

# A.I.M for the M.I.A.

Ricardo V. Bain, Youth Director, North Bahamas Conference

## Abstract

*It has been well documented that young people leave our churches at an alarming rate. Many of them are missing from the church that claims to love them so much. Until we step up and are intentional about reclaiming and keeping our missing members we will continue to experience high drop out statistics among young people. We must reclaim the missing by strategically seeking their association, assimilation, affirmation, accountability, and attendance.*

## The Problem

In many Seventh-day Adventist churches the attrition rate of young adults gives cause for alarm! And there seems to be little movement to do anything about it. Roger Dudley of the Institute of Church Ministries at Andrews University conducted a 10-year study of 1,523 young Adventists in the United States. In the tenth year Dudley's best estimate is that 49% had left the church (Dudley, 2000). These were baptized, committed youth at the start of the study. Of those who remained in the church only 55% attended regularly (Dudley, 2000). According to Barry Gane, the Valuegenesis study has shown that 28% are not planning to be in the church when they are 40. (Gane, 1993). Addressing this predicament is not expected to be a breezy undertaking; however, it is one that we can ill-afford to stop working to quell.

The Sunrise SDA Church in the Bahamas recently implemented the model described in

this paper. This congregation has 176 registered members, with about 75 in regular attendance. The active youth population of the church is about 30 young people. The missing young people—those between the ages of 19-30—still on the register number 55. At the time of this writing, the church was three months into following the model described below. We are seeing tremendous results already. We use many different facets to accomplish the goal of having these missing youth return and stay in the church.

## An Explanation of The Model

As the pastor of the church, I simply took the word "aim" and made it an acronym for "Advance In Mission." I reversed the acronym to identify those who no longer attend at "Missing In Action." (See diagram at the end of the chapter). Five additional "A-words" further define and describe the "Action": Association, Assimilation, Affirmation, Accountability, and Attendance.

I am persuaded that we must make it a point of emphasis at every level of the church to focus on the missing youth and young adults. It is urgent that we relentlessly pursue them with a spirit of mission that never dies. We want to work like everything depended upon us to get them back in the church. We also want to trust God like everything depended on Him for guidance to bring this to fruition.

We will Advance in Mission for those who are missing from our church's Association, Assimilation, Affirmation, Accountability, and Attendance. We will work with a defined strategy to woo these young people back to God's house with the goal of permanent presence and action.

### **The Theological Foundation for This Ministry Model**

This model finds its biblical foundation in the trilogy of parables Jesus told in Luke 15. Some Pharisees and scribes were complaining about Jesus communing with sinners. In response, Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep. This story depicts a shepherd who had one hundred sheep. When he discovered that one was missing, he left the ninety-nine sheep and searched for the lost one until he found it. Once the lost sheep had been found, the shepherd called together all his friends and neighbors for a party. Jesus said the same thing happens in heaven when people who have left are found.

Relating this parable to the model, we find the shepherd "Advancing In Mission" to find the "Missing In Action." The search continued until the lost was found. And finding the lost wasn't a matter of relief or reprimand, but a cause for celebration with friends and neighbors.

The parable of the lost coin comes next. This model reflects the essence of this parable as well. A woman lost a silver coin—"Missing

In Action." Because the coin is valuable to her, she lit a lamp and searched for the coin until she found it. Once again, when the lost was found it resulted in a celebration with friends who were called for the express purpose of celebrating.

The parable of the prodigal son also tightly fits this model. From the story we can tell that the youngest boy approached his father and demanded his portion of the inheritance. His father gave it to him and he left home—"Missing In Action." He wasted himself and his substance in wild living. He came to himself and he decided to go back home. This young man prepared a speech to request the position of a hired servant in his father's house. However, while on his way back home, the father "Advanced In Mission" for his son who was "Missing In Action." He ran to his son while the son was still a great way off, kissed him, put a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet, a robe on his back, and didn't even give him time to recite his speech. He was excited just to have him back home. He then involved his son in a party. According to Luke 15: 24 (NKJV), "For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry."

The trilogy of Christ's parables in Luke 15 presents a model of seeking the lost, continuing to search until the lost is found, and celebrating with others when the lost are found. While the context of these stories places both God the Father and Jesus Christ as the ones in search of the lost, this example applies to those who follow Christ as master and lord.

### **Missing in Association**

When we survey the situation we face concerning the deterioration of our young adult population, we may find out that young people are not properly or deeply associated with the church. It is not long before many of these youth leave for churches that offer more

genuine associations and relationships. To relate to this concern as we did the following at our church:

1. We created an extensive list of all the young people registered in our church and determined who is actually attending and who is not.
2. We assigned these names to the young people attending church to work with the missing members. This gave them a point of contact with the church again.
3. We also called young people who were not attending and invited them to social activities. We gave them time to decide. Sometimes we called once, twice or even three times. Some did not respond. However, we did not get discouraged. We tried again and some of them came.

### Missing in Assimilation

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Church*, wrote, "Assimilation is the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church" (Warren, 1995). I resonate with this definition. We are generally good at making young people aware of our churches, and even getting them to attend. Our weakness seem to be in assimilating them into the active membership. At the Sunrise SDA Church we worked to achieve assimilation in these ways:

1. We helped the returning young people to become involved in the life of the church by linking them to a young adult small group called G.Y.I. (Genuine Youth Ignition).
2. This small group is charged with the responsibility of assimilating the returning young person into the fellowship of the church.

3. The returning young person would also have the freedom of expression during the "Share and Care" segment of the group meeting. This is an open time when we take testimonies.
4. We offer prayer and additional forms of tangible support when the young people have their issues.
5. We also engage them in cross generational connections. We connect these young people with a select group of adults to be "Share and Care Partners." This basically means they look out for them during the week. As a result, we have seen an uncommon revival at our church.

### Missing in Affirmation

The atmosphere of our churches must be perfumed with affirmation and genuineness if youth and young adults are going to remain. It is also imperative for them to constantly affirm others by expressing positive thoughts and giving support to peers. At the Sunrise SDA Church we seek to affirm returning young people in the following ways:

1. We make a big deal about their presence at church by showering them with positive expressions.
2. We celebrate their successes, such as passed exams, positive relationships, drama performances, basketball game wins (we even celebrate the losses).
3. We seek to be genuine with our words to returning, fragile, youthful member.
4. We rely on a hospitality group made up of young people to ensure that those who return are cared for on Sabbath. The hospitality group is also responsible for calling the returned youth to check up on them at least twice during the week.

## Missing in Accountability

David J. Felter made accountability comprehensive when he stated, "Everyone is accountable for something to someone. Accountability is simply inescapable. The ramifications are enormous. Whether the setting is business, industry, education, family life, or ecclesial organizations, we are all accountable." (Felter, 2009) We cannot live without accountability. When youth and young adults are not held accountable for their relationship with God and some aspect of church life they experience a type of death—dropping out. When this happens they are missing because of a lack of accountability. At our church we hold the young people who are present accountable in the following ways:

1. We made a prayer list of all missing youth. Each person present is connected to the name of one who is missing. We expect a report at the next meeting as it relates to the contacts made with those missing persons. That report includes both praying for the missing person and making contact with that person.
2. We also organized a Youth Mentoring program. Each young person present was linked with one returning. This gave the youth who were in church an appreciation for accountability and those returning were held accountable to their new mentors. We called these mentors "Access Partners."
3. We embarked on a series to train and educate the church so that they could be friendly and warm towards the returning young people. We admonished adults to allow the young people space to grow and develop in their Christian experience.
4. We also include accountability in the small group G.Y.I. Members of the

small group sign a contract to help ensure this. We are intentional about seeing to it that they are present at group meetings and church services.

## Missing in Attendance

When young people are missing the care of proper association, assimilation, affirmation, and accountability within the church they tend to be missing in attendance. They neglect to assemble themselves with the church. It is alarming how many of them are missing because of carelessness and blatant unconcern. "The American church is dying. Perhaps most startling is the gravity of how many exit the church and the pace at which this exodus is occurring. Each generation that passes loses more than the previous generation. Multitudes are dropping out of the church!" (Rainer, 2008)

In addition to the previously mentioned actions taken in the youth group, we have initiated the following elements for our church as a whole to woo back those who have stopped attending:

1. We started group visits. We had brief meetings in the homes of the missing young people and made sure many of their friends were present. The outpouring of love and togetherness gave most of them the feeling of warmth that made them commit to coming out to church again. And they did!
2. We invited them to social events at the church so that they could be connected to us in a non-threatening way.
3. We created a young adult presence that would dominate the worship planning committee. Our intention for this action was to keep the church services interesting and viable for young people.

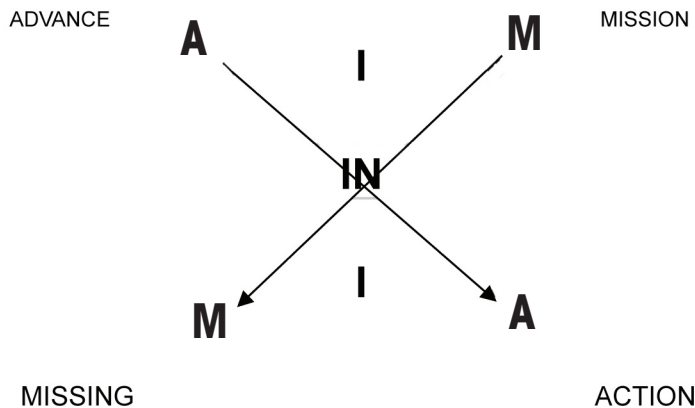
## It Works

With these actions in motion we have already seen many of those who were:

Missing in Association, Missing in Assimilation, Missing in Affirmation, Missing in Accountability, and Missing in Attendance start attending our services again. We have seen 12 of the 55 missing young people return to the church and be re-baptized. Of course this meant we did a lot of celebrating! We have seen this model effectively lead those in our church to minister to many young people, and we believe it can be used to influence many more.

## References

- Dudley, R. L. (2000) *Why our teenagers leave the church*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.
- Felter, D. J. (2009) *Accountability*. Retrieved August 31, 2010, from <http://nazareneblogs.org/holinesstoday/2009/09/11/accountability/>
- Gane, B. (1993) *Reclaiming missing youth*. Retrieved July 12, 2010, from [http://youth.adventistconnect.org/site\\_data/93/assets/0001/4191/ReclaimingMissingYouth.pdf](http://youth.adventistconnect.org/site_data/93/assets/0001/4191/ReclaimingMissingYouth.pdf)
- Rainer, T. S., & Rainer, S. S. (2008) *Essential church: Reclaiming a generation of dropouts*. Nashville, TN: B & H Books.
- Warren, R. (1995) *The purposed driven church: Growing without compromising your message and mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.



## MISSING IN ACTION

- Missing in Association
- Missing in Assimilation
- Missing in Affirmation
- Missing in Accountability
- Missing in Attendance

