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Stopping the Leaking Bucket Syndrome

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I. Introduction

Recently, many major financial institutions and corporations have been caught engaging in frauds of great magnitude. Marianne Jennings, in *The Seven Signs of Ethical Collapse*, explains that ethical collapse occurs gradually as committing moral wrongs becomes first palatable and eventually acceptable.¹

Whether the early signs of ethical collapse were conspicuous and intentionally ignored or undetected, the ultimate result was great cost and public embarrassment. Spotting ethical failings is thus essential for any organization's continuity and viability.

Religious groups are not immune to ethical threats. For example, the pressure to maintain impressive membership and attendance numbers can cause them to allow advances in one

area to overshadow the ills occurring elsewhere. Among evangelical churches, a strong evangelistic thrust can create a predisposition towards making unrealistic soul-winning demands a priority in place of a more cogent, balanced, relational approach to mission.

Unethical trends and practices, if not corrected, can lead to a qualitative membership meltdown even amidst apparent quantitative growth. And when the world exerts a stronger influence on the church than the church is exerting on the world, further deficiencies in the church's attempts to gain and retain new believers can result.

I believe that an ethical deficiency in many evangelical churches is partly responsible for the 'leaking bucket syndrome',² in which huge efforts are made to attract new members without a commensurate commitment to

1 Marianne M. Jennings, *The Seven Signs of Ethical Collapse: How to Spot Moral Meltdowns in Companies ... Before It's Too Late* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), xi.

2 G. T. Ng used this term in his presentation, 'The Leaky Bucket Syndrome and How to Fix It', at the Summit on Nurture and Retention, 19 November 2013, Silver Spring, MD.

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effective discipling. The end result is a church that may be baptizing or welcoming relatively large numbers of new arrivals, yet experiencing a decline in active membership. Such unethical practices, if not corrected, can lead to qualitative membership meltdowns, even while the anthems of prolific growth are sung.

In 1979, Carl S. Dudley in his classic, *Where Have All Our People Gone?*, noted that mainline churches had experienced unprecedented membership loss since the 1950s while evangelicals and other Protestants, such as the Seventh-Day Adventists (SDA) and the Church of the Nazarene, increased by 35 and 40 percent, respectively.³ Overall, the declines in mainline membership were less than the drops in attendance, implying that many people may have still considered themselves nominal members even though not attending church.⁴

The Adventists have enjoyed considerable growth, especially in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. But in recent years, the trend of mainline decline may have begun to spread into many SDA and other churches where the rolls are filled with persons who rarely or never attend but nonetheless consider themselves members.

The tendency amongst Generations Y and Z is to hold beliefs without much

commitment. Could evangelistic approaches that de-emphasize personal involvement and relationship-building run the risk of inculcating belief without commitment?

II. The Typical Evangelistic Pattern and Its Problems

The SDA, like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, emerged from the US spiritual awakenings of the nineteenth century with a strong missionary imperative. Between 1890 and 1960, Adventism became an international movement as its teachings surged in practically every corner of the globe.⁵

By 2009 the SDA was a truly worldwide denomination, with a membership of 200,000 or more in each of twenty-nine countries, mostly in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.⁶ Today the SDA claims a total membership of over twenty million and has added one million new members a year since 2004, mostly in developing countries of the global south. According to the SDA General Conference's Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, as of 2014 the denomination was adding a new member to its ranks every 28.92 seconds and planting a new congregation every 4.35 hours.⁷

3 Carl S. Dudley, *Where Have All Our People Gone? New Choices for Old Churches* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 4–6.

4 David Roozen, 'Denominations Grow and Individuals Join Congregations', in *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth and Decline*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 10.

5 George R. Knight, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom: Adventist Mission Confronts the Challenges of Institutionalism and Secularization* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995), 78.

6 Ronald Lawson and Ryan T. Cragun, 'Comparing the Geographic Distributions and Growth of Mormon, Adventists and Witnesses', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 2 (2012): 223.

7 Office of Archives, Statistics and Research,

This rapid growth, however, has been accompanied by substantial attrition. It has been claimed that the SDA loses 43 of every 100 persons who join the church.⁸ This statistic points to a chronic problem present in many local congregations.

SDA-style disciple-making seems to be patterned after that of nineteenth-century American revivalist, Charles Finney, with a focus on a heightened private experience of Jesus.⁹ Today, this approach is mediated through the musical hype that accompanies many evangelistic campaigns, with their grandiose paraphernalia designed to draw persons to Christ and the church.

Although such approaches have in fact won many genuine believers, they have often created an army of members driven by programs and goals rather than by an inherent commitment to becoming disciples and teaching others. In most cases, church membership is equated with being a disciple, rather than with the inculcation of deeper spiritual virtues as is evident in the lives of transformed passionate disciples.

Therefore, John R. W. Stott referred to much of contemporary outreach as 'superficial discipling' and others have commented that it merely makes the church quantitatively robust but qualitatively fickle.¹⁰

Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses and

Mormons, whose members are personally obliged to take their message from house to house, Adventists typically rely predominantly on the public promulgation of biblical truths in small or large gatherings. Theoretically, the church encourages complete involvement in its mission, including personal witnessing, but in actuality, at best, the great majority of members are only passively involved.

We see the result of this tendency when evangelistic campaigns are held and the crowds are full of members, rather than their friends, neighbours, and other outsiders. Evangelism becomes seen as the purview of the evangelist and his team, but fruit cannot be harvested if it has not been prepared. In contrast, effective harvesting takes place as members make daily deposits in the social account of their religious experience, thereby allowing themselves to connect with others and share their faith. Reaping is a consequence of such investment.

In response to this problem, evangelism must return to its biblical foundation of disciple-making. Missiologists agree that the loss of members in mainstream denominations is symptomatic of a much deeper problem: a breakdown in relationships and a failure to make passionate disciples as a consequence of an insufficient social capital reservoir. This problem is directly related to a potential misinterpretation of our mission: are we called to grow the church through large numbers of baptisms, or are we called to make disciples?

The two goals are not mutually exclusive, but they are distinct from each other. Every disciple is a member of the family of God, but not every member is

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, March 24, 2014.

⁸ Ng, 'The Leaky Bucket Syndrome and How to Fix It'.

⁹ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on the Revival of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1835), 91.

¹⁰ 'Make Disciples, Not Just Converts', *Christianity Today* (25 October 1999): 28.

a disciple. A disciple is fully converted and demonstrates a commitment to the master's cause.

Can proper discipling contribute to improved retention of members? Is there any biblical paradigm as to what entails proper discipling? Can we maintain a balance by which the church grows quantitatively without compromising its core values or cheapening the grace of God to meet statistical goals? Can the church grow without losing its essential call to be a witness and voice of God in a world that is destitute of absolutes?

How does Adventism or Christianity in general maintain a balance between its mission and its image? How does the institution serve the mission, and not vice versa? In many cases, mass public evangelism has been encouraged as a means of striking that balance, but has it really proved to be the most effective way? Is it possible that Christians could lose sight of their mission while seemingly engaged in the mission? Is it possible that mission could become a means of supporting the structure, rather than the institution supporting the mission?

I believe that we must begin by linking discipling with membership-retention initiatives, because if these two are separated, the entire missional mandate is eviscerated.

III. The Church: God's Property

Since discipling takes place within the believing community, it is imperative to establish that the church is the property of God. The church is built on Jesus Christ, the foundational stone (Mt 16:18; 1 Pet 2:6–7). Moreover, the

church has been given the assurance that its efforts in kingdom-building, though punctuated with insurgencies, will ultimately triumph.¹¹

Those who belong to the church must see themselves as merely custodians entrusted by God with the responsibility of fulfilling his agenda to seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10). The work of church growth therefore consists primarily of God growing his church through human instrumentalities (1 Cor 3:6; Acts 20:28). Unless this is understood, we will attempt on our own to do what God alone can do—grow his church.

The origin of the New Testament church reflected God's continual initiative in establishing a people who would serve as his witness to all the nations of the earth (Is 49:6; 60:3). God's redemptive and restorative agenda is at the core of the church. The church not only owes its ontological existence to God, but relies on Christ for its future sustenance.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus regarded the church as *mou tēn ekklēsia*, 'my church', suggesting his ownership of and authority over it. In Greek, when the possessive lacks the article, as in the case of *mou*, 'my', this infers that the author intends to assert an innate quality of its object.¹²

11 Malcom B. Yarnell III, 'Upon This Rock I Will Build My Church: A Theological Exposition of Matthew 16:13–18', in *Upon This Rock: The Baptist Understanding of the Church*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcom B. Yarnell III (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 24–56.

12 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1934), 685.

The church, therefore, has Christ's imprint within its DNA and no one else can claim its ownership. Christ not only owns the church but takes responsibility for its growth and protection. He says, 'I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Mt 16:18 KJV). The use of the future tense indicates that Christ foresaw the future growth, expansion and persecution of his church and, as a result, placed these events under his domain. Consequently, nothing can happen to the church in the present or future that God has not already resolved in eternity. In Revelation, the church is seen in both its militant and triumphant state, with both the saints and Christ as ultimate victors (Rev 3:11, 12).

IV. The Biblical Paradigm

Often, messages on evangelism highlight the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20. Although this commission underscores the disciples' commitment to Christ's mission until the end of time, when read by itself Matthew 28 does not paint a full picture of what the Great Commission entails.

One of the most pertinent biblical texts related to the Great Commission is John 15:16 (KJV): 'Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.'

This text broadens the focus from bearing fruit (which could be equated with quantitative growth) to fruit retention (or qualitative growth). Sustainable evangelism takes place only

when the fruits remain. Evangelism, therefore, must include not just a plan to win new members to the faith but also a concomitant plan for retaining them. And the success of any evangelistic initiative should be gauged not just by the bearing of fruit (i.e. baptisms) but by its retention.

I long for the day when my denomination will stop reporting mere baptisms as evidence that 'fruit has been borne' and will instead report what has been truly added, the retained fruit. The process of retaining fruit is correlated with how it is produced.

When rightly done, evangelism will be less program-driven and more a relational initiative, in which those who are won become in fact disciples connected foremost to Christ, and by implication to those constituting the body of Christ. After all, people are unlikely to remain in a church where the social capital account is low. In other words, the dynamism of relationships among the church's members and their social networks of friendships within the community directly affect the connectivity that new believers experience when they enter the church upon accepting its teachings.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew in Matthew 4:19, he said, 'Come ye after me, and I will make you fishers of men' (Young's Literal Translation). It is notable that Peter and Andrew, and likewise James and John, were called first in their capacity as brothers. Jesus was not trying to build family dynasties; rather, he understood that discipleship takes place most easily and effectively within a relational context.

Furthermore, the disciples were asked to become reproducers (fishers of men) only after making their own

resolution to follow Jesus. The use of the conjunction *kai*, 'and', in the Greek serves as a bridge connecting two elements that are meant to be understood as closely connected and of equal status.¹³ This means that the call to be disciples of Jesus logically precedes their mandate to become fishers of men. According to Daniel Wallace, *kai* can sometimes add an emphatic element to that which precedes it, inferring that 'becoming fishers of men' should be understood as the central thrust in following Jesus.¹⁴

V. Discipleship: The Real Mandate

Recognizing the need for believers to work in partnership with God, Jesus gave the commission in Matthew 28:19–20 to 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (NAS). This commission is enveloped with the imperative *mathêteusate*, 'make disciples', and three participles—*poreuthentes*, 'go'; *baptizontes*, 'baptize'; and *didaskontes*, 'teach'.

This text can possibly be seen from different perspectives. If the first participle, *poreuthentes*, and those following

it are predicative, then the imperative *mathêteusate* must be seen as substantive, thus implying the translation, 'Make disciples while going ... baptizing ... teaching.' On the other hand, if the imperative is seen as the predicate, the text can be read, 'When going, make disciples ... when baptizing, make disciples ... when teaching, make disciples'. In the first instance, disciple-making becomes the focus and the participles explain how it is to be done. In the second instance, disciple-making results from the actions inferred.

In the text, it appears that Matthew intercalated the imperative amidst the participles to highlight its prominence and importance in the commission. The author placed the imperative, *mathêteusate*, and the participle *poreuthentes* in the aorist tense as if to suggest that both are contemporaneous actions. In other words, making disciples cannot take place apart from going, and going leads to disciple making.

Conversely, the participles *baptizontes* and *didaskontes* are in the present tense, inferring that both are continuous initiatives, ongoing in the discipleship process. This implies that fulfilling the Great Commission can happen only when the church is actively involved in 'going' and not passively waiting. Moreover, baptizing and teaching are not events but processes, as is discipleship.

The commission in Matthew 28:19–20 suggests that the one being baptized must first be made a disciple, which essentially requires an inward transformation of loyalty and submission to Christ. Disciple-making, though it precedes baptism (which underscores its chronological importance in

¹³ Steven E. Runge, *A Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2010), 40.

¹⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics—Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999, 2002), 671.

the conversion sequence), also constitutes a continual process that begins with conversion and continues daily in the process of sanctification.¹⁵

Evangelism, therefore, cannot start with public evangelization and end with baptism. Rather, evangelism commences and ends with disciple-making, because the ultimate goal of evangelism is kingdom building, not institutional maintenance. The former aims at the multiplication of members' qualitative discipleship, whereas the latter targets the addition of members through increases in quantitative membership. Although addition and multiplication are not necessarily mutually exclusive ways of achieving meaningful growth, multiplication best contributes to kingdom building.

The imperative to make disciples underscores a fundamental premise in biblical evangelism: the focus is never on adding new members but rather on multiplying members. Only disciples can multiply; hence Jesus' resolute willingness to start the Christian movement with just twelve intimate disciples. He understood that it does not matter how many disciples you start with; if they are firmly committed and well trained, multiplication will inevitably take place.

The early Christian church, at its inception, had five hundred believers who witnessed the resurrection (1 Cor 15) and 120 meeting in the upper room at Pentecost (Acts 1:13–15). It later multiplied to nearly one million in sev-

enty years.¹⁶ This church crossed geographic frontiers as it swept through Judea, Samaria, Asia and Africa without the aid of technology and trained seminarians.

What contributed to the success of the early church? The answer is simple: members were not just added to the church. Rather, the church was engaged in multiplication through disciple-making.

The early church saw world evangelization as its mission, but the retention of believers was of equal importance. Likewise, the church today must see conservation as a priority and as an integral aspect of evangelizing the masses. Baptism is for those who believe in Jesus and are willing to demonstrate their belief through their full commitment and surrender. This required total surrender occurs only as someone becomes a disciple.

A failure to make disciples creates believers who are disoriented and eventually uninterested. A survey of SDA young people in their teens and early twenties indicated that 31 percent found church to be boring, 24 percent saw their faith as irrelevant to their careers and interests, and 20 percent saw God as missing from their personal experience of church. Most importantly, 36 percent confessed that they were not able to ask their most pressing life-questions in church.¹⁷

Young people who leave the church

¹⁵ For some of the characteristics of a disciple, see Kwabenor Donkor, 'Discipleship: Towards a Biblical Approach', paper presented at the Summit on Nurture and Retention, 18 November 2013, Silver Spring, MD.

¹⁶ David Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 3.

¹⁷ David Sedlacek, 'Why Young People Leave the Church', paper presented at the Summit on Nurture and Retention, 18 November 2013, Silver Spring, MD.

do so due to a lack of authentic interpersonal relationships that are nurtured and cultured within a community atmosphere of love and belonging. Older adults report the same problem. In one survey of SDA backsliders, the top six reasons given for leaving were all based on relationships. Not surprisingly, only 24 percent viewed their chances of reconnecting with the SDA as likely.¹⁸ This seems to suggest that evangelism without a strong focus on developing quality, sustainable interpersonal relationships is counterproductive to assimilation and retention.

The method of membership assimilation has a corresponding impact on retention. In many places, public evangelism is the principal method of assimilating members into the church. There are some examples in Scripture of successful public evangelism, despite the apparent numerical failures of Noah (1 Pet 3:20) and Paul in Athens (Acts 17:34). Many of the successes of public evangelism in Scripture were the result of coordinated personal effort, with the public campaign merely reaping the seeds sown. On the first Pentecost, more than three thousand were baptized, but the preparatory work done by Jesus' ministry created the context for that great success.

One of the key differences between the declining churches of the 1950s and 1960s and the growth of evangelicals pertains to their approaches to evangelism. Mainline churches sel-

dom went beyond their denominational walls in evangelism; as a result, they deprived themselves of the chance to breathe new life into their structure. Churches that are more willing to evangelize heterogeneously, i.e. reaching out to diverse groups of people, often experience exponential growth and energy within their ranks.¹⁹

Historically, this has been a strength of the SDA, as its evangelistic fervour has crossed boundaries, driven by a firm commitment to preparing the world for the eschatological closure of earth's history. This evangelistic ethos is laudable, but it must be accompanied by a refocusing on sustainable initiatives, not motivated solely by quantitative agendas.

To truly fulfil the Great Commission, we must take the following steps:

1. Disciple-making must become the focus, where the thrust is on multiplication and not mere addition. In discipleship, the focus is on producing reproducers, which ultimately leads to multiplication of more disciples.
2. Believers must become disciple-makers, through an ongoing process by which they are won, trained, and deployed.
3. It is easier to disciple a few rather than the masses. Unless new believers are trained to become individual disciples who are connected to Christ, they will never be inspired to make other disciples.

¹⁸ Anthony Kent, 'Why Did They Leave? Why Might They Come Back? Findings from a Global Survey of Seventh-day Adventists', paper presented at the Summit on Nurture and Retention, 18 November 2013, Silver Spring, MD.

¹⁹ C. Kirk Hadaway, 'Is Evangelistic Activity Related to Church Growth?' in *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth and Decline*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 172–4.

VI. Sustainable Church Growth

Sustainable church growth must be firmly rooted in a Christocentric framework, which includes the following concepts: Christ created human beings in his image (Jn 1:1), reconciled fallen humanity to himself (Rom 5:12), assumed human nature in order to redeem humanity (Phil 2:7–8), bore the penalty for sin on the cross (1 Cor 6:20), died and was risen to guarantee believers victory over death (1 Cor 15:56–57), makes provision of salvation available to all (Jn 14:6), commissioned his followers as disciples (Mt 28:19) and promised to return to consummate his kingdom of glory (1 Thes 5:4–10).²⁰

Public evangelism is most successful when accompanied by concerted fieldwork, both preceding and following the public initiative.²¹ This kind of work demands a systematic and consistent approach to evangelism, which goes beyond merely holding an event and involves an ongoing lifestyle. Public evangelism thus must complement and even augment relational evangelism, not replace it.

Interestingly, Adventist pioneer Ellen G. White had much more to say about evangelism being centred on relationships than about large public gatherings devoid of personal connections. She wrote, 'One of the most effective ways in which light can be com-

municated is by private personal effort. In the home circle, at your neighbor's fireside, at the bedside of the sick, in a quiet way you may read the Scriptures and speak a word for Jesus and the truth.'²²

In another passage, White stated, 'The presentation of Christ in the family, by the fireside, and in small gatherings in private houses, is often more successful in winning souls to Jesus than are sermons delivered in the open air, to the moving throng, or even in halls and churches.'²³

When sustainable evangelism occurs, church growth will be inevitable. A growing church will exhibit some or all of the following:

1. High institutional commitment of members
2. Emphasis on active involvement in evangelism
3. New churches with youthful zeal
4. Decline of congregational conservatism as the church endeavours to be more relevant to its context
5. Denominational loyalty prioritized above the actions of the local church²⁴
6. A retention rate of new members higher than the attrition rate
7. A culture of caring, love and fellowship that characterizes relationships
8. Strong involvement of new believers in the services and programs of the church

20 Thom. S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology and Principles* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1993), 101–9.

21 Ellen G. White, *Pastoral Ministry* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Ministerial Association, 1995), 135, 136.

22 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1855), 428, 429.

23 Ellen White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1946), 437.

24 Hadaway and Roozen, 'Growth and Decline', 129–34.

9. Evangelism becoming less programmatic and more experiential, with a focus on each one reaching one

VII. A Practical Checklist for Disciple Making

A growing church is one in which service begins when the church program has ended. In other words, members are challenged to live out their faith daily beyond the contours of the church wall.

Based on my personal experience, I have developed a set of guidelines for wholesome and sustainable church-based evangelism, grounded in the biblical imperatives of kingdom growth and effective retention:

1. Disciple-making must be our priority, not merely adding members.
2. The church's culture should encourage all members to take personal responsibility for their spiritual growth.
3. New converts must be thoroughly instructed and consolidated in the faith.
4. A mentoring plan must be set up and the church must be responsive to the needs of new members.
5. Members are confirmed in their faith through witnessing and service.
6. Strict, firm, consistent behavioural standards are maintained.
7. Children and youth receive intentional caring.
8. High involvement is encouraged for most members, not just a select few.
9. A warm, caring welcome is given to new people.
10. A church that makes prayer its passion does better in attracting others and keeping them.
11. Worship must be lively, uplifting and creative.
12. Conscious effort is devoted to maintaining unity within the church and resolving conflict.
13. Get in touch with absent members promptly.
14. Help members who are facing pressing issues related to work, education or family.
15. Put the focus less on programs and committees and more on people and their needs.
16. Involving people actively in worship service contributes to their spirituality, growth and consolidation.
17. Service must begin when church ends!

VIII. Conclusion

A return to biblical evangelism necessitates a paradigm shift in the minds of those who are committed to fulfilling the church's mission. This entails a return to relational personal evangelism, which ought to complement and never be substituted by public evangelistic campaigns. Although public evangelism may account for the scores of people being baptized, most of those leaving the church are also recent converts from public evangelism, as opposed to those who were won through personal and relational evangelism. An emphasis on the latter will stop the high membership attrition that many churches are currently experiencing.

There will always be a place for public evangelism within the church, but in collaboration with intense personal work. Public evangelism should be

more of a reaping initiative, harvesting the results of the seeds sown by passionate disciples. Approaching public evangelism from this perspective eliminates the need for protracted public efforts and exorbitant financial obligations. Any church with an aggressive, eschatological evangelism agenda can counter the problem of high attrition currently faced by the Adventists and other churches.

This article calls for a healthy balance between missional ethos and

evangelistic fervour. Evangelism must be done in a sustainable fashion so that the leaks from the bucket can be minimized or even stopped. There is a better way, a biblical way—focusing on making disciples through relational evangelism that eventually serves as a feeder to public reaping initiatives. Public evangelism may not even be needed to a great extent if the church, through its members, is engaged in soul winning on a consistent basis.