

# "STANDOUT" PUBLIC SCHOOL RETREAT

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## Abstract

*Standout is a public high school retreat created by the enrollment team at Andrews University in order to respond to the growing concerns of Adventist youth choosing public schools over Adventist schools. Since the statistics of youth who leave the Seventh-day Adventist church are grim for those who attend public schools, the enrollment team decided to address the issue. The team created a weekend on the campus of Andrews University specifically geared towards public high school students (while including home-schooled youth) in hopes of inspiring Adventist youth to seek a deeper experience with Christ and in turn begin to make future decisions based on His guidance. Recognizing that these decisions may or may not lead them to Andrews University was not a deterring factor as the primary focus was to create a community of youth that seeks after God and to build their identity as Seventh-day Adventist Christians.*

## Standout

According to Hurst, 66-75% of Seventh-day Adventist youth attend public schools.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, statistics show that Adventist youth who attend public schools instead of Adventist schools leave the Adventist Church at an even higher rate than those who attend Adventist schools. The attrition of Adventist public school youth may be up to 80%,<sup>2</sup> whereas, according to Dudley, the attrition for Adventist school youth is about 55%.<sup>3</sup>

The enrollment team at Andrews University, which consists of recruiters, admissions personnel and guest relations, has traditionally targeted students from Adventist academies. However, when the enrollment team began receiving statistics regarding most Adventist high school students attending public schools, they knew it was time to reach out to this population. Since so many of our Adventist youth are choosing public schools, the enrollment team began asking questions such as: "How does Andrews University demonstrate to these students that Adventist education is an important aspect of a Christian lifestyle?"

The enrollment team soon realized that rather than attempting to portray Andrews University in a glamorous light, it was of greater importance to portray Christ as the brightest light. Only when youth fall in love with Christ and see Him as the light of their lives, will their decisions, including educational

decisions, be based on His leading. Thus, perhaps the answer is to inspire youth to truly follow Christ. As they seek God guidance, many of them will be led to Adventist colleges or universities if God indeed wants them to be there. We decided to create a retreat that targets public high school students and specifically their spiritual needs.

## Mission Statement of Standout

Standout, a public high school retreat, seeks to provide an opportunity for public high school students and home-schoolers to worship together, to meet other youth, to experience God, to learn together, and to refresh their walk with Jesus. We hope to empower and inspire youth to be a powerful force that brings Jesus to our world as a united community that seeks to devote its efforts to prayer, fellowship, learning and breaking bread together.

Our Mission Statement is based on the following verse: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."<sup>4</sup>

Standout is a public high school retreat annually hosted on the campus of Andrews University since 2006. It is a retreat that occurs over three consecutive days and focuses on creating a community that seeks after God. We have placed it on the campus of Andrews University for several reasons. We wanted to separate it from a specific

church location so that youth do not feel like it is a competition of which church or region has the bigger youth rally. We also wanted to give these high school students the experience of being on the campus of the university. We hope that their positive experience at Standout will also translate to a positive experience with the campus and its people. Whether God leads them to attend Andrews University in the future or not, we want to provide a community that will nurture and strengthen their walk with Christ into adulthood. Our hope is to encourage them to ask God for guidance in every step they take and to deepen their sense of belonging to the Adventist family of faith by involving them in worship and service within and outside of the Standout community.

### **Relationships and Community**

The goal is to give youth a taste of a community based on Acts 2:42 (NIV): "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Just as the apostles spent time together in fellowship, learning, eating, and praying together, Standout seeks to do the same. We want to offer youth a weekend during which they experience a community where youth fellowship and worship together through each aspect mentioned in the verse: prayer, eating, learning, and fellowship. It is essential to notice that the verse states that the apostles "devoted themselves" to these things. They didn't just do them once in a while. They devoted themselves to doing them every single day. We want to give youth a weekend experience demonstrating that this kind of fellowship is possible. We hope to inspire them to carry this into their everyday lives. We want to allow them to participate in a living faith because as De Oliveira (2009) aptly states: "Living faith generates living faith in others."<sup>5</sup>

The 180° Symposium in 2008 identified the need for genuine, authentic relationships among youth as one of the key aspects of youth development. Unless this is met, youth will look elsewhere to fulfill it.<sup>6</sup> Standout seeks to provide an opportunity to meet this need of teenagers by creating a community. "Healing relationships and creating community are primary in Jesus' plan for restoration and it is a priority for postmodern (millennial) youth and young adults."<sup>7</sup> Standout is a

weekend designed for youth to meet other youth—to bond with the group as a whole as well as with their own youth group from home.

Group activities during Sabbath School or ice-breakers promote community and relationships. So do "Open Mic," break out sessions, Saturday evening games, and even meal times. Although past Standouts have mainly focused on building relationships during the event, the plan is to further develop and create a community that will last beyond the three-day retreat. Through a website and other online communication tools, Standout will stay in touch with all past attendees and will continue to build community through constant communication with Standout participants.

### **Chaperones and Adult Support**

The community of Standout would not be complete without the presence of adult chaperones. These adults bring the youth to the event as well as spend the weekend with them. Our goal is to involve the adults so that youth experience a true community that includes everyone. Although the weekend is geared towards the youth, the support, prayers, and importance of adult presence cannot be underestimated. When Chap Clark studied adolescents he discovered that most of the issues that youth face grow out of abandonment. In general, the adults of our society have abandoned the youth. As a result, young people have created their own world in which they fend for themselves. Clark states, "The goal of youth ministry should be to make disciples of Jesus Christ who are authentically walking with God within the context of intimate Christian community."<sup>8</sup> He identifies three convictions that are core to this understanding, with the third one being "young people and adults recognize that a community is one in which all members need and belong to one another."<sup>9</sup> That's why Standout invites the participation of the adults who are investing in the lives of the youth.

We provide two breakout sessions for the adults in which they are given tools for youth ministry. In the future, we would like to provide tools and materials that these adults can take to their churches and further educate church members on the issues surrounding youth and their attrition along with the discussions from the 180° Symposium.

## **Worship & Spirituality**

Singing, speakers, prayers, breakouts, and all of the other activities are designed to inspire youth with a passion for Christ. We want them to walk away wanting more of God in their lives. We desire for youth to have a deeper experience with Him and to long for more. In the Valuegenesis II report, Gillespie and Donahue suggest, "Personal piety is crucial according to our research, and young people need to be shown how to build a personal spiritual life. Show them how to have meaningful Bible study with the use of inspirational materials, Christian music, and community service involvement."<sup>10</sup> It is our hope to provide breakout sessions and other worship experiences that will give them the tools for developing a daily relationship with Christ rather than only provide a one-weekend boost in their spiritual lives.

Ron Pickell mentions that "many young people who have grown up in the church don't really know what to share"<sup>11</sup> when asked to share their faith. I believe that not only do they not know what to share but many of them also don't know what they believe. An important part of spirituality is our understanding of theology. Our comprehension of Adventist theology influences the way we understand God and what happens in our lives. As I converse with students I am struck with the reality that many of our youth do not know and would not be able to explain the basic tenants of our faith. Therefore, it seems imperative that we emphasize theology in youth ministry. In one weekend we cannot accomplish all that is needed in this area, but we can focus the sessions on teaching and learning bible truths. Just as Acts 2:42 points out that the people devoted themselves to learning, so we want to devote the weekend activities to teaching and learning. We also plan to stay in touch with the students throughout the year and encourage them to delve deeper into the Word and to learn more of Scripture and theology. Standout creates a community that will also inspire youth in a renewed passion for Biblical truth.

## **Service and Involvement**

Standout also embeds an opportunity for service activities. We invite youth to participate in a service project as they arrive or during Sabbath afternoon. Every year the service opportunities may be different,

but there will always be a way for youth get involved and make a difference in a certain community. Dudley and Gillespie's Valuegenesis report points out that active involvement is one of the big reasons youth remain in the church.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, we will ensure opportunities for service in the Standout weekend.

Additionally, we invite Standout attendees to be active participants in various parts of the programs throughout the weekend. They can create an art project for display, prepare special music, lead out in song service, share a testimony, participate in discussions during breakout sessions, etc. The voices of our youth are heard.

Chris Blake suggests "Youth Summits" as one of the three solutions to stop the exodus of young people leaving the church.<sup>13</sup> He recommends that the Adventist Church should re-introduce Youth Summits, as they are "designed to create a large critical mass of energetic youth and focus on involvement rather than entertainment."<sup>14</sup> I see Standout as a variation of a Youth Summit. Standout exists so that the "large critical mass of energetic youth" catches a fire for Christ from each other. They need to experience a gathering with other youth since they are comparatively alone in many of their churches. Standout serves as a boost because it reveals there are other youth who love the Lord. Rather than one day, however, Standout occurs over the whole weekend. Youth positively comment on this time period as they appreciate the bonding that results from having a full weekend to socialize and fellowship.

Blake's statement points out that Youth Summits were designed to involve youth and not to entertain them. I completely agree with this statement. However, I believe that those in youth ministry may each view the concept of entertainment differently. There may be some who will walk into a Standout worship session and see it as entertainment because we have a band playing up front, video clips running, drama group performing, etc. Although we involve the participants of Standout in much of our programming, I believe that inviting the participation of professional or semi-professional figures is also imperative and does not signify entertainment. Just as in the Old Testament sanctuary and temple, there were musicians whose sole job it was to 'do' music day and night,<sup>15</sup> so it is

important that our events include the participation of those who have been called by God to minister through music or drama. The experience of joining in worship with musicians or our drama team is invaluable as it creates a depth of worship that cannot be accomplished in the same way through 'lets practice right before' worship. If God impressed on His people to appoint the Levites to focus on music and lead the nation in worship, then it is safe to say that professional leadership in music is not entertainment when its purpose is to uplift God with others.

## Future Vision

Our vision is to see Acts 2:42 implemented in the lives of the students. We want to see them acquire and demonstrate a thirst for learning from God, meeting together, discussing their faith, and seeking to walk with Christ. We would like to see long-term development and a strengthening of the youth's Adventist identity.

We would like to see public high school students and home-schooled students who are excited to be a part of the Standout community not just for one weekend but for the whole year. The indicators of its success will be the constant communication with students and Andrews staff through our website and other online or phone conversations. The Standout team also visits various churches and youth rallies throughout the year, which offer additional venues to stay in touch with youth.

As Standout keeps growing, it may be necessary to offer two Standout events per year. The total number of participants has increased at a rate of about 50 each year, with more than 200 in 2008. Preferably, Standout will not be larger than 300 participants because the event will lose its intimate feeling. The smaller size allows for greater fellowship and participation of students as well as the Andrews' staff-student engagement.

Ideally, we would like to transition the students who are involved in Standout and enter colleges and universities to a collegiate ministry program such as GODencounters. GODencounters is "a movement of young adults who are wholeheartedly seeking a 24/7 experience of GOD, recklessly living for His renown."<sup>16</sup> As a young adult ministry,

GODencounters would be an ideal transition for youth who have been involved in Standout as they keep pursuing a 24/7 experience with God.

## Results

1. *Spiritual* – During the last Standout, 150 students came to the front to recommit and give their lives to God. Many had made decisions for baptism as well. Every year students and chaperones leave messages of the transformation that God has worked in their youth. As one of the chaperones stated:

"This past weekend I really saw God working in our group. All of my kids come from broken homes. One of them has had 6 stepdads and has a family history of drugs and alcohol abuse. One was adopted and the adopted family kicked him out. He has been living on his own and going to school for about 5 months. Another one of our kid's dad is in a rock band and lives the bad band lifestyle, her teenage sister just had a baby and they hate each other. The last one said she doesn't believe in God and that our parents are "Jesus" in a way. This is why I feel like they need weekends like this to really find out that Jesus, no matter what, will always love you and find YOU worth any sacrifice even His own life."<sup>17</sup>

A few of the students in this chaperone's group commented as well. These are their impressions of Standout:

"The one thing that touched me the most was when the drama class did that presentation/play ...I don't know what it was but it touched me so much I actually teared up, NO JOKE!!! But keep that on the down low. I am most definitely looking forward to coming back next year."

"When they called people to the front on Saturday I got up but it wasn't real. But the last call they made and I went up that was real. I felt weird and like an outcast compared to everyone else that came in the beginning. But when the weekend ended I felt like I can actually change. It might be hard, but it will be worth it."<sup>18</sup>

One of the most amazing parts of the weekend is observing the ministry of the sponsors who work with these youth. They are committed and caring adults who would do anything for these young people. Their love and care is palpable. Watching these adults reassures me that God has His hand over His youth!

2. *Andrews Attendance* – It has not been our primary goal to make sure that students who attend Standout enroll at Andrews University. We want them to go wherever God leads them. But Andrews University has been blessed with a steady attendance of students who have participated in Standout. Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure how many students have chosen Andrews solely because of their Standout experience since some have completed an application or an interest card somewhere else. But there are many who have been entered into our database under the Standout code every year. Out of those who have been entered since 2006, we have about 30 Standout attendees who are currently attending Andrews University.

It does appear that the Standout event is leading students into a stronger relationship with God and to Andrews University. As one student commented: "I am so glad you planned this weekend. Everything was perfectly planned and it helped me A LOT! Everything from the worship sessions, to the breakout sessions, or just the family setting that it presented. I don't go to a SDA school so this weekend also helped me realize that I need to put myself in a college with other students who have the same beliefs as me."<sup>19</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Hurst, V. G. "Unity and Ministry Through the Massification of Adventism" in Dudley, Roger, and Allan Walshe, editors. *Ministering with Millennials*. Lincoln: AdventSource, 2009, 79-89.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Dudley, Roger L., and Bailey Gillespie. *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance*. Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1992.

<sup>4</sup>Acts 2:42, NIV.

<sup>5</sup>De Oliveira, Japhet. "Adventist Identity Crisis: In the Leaders or the Led?" in Dudley, Roger, and Allan Walshe, editors. *Ministering with Millennials*. Lincoln: AdventSource, 2009, 41-45.

<sup>6</sup>Dudley, Roger L., and Allan Walshe. (2009). "A Report on the 180° Symposium" in Dudley, Roger L. and Allan Walshe, editors. *Ministering with Millennials*. Lincoln: AdventSource, 2009, 1-10.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>8</sup>Clark, Chap. *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, 188.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>10</sup>Gillespie, V. Bailey, and Michael J. Donahue. *Valuegenesis: Ten Years Later. A Study of Two Generations*. Riverside, CA: Hancock Center Publications, 2004, 348-349.

<sup>11</sup>Pickell, Ron. "Proclamation vs. Protection: Reshaping the Vision of Adventist Youth Ministry" in Dudley, Roger, and Allan Walshe, editors. *Ministering with Millennials*. Lincoln: AdventSource, 2009, 141.

<sup>12</sup>Dudley, Roger L., and Bailey Gillespie. *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance*. Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1992.

<sup>13</sup>Blake, Chris. "Stop the Sad Exodus: Three Practical Solutions" in Dudley, Roger, and Allan Walshe, editors. *Ministering with Millennials*. Lincoln: AdventSource, 2009, 27-31.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>15</sup>1 Chronicles 9:33.

<sup>16</sup>[www.godencounters.org](http://www.godencounters.org).

<sup>17</sup>K. Nelson, personal communication, April 20, 2009.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>A. Coleman, personal communication, April 20, 2009.

