

PUBLIC CAMPUS STUDENTS: SABBATH SCHOOL FOR THE 70%

Scott R. Ward, DMin

The structure of Youth Ministry in Seventh-day Adventist denomination is founded on the belief that the 3 pillars of home, school and church need to work together to form our children spiritually as revealed in the findings of the Valugensis studies. This Valugensis research that was based initially on surveys of 24,000 Adventist Academy students indicates that the Adventist church may be losing approximately 50% of these youth that are attending Adventist Academies.

With the absence of clear data on the retention rates of Adventist youth attending public high schools and with clear data indicating that Adventist Education is effective in helping to retain Adventist youth it seems reasonable to assume that we may be losing significantly more than 50% of Adventist youth attending public high schools. It is estimated that there may be approximately 70% of Adventist teens included in this significant at-risk group attending public high schools. Because of the limited reach of Adventist education it is Adventist churches that are left with the primary responsibility of assisting the Adventist homes in reaching this majority of Adventist youth attending public high schools.

For these reasons it is critically important to equip, resource and support the lay youth leaders in our local Adventist churches to reach all Adventist teens with the gospel and with our distinctive Adventist understanding of scripture. For many Adventist churches the main, and sometimes only, existing youth ministry activity that takes place on a regular basis that can serve as the starting point for this process of reaching and retaining our youth is Youth Sabbath School.

Structural Issues

The heart and soul of the Seventh-day Adventist church is the local church. Local churches are the place for individuals and families to develop relationships with other believers, learn about the Bible, grow spiritually and mobilize to live their faith and reach their communities for Christ. Many local Adventist churches also have small elementary schools that they operate and some churches are also constituents of local day academies and boarding academies. Adventist education has developed over the years as a ministry of the local churches and conferences intended to help reach Adventist young people for Christ. For many Adventist churches this is the main form of youth ministry they offer. Some congregations designate more than 50% of their church budgets to support this type of Adventist education ministry.

The two main departments relating to Adventist youth in most local conferences are the youth department and the education department. The education department oversees all the schools within the conference territory with the main goal of Adventist education being to help lead young people to Christ.

Most local conference youth departments in the North American Division (NAD) are structured around providing support for junior youth ministries in the form of Adventurers, Pathfinders and summer camp; and many are also able to provide a limited number of senior youth Bible conferences, short-term mission trips and other youth-oriented ministries. It is also noted that summer camp ministries minister to the youth and young adults who work there as staff along with the younger kids attending camp.

It is important to note that most of the attention of the local conference education departments is given primarily to the existing church schools and in spite of their best efforts for the past several decades many of these local church schools and academies are closing at an alarming rate. The point being made here is that the local conference education departments typically are not having a significant impact on the churches that are not affiliated with a local church school—rather than expanding they are fighting desperately to keep the schools they have open.

It is also important to note that many local conference youth departments are focused more on junior youth ministries than they are on senior youth ministries. Often times the local conference youth departments work closely with the education departments because they are both reaching out to the larger churches that have enough youth to warrant a church school ministry and there is a great deal more opportunity to find and recruit youth for ministry events where there are larger numbers of Adventist young people in one place. For example: it is common for summer camp directors to recruit students for camp by visiting all of the conference elementary schools and it is common for the summer camp directors to also visit Adventist academies and colleges to recruit summer camp staff. On the other hand, it is much more difficult and time consuming to find the Adventist young people that are scattered in smaller numbers throughout the greater number of Adventist churches that do not have enough young people to warrant having local church schools.

In some union conferences within the NAD there are youth departments that help to support local conference youth ministries and there is also youth ministry support for local conferences and unions coming from the NAD but these levels of the church structure are not the topic of this conversation because they primarily exist to support local conferences and unions rather than directly resourcing the local churches.

The interesting thing to note here is that the General Conference, which is the highest level of Adventist church structure, is the entity that has been delegated the task of creating Sabbath School materials for local Adventist churches around the world. The concept has been that our denomination would have one lesson produced each week that can reach all young people from all walks of life from around the entire globe, thus bypassing the local conference, union and division youth ministry and education departments and thereby taking these departments out of the conversations regarding Sabbath School and effectively eliminating this vital church ministry from their structures. In fact some local conference youth departments do not have a good feel for what is happening in local church youth Sabbath School classes because it is under the local conference Sabbath School department rather than under the direction of the youth ministry professionals. So, within the current system, the GC creates one youth Sabbath School curriculum that is passed down to local conference Sabbath School departments to be distributed to local churches along with

all the other Sabbath School department materials completely bypassing the existing local conference youth ministries conducted by Adventist education and youth ministry departments.

For this reason we find ourselves in the situation where our existing youth ministry structures are focused on the significant task of reaching Adventist young people associated with Adventist schools and church congregations large enough to warrant the presence of a youth pastor or other youth ministry professional. With so much work to do with this significant number of youth in our schools and larger churches and with the budget and staffing constraints of attempting to keep these ministries alive and functioning and with Sabbath School somewhat off the radar for all of these youth ministry and education professionals we find that our denomination in North America has come to the point where it is very difficult to see and identify Adventist youths that are scattered throughout our smaller churches and only marginally involved in the existing “system” of local conference youth and education ministries.

For these reasons it seems clear that as the discussion about providing new youth Sabbath School materials moves forward we must keep in mind that the significant group that is being missed by our existing organized youth ministry structures is primarily the approximately 70% of Adventist youth attending public high schools and that are associated with our churches that are too small or too poor to have their own Adventist schools or youth ministry professionals.

Young Adult Retention must Begin in High School

For many years the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in North America has been investing millions of dollars into Adventist education and has also been spending even more to study the effectiveness of Adventist education with the Valugenesis research. The results of this research have made it very clear to most Adventists that we are losing far too many of our youth despite our best efforts and well spent money. The common number that is most widely talked about due to this research is that we are losing approximately 50% of Adventist youth. What most people may not be realizing is that the Valugenesis research indicating this approximate 50% loss is based solely on surveys of teenagers attending Adventist Academies—public school youth are not involved in these studies or statistics and as stated in the abstract above it seems reasonable to assume that the Adventist denomination is losing far more of its youth than previously thought when the loss of youth attending public high schools is factored in.

What if we could find a way to make youth SS the springboard for reaching out to the majority of our teens attending public schools? With the millions of dollars being spent on Adventist Education and on studying the effectiveness of Adventist education would it seem wise to also designate some funding to develop youth ministries specifically targeted to reach the large numbers of Adventist teens that are only marginally being reached by the existing system?

Several years ago the NAD identified young adult retention as one of its top priorities. Funding has been allocated and new young adult initiatives have been implemented to help stem the loss of our young people and progress has been made. It is important to note, however, that some youth ministry professionals agree that many of our young adults that are leaving the church made the decision to leave while they were still in high school—they just didn't have the

freedom to leave, in many cases, until they turned 18 and graduated. For this reason it is important to state clearly that young adult retention and stemming the loss of our young people must begin in high school and with the clearly identified structural difficulties and limits of Adventist education and youth ministry a new direction must be considered.

Our denomination seems to be having better success with investing into our junior youth aged children with elementary schools, Adventurer and Pathfinder ministries along with summer camp ministries and other activities designed for this age group. For those students who are able to continue on from these ministries and attend Adventist academies the full array of ministry opportunities continues to exist and provide effective ministry. The problem is that when many Adventist children graduate from Adventist elementary schools they also grow out of Pathfinders and summer camp ministries at around the same time. The problem is compounded because far fewer options for attending Adventist schools during high school exist than there were for elementary school.

Thus, it is all too common for Adventist churches to invest heavily in junior youth ministries and then have very little to offer during the high school years for those students unable to continue on to an Adventist academy. When this happens we often times lose much of the investment made during the elementary school years as we fail to build on that foundation.

Once again, it seems that Sabbath School is the one structured Adventist ministry to youth that still exists in some form that can be strengthened and built upon to capitalize on what we have already invested in so heavily in our young people as children. It is also important to note that it is during these critical high school years when young people begin to take control of their lives and go from being told what to believe to deciding for themselves if they will believe what they have been taught spiritually. It is during these critical years when the decisions to be Christian or not and whether to be Adventist or not are being made. And, as stated above, it is often times the decisions that are made during this time of life, in high school, that determine whether our young people remain involved in church as young adults or walk away.

More than an Hour on Sabbath Mornings

As has been discussed above, youth Sabbath School has the potential to play a major role in helping to educate and develop Adventist teens spiritually and to help retain them in our churches as they become adults. Also, as noted above, churches that are large enough to have a youth ministry professional on staff and/or are large enough to have an academy nearby often times have youth Sabbath School leaders that can create their own resources or are familiar with enough other resources that they don't need as much help as the youth leaders from churches that don't have these human resources. For these reasons the suggestions laid out here for helping to recreate youth Sabbath School will be primarily targeted to the smaller churches and poorer inner city churches that have fewer human as well as material resources and are often times the churches trying to minister to many of our youth who are unable to take advantage of the benefits of Adventist education.

As we begin to imagine what youth Sabbath School could be it is important to see it as more than just one hour per week on Sabbath mornings. If our lay youth leaders, who are mostly not youth ministry specialists, see Sabbath School as

merely fulfilling an obligation for an hour per week or merely as something to “get through” we have lost the battle before it has begun because the youth will immediately notice the lack of interest and immediately walk away—if not physically—then mentally.

It is critically important to create resources that can effectively reach our youth by helping our lay youth leaders to find easy and natural ways to create meaningful, spiritually nurturing relationships with the teens they are serving. So, rather than focusing only on programming that is attention-getting, the focus needs to be on building trust and genuine, caring relationships. Plug and play dynamic programming gets old in a hurry when it is devoid of deeper relationship. Therefore, the place to start youth retention is by learning their names and interests and this can happen anywhere at church—including, but not limited to, Sabbath School.

Trying to get to know a small group of teens, or even one or two, can be rather intimidating for many adults so it is important to bring out what may be obvious to many but not all. With teens there is no better mood setting, conversation starting, relationship building tool than food. There are good reasons why so many business meetings and socials take place in the context of a meal. It gives you something to talk about, gives you something to do rather than merely fidgeting with something else and just makes everyone more comfortable in most cases. The food can take on many forms depending on the comfort zone of the particular church but the point is to use this proven tool to help break the ice and warm people up. More traditional youth group ice breaker games can work well in larger groups, but in smaller groups food and often times a little background music can serve to ease tension and help everyone to feel welcomed and a little more at ease.

As students come in to Sabbath School and start checking the table to see what kinds of food are smelling so good one of the next natural steps in human relationship building is to greet the students and ask them how their week has been. These conversations should be informal and the real goal is to get to know everyone’s names, interests, where they go to school, etc. Another goal of this weekly “get to know you” time is to help kids learn about each other and to help them to develop relationships with each other as well. This also helps the youth leader to know what kinds of activities to propose engaging the kids in outside of Sabbath School and also serves as a time to discuss what they might like to do for some kind of social activity. There are a lot of small group books on the market that can be helpful in giving more suggestions for doing this type of group/team building.

The next step in relationship building that will be suggested here is to take prayer requests and praises. This is a time to take all the things you’ve learned about each other to God in prayer. It is important to try to keep track of the different prayer requests so that you can follow up week to week with what is happening in the students lives. This helps them to know that you care and is a tangible way of demonstrating the practical love that Jesus has for each one of them as well. The formula is: meet some felt needs, show them that you care, and then help them learn more about Jesus. Actual programming structures and ideas are beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusions

1. The Seventh-day Adventist church in North America needs to take a serious look at its youth ministry structures and begin addressing its current weaknesses and blind spots so that it can more effectively address how to minister to and retain the large numbers of Adventist teens attending public high schools.
 2. The Seventh-day Adventist church in North America needs to recognize that young adult retention begins in high school and target more resources to this vital area that is often times dramatically under-resourced as compared to the variety of junior youth oriented ministries that these students have often times just graduated from.
 3. As new youth Sabbath School resources are developed it must be kept in mind that helping lay youth leaders understand that, (a) relationship building is the primary goal and that (b) programming is secondary, is vital. Relational lay youth leader resources, training and support are of critical importance and will help to develop youth Sabbath School as a foundation for all other youth ministries that local church congregations can provide.
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