

The School-Based Model

Description

The school system for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America creates some unique dynamics when it comes to youth and young adult ministry. The first one deals with being “in” or “out.” In some churches, those who attend the church school are “in” and those who don’t are considered “out.”

Young people often segregate themselves this way at church gatherings. Those from the church school stick together and those who attend public school hang on the fringes. Conversations and announcements favor church school life. For example, a statement like, “Nobody is here today because the choir is on tour” insinuates that all who are present are “nobodies” and “the choir” must be the church school choir.

In churches where the dominant group does not attend a church school, that church school becomes a non-factor and those who attend it will probably change churches to attend one that gives preference to the church school.

Those who home-school their adolescents often struggle with the tension of wanting their children to be part of the youth group for social interaction, and yet not be negatively influenced by those other kids. The church school gets perceived as not being serious enough, not academic enough, lacking the right kind of music, being too sports-oriented, or possibly downright worldly.

When a church school is associated or affiliated with just one church, the church usually takes the lead in the relationship. The church probably started the school for its own young people as well as to reach out to others in the community. As soon as more than one church becomes part of the school constituency, “church” gets split into multiple segments and the church school develops its own life and center, which serves as the center for the students rather than their church. Do the math—how many waking hours per week does a young person spend at school, at home, at church?

Most families that have young people either invest in the school or hand off their children to the school’s purview. Often the parents who are involved in the school are the same parents who support the youth or young adult program at church. Once again, count the hours spent in each arena. The church school becomes the central agency for the home, and church gets the leftovers. For example, when a sports tournament takes place, the church school draws players and many others because the tournament serves

as the gathering point for the young people. Any church activity scheduled at that same time will languish. Perhaps only those from the “out” group will attend.

Critique

A church school usually has a larger staff of full-time employees than a church youth group. But the school staff aren’t trained to be youth pastors or youth leaders; they are trained in various disciplines, such as English, history, computers, math or science. Their spiritual influence and initiative in the lives of their students may take second place to their primary emphasis of teaching their given school subjects. Those who teach a class in religious topics often cover much more material in a week than a youth leader can do in 20-30 minutes on the weekend. As a result, the religious education in the church setting seems comparatively elementary and church youth groups become primarily social gatherings in a religious building.

Often misunderstandings develop between school and church leaders due to a lack of communication. Church school employees tend to shrink from church involvement, especially with young people. They want a break from having been with their students all week, so there tends to be a disconnect when it comes to church. Those who promote God during the week at the church school may not even attend church on the weekend. If they do, they probably won’t be involved with their students.

Young people who attend a Christian school participate in church activities only if they have time or if they are looking for a different arena to develop their skills. The church youth group can serve as a farm system to train youth who aren’t yet student leaders. As they develop, the church school recruits them to support their larger enterprise. The newly trained church youth leaders drop their youth leadership so they can enter

student leadership. They have moved to “the big leagues.”

Often church participation drops severely after high school graduation. Some may say, “When they graduated from school, they also graduated from God.” In reality, for those who attend a church school, it happened during their high school years. Their church school involvement replaced their church involvement. As they “move on” church influenced their earlier development, not their adolescence. If they attend a Christian college, they are apt to look to that educational institution to direct and drive their future religious involvement. Those who don’t take that road might return to church to seek a social group that also provides spiritual connecting points. Active young adult ministry can glean from this transient group that seeks familiar roots.

Possibilities

If you serve in a setting that includes a church school, increase the communication between the church school and the constituent churches. Initiate and persist in communicating among the youth leaders from the different churches. Coordinate efforts since you often are dealing with the same youth—those who see each other as classmates more than being youth in different churches.

Coordinate purposes and calendars, both between the school and the churches as well as among the churches. Be present in the lives of young people in multiple settings. Capitalize on “vacation” periods for the church to take the lead. Communicate, coordinate, celebrate, repeat.