

CAMPUS BASED YOUTH MINISTRY: AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

The Adventist church has a rich history of campus-based youth ministry centered on Adventist academy campuses. The Adventist system is so campus-based that many youth pastors attempting to follow church-based models have difficulty including non-academy students in their ministries. The church's mission is to reach all Adventist students in the community not just the ones attending Adventist schools. The solution is a campus-based youth ministry model that can be used for both academies and public high schools and can be used by youth pastors and lay youth leaders. By developing such campus-based youth ministries all high school aged Adventist students can be ministered to while getting outside the Adventist "bubble" and on to public campuses for effective youth evangelism as well.

The Advantages of Campus-based Youth Ministry

Youth ministry in North America began in the 50s and 60s when a distinct youth culture began to develop.¹ This initial youth ministry movement was campus-based as "youth evangelists" went on campus to reach teenagers for Christ. Years later churches started hiring youth pastors and youth ministry became church-based rather than campus-based. As this transition continued over time churches began to use fun and games to "draw" youth into the church facility. This "fun and games" youth ministry model of the past 25 years is now being declared bankrupt² and youth ministry leaders are searching for a new model. Campus-based youth ministry seeks to return to the school campuses and find the youth where they are living their lives. It also seeks to meet their needs in the real world rather than continuing to use gimmicks to draw them into our churches. Campus-based youth ministry is rooted in relational youth ministry,³ seeking to be salt and light. Research today is revealing the fact that many people, "Like Jesus but not the Church," as Dan Kimball has so eloquently titled his most recent book.⁴ In light of America's current cultural context, reaching out to public high school campuses is no longer optional. Youth no longer come to church as they once did. If our ministries want to reach youth for Christ, they must meet them where they spend most of their time—at school!

Even though Adventism has a long history of campus-based youth ministry, we still suffer from the negative effects of trying to "draw" people in rather than going out and connecting with students in their world. Likewise, other Christian based schools are missing the boat as well. If our youth are surrounded by Christians only, who do they witness to? Where do our ministries do outreach? Many Christian campuses are quite Laodicean because of this. The Christian mindset needs to change back to an outreach orientation rather than a nurture orientation. Spiritually speaking, as Christians in North America, we are nurturing ourselves to death! The future of Adventist evangelism, and thereby, the overall church, is in the hands of the youth leaders of today. We must seriously consider how are we "training up the child!"⁵

This is not to suggest that we close our Christian schools. What is being said is that in order to save our youth from spiritual death, we need viable ministries to attract and lead all our youth—including those on public campuses to Jesus Christ. We need to focus our communities on Jesus and provide opportunities for his power to be unleashed. We need to get our students in a position to see the powerful hand of God at work and get them excited to reach out to the un-churched youth on campus. When we sequester ourselves to our own private campuses and ignore the public campuses we literally have the world to lose.

How My Campus-based Ministry Began

If you are serious about getting to know youth—get on campus! Volunteer to do anything! Schools always need free labor. Being an artist, I wanted to help in the art room at my local academy. What I ended up doing was teaching a mandatory art class. That was perfect! I had 55 minutes a day with my target audience. This gave me a reason to be on campus. My daily presence opened doors to also host a “family group” of 8-10 students on Tuesday mornings and to take the lead for Thursday morning chapels where I was eventually able to start a praise band and coach student speakers to give devotional talks. Again, My regular presence on the academy campus made it the overall base of operations for my ministry. All academy youth from all churches (including non-Adventist) were invited to all my activities. This seemed natural because most Adventist teenagers think in terms of the friends in their circle—the ones they see at school on a daily basis. They don’t think in terms of “youth group.” I couldn’t tell students that only members of my church could go on my mission trips, houseboat trips and other activities? That would create artificial segregating. This led me to develop a campus-based rather than church-based ministry model.

As my academy campus ministry was developing a teenage girl approached me at a church potluck and told me she was a freshman at the local high school that year and wanted me to help her start a Bible study on her campus. I went through the registration process with the high school and was cleared to be on campus. Then I had permission slips signed by parents saying that I could meet with their children for “counseling” during lunch-time.⁶ Our group size varied each year depending on how many were interested and if they brought friends. I was amazed at how many youth I met had an Adventist background—either parents or grandparents had been church members in the past but had lost interest. I was able to reconnect with many of these youth and some began to reconnect with the church. My initial ministry on this public high school campus was one of getting to know people and staying connected with Adventist youth and their friends. They were not coming to church, so I went to them and met them on their turf.

My public campus ministry took off two years later when I re-started the Christian club on campus. The club had folded because of dwindling attendance. I believe interest had waned because the club primarily offered student-led Bible studies during lunch. It seemed to me that during lunch time students wanted a break from studying. I believed that more than anything youth needed to find other Christian students to develop community with so that they could withstand negative peer pressure. Eventually I discovered that the students also wanted to do outreach on their campus.

When my focus was primarily on Adventist students my group was small. It seemed that the youth sometimes felt like they might appear to be a little odd by attending such a small obscure group. Some demonstrated hesitancy to participate at times. But by opening the group to all Christians, the Adventist students had opportunities to be leaders in the overall Christian community and to benefit from being a part of a larger more visible group. I had done the same thing at the Adventist academy where Adventists were the clear majority, but this was my first attempt at a public high school where the Adventists were in the minority.

Each week our Christian club starts with a “check-in” time where everyone shares how his or her week is going and makes prayer requests. This is how we all get to know and support each other and become friends. As our lunch time groups grew from 5 or 6 per lunch period to 20 or 30 we found that we had to divide into small groups to maintain the intimacy and bonding within the group.

When our campus ministry was ready to start doing outreach we developed a website: www.peace4youth.org. The website is still developing as we try to reach students more effectively, but the goal is to draw youth in with photos of our activities, then offer simple steps for developing personal spirituality. The goal for the website is to become a place for campus clubs to network and share ideas.

We promote our website during our “pizza and prayer” outreach events where our club members, wearing peace4youth t-shirts, spread out all over campus during lunch time offering free slices of pizza and “peace4youth” wristbands while taking prayer requests. We have an adult/teen prayer team

regularly praying for hundreds of requests from this ongoing ministry.

Now with campus ministries at every high school in town, both public and private, I have access to nearly all teens. So, last January "Peace4youth Campus Ministries" hosted a city-wide youth rally that attracted nearly 500 youth to a weekend event that was amazing! I partnered with the local youth pastors' network with the goal of all our youth groups working together to reach un-churched youth. I call it "Billy Graham style" youth evangelism where we all work together for the basic Gospel that we all agree on. The weekend was a huge success.

Through these events my Adventist youth have grown spiritually and are now inspired to reach out even more on their campuses, and the non-Adventist students in my clubs will always remember that it was an Adventist youth pastor who reached out to them and helped them in their walk of faith. Getting on campus, getting to know students, helping them network with each other, encouraging them in their walk of faith, and staying in communication via websites, social networking sites and texting is what makes this ministry work.

Variations of the Campus-based Youth Ministry Model

Full-time Youth Pastor Based at One Church. This model is based on what I am currently doing as described in this paper. Any youth pastor with a well-rounded program of youth activities based at the local academy, only needs to spend an additional two hours per week at the public high school campus to follow this model. The concept is to form a "group" at each school so that the public school students no longer feel like the "odd man out." When public high students feel like they are a part of a Christian "group" on their campus they feel more comfortable coming to the existing youth ministry events because they are no longer coming alone. They are coming with their group—a group that is just as spiritual, if not more spiritual, than the academy students.

Academy Bible Teacher/Campus Chaplain. Another important model to be developed is for the academy Bible teacher/chaplain to be the one visiting public schools at lunch time, especially in

areas that have no youth pastors. This is important because the Bible teacher/chaplain is already serving in this role on one campus and could easily connect on other campuses as well. This model would go a long way toward helping marginalized public high school students feel welcome at church too. The vast majority of youth ministry funding goes to our academies. Increasingly, our youth are choosing to attend public high schools. We need to be fair by reaching out and ministering to all Adventist youth on all campuses, both public and private.

Full-time Traveling Youth Pastor/Public School Chaplain. Northern California Conference has a small-school youth pastor who visits all the small elementary schools in the conference. He conducts weeks of prayer and connects with children in any way he can. This is a good model to adapt for a public high school chaplain as well. Find the churches with larger groups of students in public schools who want to reach their campuses. One chaplain could visit 10 schools on a bi-monthly basis making a huge impact and giving God the opportunity to make things happen.

The chaplain could also spend time recruiting lay volunteers as well. Most Christian clubs on high school campuses are run by teachers, not pastors. It's something anyone who loves youth can do. All you need is a caring heart and a good book on running small groups.⁷ This model could impact dozens of schools.

Conclusion

One of my favorite things to do is visit a new high school campus. Have a parent call ahead saying that you will be visiting their child on campus. Then you show up with about 5 pizzas, a hundred "peace4youth" wristbands and some "peace4youth" t-shirts to give away. Trust me, you will draw a crowd of admirers! Everyone will want to know what you are doing. That's right, the crowd will come to you! Give away the P4Y (peace4youth) items that point them to the spiritual website, give everyone a chance to tell about themselves, have prayer then be on your way. It's a high impact evangelistic tool that anyone can use, and all the models listed above can be legitimately funded with evangelism money.

Adventist youth ministry needs to start reaching out to all our students instead of being satisfied by merely reaching out to the most churched and most accessible groups who attend our Adventist schools. Reaching out to only the easily accessible students is narrow minded, un-evangelistic and unbiblical. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for taking this approach.⁸ Instead, talk to the youth at your church and discuss the Insight article "Taking God to School"⁹ and then schedule a time to visit them at school and meet their friends!

Endnotes

- ¹Oestreicher, Mark. *Youth Ministry 3.0*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, 45-6. See also: Root, Andrew. *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007, pp52-3.
- ²King, Mike. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006, 25. See also Oestreicher, 64.
- ³Root, 15.
- ⁴Kimball, Dan. *They Like Jesus but not the Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.
- ⁵Proverbs 22:6.
- ⁶For more information on how to get on a public high school campus see my website: www.campusbasedyouthministry.org
- ⁷Walshe, Alan. "Transformational Youth Ministry," in Dudley, Roger and Allan Walshe, editors. *Ministering with Millennials*. Lincoln: *AdventSource*, 2009, 179.
- ⁸Matthew 8:10-13.
- ⁹A copy of this article is posted at: www.campusbasedyouthministry.org