

# TASKFORCE NOW

by Michael J. Stevenson

## Abstract

*The world is currently wrestling with an economic downturn. As life gets rearranged; plans have to change. The convergence of a sluggish economy, lack of jobs and fewer slots available means that more Adventist young people are out of a job. At the same time the huge needs for leadership, mentoring and encouragement for students on thousands of campuses continues. The synergy that could happen at this convergence may come in the form of the revival of taskforce campus ministry across North America and the world. Now, amid the chaos of a global economic mix up, we can seize the moment, employ and deploy hundreds to nurture the needs of thousands through the revival and adaptation of Adventist Collegiate Taskforce (ACT).*

It was a perfect Fall day and the air smelled pungently of burning leaves. Squirrels chattered overhead and crows called to each other from the crooked, leafless branches of the shagbark hickories in my yard. With maples still aflame in color, I sat and contemplated the past and future of Adventist youth ministry. It seemed to me that the talk and theory surrounding Adventist youth and mission circled around and around the same themes with few useful ideas emerging. Would Adventist youth ministry ever evolve into something more robust and participative or would it seem to be as effective as just another circle of Dante's inferno?

Forty years ago the Aquarius Generation took their situation firmly by the horns. They were no longer interested in being bystanders while society swept them along. They wanted to be in the middle of the swim. They wanted action.

As a result, Adventist Collegiate Taskforce (ACT) was born in 1967. It targeted three Los Angeles neighborhoods with an urban mission that called for serving the community in new ways and engaging in personal evangelism. They focused primarily on young people and children. The first ACT teams conducted a day camp for 10 weeks that coincided with a hot meal program sponsored by the local public elementary school system. The teams spent evenings visiting the parents of kids who had attended the day camp. On Friday and Saturday evenings, the youth of the area were invited to a coffee house. The summer culminated with an

evangelistic series fueled by the relationships made during the summer. Each location had 4-6 taskforce workers who lived, ate and worked together. One of the original taskforce team members from the summer of 1967 was Monte Sahlin, now Director of Creative Ministries in the Ohio Conference.

Sahlin relates an episode from one of the summers in the late 60s when a taskforce team centered in Oakland, California received protection from the Black Panthers. Bobby Seale, the co-founder of the Black Panthers, sent word to the team that he wanted to see them. Although very apprehensive, they dutifully went to the meeting. Seale informed them that he was pleased with their activities and was particularly interested in white young people coming to a black neighborhood to be of assistance. He pledged the support of the Black Panthers, and told the team that they would not encounter any difficulties. The team reported that indeed they did not encounter any problems. Every day their day camp was guarded by Black Panthers.<sup>1</sup>

Within four years of ACT's founding, there were fifty teams of four and these teams came from the Pacific Union, the North Pacific Union, the Atlantic Union and the Columbia Union. The summer scholarship for participation in ACT amounted to \$500 with living and food expenses paid by the program. All of the teams focused on urban locations and lived communally in the areas where they served.

Since the 60s, however, the target group of ACT has shifted from outreach in urban areas to inexpensive labor for Adventist education. Academies capitalized on the enthusiasm of volunteer college-age young adults who would serve for minimal pay plus room and board. This helped academies who lacked the financial resources to provide full time budgets for some of their staff and/or teaching positions. The original targeting of youth in urban areas has been superceded by the safer, corporate options of academy life. Consequently, the original community evangelistic focus has been lost.

Adventist education has had to exercise economic prudence for some time, which is why it saw ACT as such a positive economic option. Today's economic situation has brought the rest of the church to realize the necessity of innovative actions regarding staffing. Adventist task force is a life-changing experience for its participants and makes economic sense for both the taskforce workers and the local church.

Involvement in the mission of the church changes young lives. Stories from the first 16 taskforce workers from the 60s give evidence of this. Sahlin is writing a book that will document conversations with these original 16 local missionaries. Early anecdotal results point towards changed attitudes, changed majors in college, and changed life directions--very different lives lived as a result of a summer spent as a taskforce worker in an urban setting in Los Angeles.

Other churches and organizations have also recognized the importance of engaging their young people in active ministry. Sahlin's research reveals that the Latter Day Saints (LDS) do not expect many conversions to their faith as a result of the actions of their young missionaries. They require this participation in mission because of the effect being a missionary has on the young people who are involved. Their zealously for their faith gets confirmed by deep relationships forged through long hours of door-to-door evangelism and communal living. The attrition rate among LDS young people is very low in comparison to the Adventist church and other mainline denominations.<sup>2</sup>

Recent research by Mike Stevenson indicates that participation on a day camp staff team for even

as little as five weeks in a summer increases the likelihood of future service for God, maintaining or increasing desire for spirituality, and improving attitudes toward the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Involving young people in active ministry can change their lives.<sup>3</sup>

The current economy is keeping young people from getting jobs. This makes them open for other options. One of those options could be employment as a taskforce worker in a variety of situations. Like the Peace Corps, ADRA and Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM), taskforce could be viewed as a place to get hands-on experience for life, for mission, and for one's resume. Taskforce participants will be introduced to life-long friends who, though they may live worlds apart in the future, will always be welded together by the experience of mission. They will learn the joy of a ministry-based community.

The elements that made the original task force workers excited about their mission still exist today: A real connection to the local community, a close relationship with a committed group of coworkers, and a clearly defined vision and goals with obvious results. Simply put, it's an opportunity to do, rather than to just hear or watch. With many Adventist young people available due to the current job market, employing them in a mission-oriented taskforce position for a year provides a golden opportunity to harness their creative passion to be of service to God.

Not only do academies and other schools currently need help, so do local churches. Recently a conference president visited a church near a major university. The church pastor is bivocational—serving part time as the pastor and also serving as a nurse at a local hospital. The head elder intimated that the current pastoral leadership would never have the capacity to start a much-needed ministry to the collegians in the area. Wanting to support the local church, the president thought of taskforce as an inexpensive option in these economically trying times. That conference is now looking at funding three task force positions for local churches situated near major universities.

This scenario exists in many other congregations who receive minimal pastoral attention because they are part of a multi-church

district or are in an urban area with a huge community. In the past, a Bible worker would have been thought to be sufficient. But there is so much more to do than only personal evangelism or being a dean at a boarding academy. A small sampling of activities that taskforce youth could be involved in are: organizing community events, consulting with government agencies, administrating small groups, leading traditional or nontraditional worship, and reaching children and youth through day camps, branch Sabbath Schools and other venues.

There are many small churches that could probably afford to house, feed and pay a highly motivated, vibrant taskforce worker to lead them in community service and personal evangelism. Using the Ohio conference as an example, there are large parts of the six main metropolitan areas of Ohio that do not have any Adventist presence at all. Task force workers enhance the abilities of local churches to reach their communities and to open new work in communities that do not have an Adventist presence.

Taskforce is not a new idea; just a good idea that needs a fresh application. After all, our Adventist pioneers were teens and young adults who lived in tough economic times, and who worked for room and board and very little pay. Today this combination of local church need and the availability of unemployed Adventist young people is a nexus point in history that must not be missed.

Taskforce ministry has within its scope the power to change young lives, energize local churches and schools, and fit within the overstretched budgets of local conferences. In our rushed and hurried society, the value of a dedicated mission-minded worker can easily be seen when parents and older church members are tired, stressed and generally unwilling. A dedicated young person could be a breath of fresh air from God. Lest we continue to spiral in an impotent miasma of idea-mongering, let us take action to employ, deploy and enjoy the passionate young people that God has provided to the church at this time in earth's history.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Monte Sahlin, personal communication, October 2, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Monte Sahlin, personal communication, October 2, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Stevenson, Michael. Andrews University dissertation, 2009.

