

THE LOCAL CHURCH AND PUBLIC EDUCATION: STUDENT SPIRITUAL CARE PRE- AND POST-GRADUATION

by Ronald H. Whitehead

Abstract

Families continue to provide the foundation for the spiritual development of young people. Today adult Adventists in North America are part of the church primarily because of their Adventist roots and relationships. About half grew up as Adventists, and almost an additional third joined because of personal relationships. Both of these often get cast aside when young adults move away to college or graduate school. It's time to be proactive to identify local churches can will provide a welcoming home atmosphere for young adults in transition. A new system called "Churches of Refuge" (COR) identifies such churches and provides certification, training and networking to foster the spiritual health of young adults. Without healthy, student sensitive Adventist congregations, North American church growth for the Adventist Church will continue to decline.

Adventist School Attendance

Numbers and "statistics" regarding Adventist school attendance often get cast about in casual conversation without solid research. Often people rely on faulty memory or hearsay as they pontificate about how many students attend (or don't attend) Adventist schools. Over the years 2007-2008, the NAD Secretariat sponsored a survey conducted by the Center for Creative Ministry. The results, a "Demographic Survey of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America," provide data that directly affects the spiritual care and the growth of students in the SDA Church in North America.

The of the questions asked directly about SDA school attendance: "Did you ever attend and Adventist school?" Their responses yielded 52% yes, and 48% no. Slightly over half of those surveyed had attended SDA schools. Further information indicated how many attended the various levels of SDA education.

- A. 28% Attended Adventist education Elementary, Secondary, and College
- B. 7% Only Elementary

- C. 13% Only Secondary
- D. 34% Only College
- E. 11% Elementary and Secondary
- F. 2% Elementary and College
- G. 3% Secondary and College

This research shouts to the local church pastor to better understand that spiritual care and faith development of students in public education has become as important as all other forms of church growth methods. No longer can Adventist education be considered the primary way that the local church transfers spiritual growth and faith maturity to its youth.

Why People Become Adventists

One of the most revealing, and for some, the most shocking pieces of information that came out of that same 2007-2008 survey dealt with responses to the basic question about how people became Seventh-day Adventists. The straight-forward question was, "How did you become and Adventist?"

- A. 51% Grew up in an Adventist family and started going to church as a child.
- B. 31% Joined the church through a personal relationship. About twice that many say relationships are what brought them to the church at the start. This is particularly true for young adults, African-Americans, and Hispanics.
- C. 10% Joined the Church through public evangelism. Most of these are over the age of 62.
- D. 5% Joined the Church through personal bible studies. Hispanics are more likely to give this response than other ethnic groups.
- E. 3% A variety of other methods, none large enough to warrant a classification of its own.

A Business Parable

Consider a parable in which the church is a public business and you are the new owner of the family business. Let's say you have been spending millions of dollars every year on business growth methods that have worked for your parents and grandparents, but you notice that your business is not growing like it did in the past. So, as the new owner, you decide to research reasons why people became your customers.

To your surprise you found out that while old business marketing methods had some merit, 82% of your customer growth came from simply two methods.

- A. Brand loyalty because of the influence of the family.
- B. Brand growth because one satisfied customer invited a new customer to "buy" your product.

Let's apply this parable to the Church. If your "family business" was the Church, and you were the senior pastor trying to grow your church, where would you focus your time and resources? Would you stay with what your parents used or would you emphasize the two methods that worked for more than 80 percent of your members. Would you give priority to the influence of the home and friendship evangelism? Of course!

It doesn't take much imagination to make the link to students in public and private education. What if they stop "buying" their parents' faith traditions? What if they stop inviting their friends to church? What will soon happen to any local church or denomination where there is not "brand loyalty?"

2010 and Beyond

It must be understood that local churches in 2010 must find ways to minister to the post-modern student and 20-something if they seek long term church growth. Congregations must re-focus their mission and evangelism plans to be more intentional and aggressive to hold on to their students and post-college young adults. The evil one has never attacked any generation with so many compromising and sinful distractions. The battle is on, but many local churches do not "get it" yet.

Typically a public school student away from home has little or no local church support. These students must become a part of the master evangelism plan of every local church. For too long a student's salvation has been understood to be the responsibility of the home. Without question, the home is the most important influence over a student's salvation, But the time has come for the local church to be much more intentional and aggressive to encourage both students' salvation and denominational loyalty. Besides, it often takes a new environment, away from home, for a young person to differentiate their spirituality from that of their parents or the church of their childhood. A move away to college presents an ideal situation for a young adult to personalize their spirituality and their church loyalty.

What Do Young Adults Think About the Church?

Less than half of all young adults ages 18-22 view their church positively, according to a Spring 2007 Life Way Research document, titled "Views of their Church Between Ages 18-22." If this same survey was offered to Adventist youth in public education away from home, what do you think they would say? Do you think they would feel connected to the local church back home? I would hope so; but I think not.

What if We Dream a Little?

- A. What if every Adventist Church located within five miles of a public university had a ministry focused and staffed for students and young adult graduates?
- B. What if the NAD provided special evangelism funding to churches located near public school universities?
- C. What if all graduates from public or private universities were given a web site to help them find churches all over the world that have made plans to welcome them unconditionally?

As for now, letters A and B are dreams for the future; but letter C is being piloted right now! Many senior pastors and college/university leaders are working together so students who move from home to attend college or graduate school can know about churches that are young-adult friendly in their new locations. The term given for such churches is "Churches of Refuge" (COR).

Parents, educators, administrators, pastors, and congregations notify students moving to large or small cities about a COR congregation in their new environment—a congregation to nurture their walk with God. COR congregations belong to an association of churches that maintain young adult ministry quality control by seeking certification from the AU Seminary Center for Youth Evangelism.

Each COR congregation offers the Center for Youth Evangelism COR evaluation team written documentation to validate their measurable compliance.

At this time there are nine COR values that must be documented by a local church seeking certification. The nine COR values that span four categories are:

Spiritual Growth

1. **Sabbath** – CORs are committed to providing a meaningful Sabbath experience.
2. **Discipleship** – CORs are committed to following Jesus Christ in all areas of life.

Relationships

3. **Acceptance** – CORs are committed to accepting people just as Jesus did.
4. **Community** – CORs are committed to building a caring and welcoming community.
5. **Support** – CORs are committed to supporting youth and young adults with their life challenges.

Community Impact

6. **Service** – CORs are committed to demonstrating God's love through acts of service.

Empowerment

7. **Leadership** – CORs are committed to senior youth and young adult leadership.
8. **Budget** – CORs are committed to investing money in senior youth and young adult ministry.
9. **Change** – CORs are committed to change that leads to improved ministry for young people.

Conclusion

Churches of Refuge (COR) is one way local congregations can take steps right now to band together with other congregations to offer a rich spiritual environment to support the spiritual, social, and physical needs of young adults.

For more information about COR go to www.AdventistYouth.org or www.ChurchofRefuge.org or call (269) 471-8380 or 1-800-YOUTH-2U.

