

ADOPTING YOUR LOCAL PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by Kevin Becker

Abstract

God promised to give Joshua every place he set his foot. It is my belief that most Seventh-day Adventist churches have little or no impact on the community in which they are located. Depending on which statistic you look at, the median age for an Adventist is between 51 and 62. I believe one of our biggest hurdles, "the graying of Adventism," could become our greatest strength. I believe that if churches would adopt their local public elementary school they would not only increase their impact, but would establish a positive presence in the community that would transform their image from doomsday fatalists to world-changing optimists. I have placed my feet at my local public elementary school and claim those children and teachers for Christ.

I long for the day when Adventist churches will adopt their local public school. While our church is far from perfect, we did adopt our local public elementary school and I am thankful. Here is my story.

My Story

All I have ever known of public schools was that they were residences of evil. If you were a "good Adventist" you would sacrifice whatever was needed to place your children in an SDA school. Public school was evil.

I have had the privilege of attending SDA schools from kindergarten through my masters of divinity degree. I am grateful for the education that I received, but I have always had this fear of public schools. They are big! Many have enrollments in the thousands. The SDA elementary school I attended was the biggest one in the Atlanta area at the time and there were five of us that graduated from 8th grade.

After graduating from Andrews Theological Seminary, I taught at my alma-mater, Atlanta Adventist Academy. I loved my five years of teaching, coaching, and being a chaplain. However, when I took the call to pastor in the Collegedale Community Church, my life's purpose came into focus.

My senior pastor, Dr. Jerry Arnold, when casting the vision of his church plant, told me that CCC

started with the purpose of ministering to the community. I was expected to be involved in the community. This excited me. Outside of ingathering or colporteur and trying to get money from people, I had never been in a church that focused on the community. What did that mean? What did it look like? How would I participate in a meaningful way?

As I pondered what my ministry to the community would be, I began to inquire of God. This was new territory for me so I made it a matter of prayer. One day I took a prayer walk on the Greenway, a short nature walk from Collegedale City Hall to Southern Adventist University. I had just asked, "God open my eyes..." when right in front of me I saw our local public elementary school, Wolfvever Creek. This was the ground I was to claim in Jesus' name. God clearly spoke to me and asked me to invest in young people that attend Wolfvever Creek Elementary School.

When this became clear, I went to the front desk with a note telling them I was the new children's pastor at Collegedale Community Church and that we were a community-oriented church. I asked the best four-worded question available, "How can we help?" From that, I was invited to the kindergarten room to read some books and tell stories. After that, they invited me to tell stories for a few of the grades. Next, they invited me to tell stories to the whole school. One thing led to another and I made a shirt that said "The Story Guy" and started doing Hamilton County's Character Education program. I

now go to the school once a month and tell stories on honesty, fairness, courage, respect, caring, etc. I have been featured on the evening news, written about in local papers and have been invited to numerous schools in the greater Chattanooga area.

What is Working

Out of that match made in Heaven, we have started an "Adopt-a-Teacher" program and have tutored students in school and at a low-income housing project. We have helped at parties, ice cream feeds and PTA programs. We even provided 80% of the volunteers (and most of the planning) for a huge carnival and gave the school the profits from the event. I have joined the Parent Teacher Association and worked with the executive committee on planning Family Fun Nights and talent shows. I was recently given a "Life Achievement Award" from the State of Tennessee, the highest award the PTA gives out. We brought in a traveling prayer room that we called a reflection room. In conjunction with the reflection room and our church, we raised \$10,000 for wells in Africa. I have met with students one-on-one and counseled them. We have given Christmas gifts to poor families. We have taught good study skills and challenged kids to walk, drink water, and get plenty of sleep in preparation for their annual state-administered academic assessment exams. We have planted flowers, raked leaves and washed windows at the school. I send out a monthly email to one hundred and fourteen families updating them on the stories and giving suggestions on how to become successful families. We are now in the process of challenging students to run a Junior Marathon. We provide mentors to train students every Tuesday night. The list goes on and on.

Think about it:

- Where does non-Adventist society come from? Public school.
- What is the heart of any community? Public school.
- What age group is most vulnerable, needs the most support, and is teachable? Elementary age students.
- When are most Christians first exposed to Christianity? In their elementary age years.

Where We Could Be More Effective

While many great things have happened at our church, in the community, and at the school, we still have a long ways to go. I still feel like I don't know what I am doing. I long to be more effective and constantly look for new paths to make a difference.

I would love to see a more focused, intentional discipleship program for the public school children who attend my church. I feel we lack a church-based network supporting Adventist children who are in the public schools. This could be a gold mine of ministry opportunities. If we could build up these students so they influence their school instead of being negatively influenced, it could transform the way churches are organized.

Another area that my church could improve is the utilization of more volunteer support. My congregation is filled with busy professionals, many of whom work and raise small kids. It is hard for them to volunteer during the day at Wolfvever Creek School. Over the five years we have been working with Wolfvever many church members have helped. However, many current church members still aren't aware of our vision.

Where to Begin

If you are interested in reaching out to your local school, here are a few things to consider.

- Go to your local school and ask the simple question, "How can we help?" This question demonstrates a servant's heart. God is big enough to set the agenda!
- Don't distribute religious literature. Serve. Follow the school's agenda. Look for ways to help. What are the needs?
- If there is a family in your church that sends their children to public school? If so, start there. They might have an "in" already. They might know teachers and/or neighbors. How do adults become friends? Many become acquainted through their children and their school activities, which is more natural than knocking on someone's door and asking to pray with them.

- Most teachers can't give enough one-on-one time to students and would love someone to sit with children and listen to them read. Informal tutoring is a positive way to start.

week they could listen to children read, grade papers, or help prepare materials. The smile of a grandmother can warm hearts and change a child's life forever.

Conclusion

We have adopted Wolfever Creek because we are Christians, not because we are trying to make them Adventists. I feel that much of our denomination's evangelistic strategy has been information-based. It's like we follow a three-step formula of I have the truth, you need to know it, so here it is. In a postmodern society, this isn't effective. My ministry style is one that loves people and builds them up where they are. My goal is to establish life-long, authentic relationships and create community. And the ironic thing is, this has a tendency to draw people instead of repelling them.

We offer unconditional love, inspiration and practical help to become contributing members of society. The truth that people are looking for is not the correct interpretation of a theological Bible passage, but the authentic living out of one's life. The integrity of one's character, the improvement of one's community, the mentoring of a child speaks more to the truth of who God is than a glossy brochure covered with beads. From tutoring to storytelling we unconditionally love our neighbors!

Our church has made a positive impact on how people view Seventh-day Adventists in the "Adventist Ghetto" of Collegedale. I have seen a church get involved in the community. I have seen the community have positive feelings towards our church. It is very rewarding for me to walk into Wolfever and see the faces of both teachers and students light up, knowing I am here to serve them unconditionally and will help them have a better day! The growing perception of our church is that we are focused on the real issues of today instead of the uncertain issues of tomorrow.

The median age for an Adventist in North America is climbing. Many of our SDA churches are filled with older people. While this is a terrible problem and begs us to look at what kind of environments we are creating, it could serve us well. Many older folks have a gift when it comes to working with young people. Most have an hour a

