes to physical clutter at the Center, a tremendous thank you to Rinald Kersten for his role in preserving what matters while removing the rest. We have more discernment to do when it comes to figurative clutter.

Removing clutter also welcomes us to a fuller experience of rest. We are a people of rest based on our Vision Map, and this is a life that we can live into all the more. I am thankful for healthy initiatives that Katrina Goodrich and the Women's Board steward, such as the Steph Sholtz Wellness Fund. We are taking healthy steps forward, but I firmly believe that our discipleship focus will lead us to a more concerted focus on our value of biblical rest.

### **Stretching**

Based on standard rates of church closures in North America, a Conference our size needs to add two churches a year simply to maintain its size. In order to grow as a Conference of churches, we need to add four new churches a year.

We are not operating a business in which we simply want to increase in organizational size. We are called to make disciples and equip disciple-makers. Planting churches is an outgrowth of faithfully joining God in His discipleship work.

I am thankful to the Church Development Team of John Pethtel, David Stall, and Patty Petersen. Through identifying and equipping church planters and encouraging partnerships among member churches and new churches there is discipleship work being done. And we will be stretched as we live this out.

### **Grateful**

As we conclude another ministry year, I am increasingly thankful for the Conference team I have the privilege of working with, the pastors I have the joy of serving alongside, the churches that make up our SDB family, and the invitation that God is extending to us in this season to actively advance His Kingdom. Together.