**how to get more children & young people into your church.**

A challenge facing individual Seventh-day Adventists all over the world is how to achieve the great commission that Jesus set out in for us in *Matthew 28:19 (NIV) - Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* Most of us know **what** to share however our greatest challenge is in **whom** to share it with! And if you’ve been a Seventh-day Adventist Christian for sometime chances are most of the people in your circles are already Christian. It’s not easy to approach a total stranger who is far from Christ and to turn them into a disciple. I mean, where does one start? But what if I told you there is a goldmine of those who do not believe or follow Jesus Christ (or non-Christians as we often call them) right under our nose that we have effectively ignored for years?

It’s true. I’m talking about the children and young people that attend our Seventh-day Adventist schools. Well over half of the students in our school system are from non-Seventh-day Adventist families. They actually pay us to learn about our distinctive Adventist beliefs during the course of their school lives and we have failed to turn these students into Christ’s disciples and members of our local churches. At the end of last year I was asked by John Denne to speak to the chaplains and principals in your conference on the subject *“How to transition students from church to school”*. But now I want to speak to you directly as the local church member.

As the chaplain of Macarthur Adventist College and the pastor of Church in the Fields (CITF), our church on the school grounds we continue to have many success stories of students from non-Christian families who have made CITF their home church and we are making them into disciples and baptising them! They are Shaquille, Reuben, Jayden, Ashleigh, Lonissa, Nicole, Denise and many more. Without sounding like an infomercial your church can have the same blessing also. As we head into 2009 please pray about how you and your church can apply some of these principles that have worked for us so you can also transition students from school into your church. Although this is written with Adventist schools in mind, with some tweeking you can do the same with a local public school down the road if there are no Adventist schools nearby. And I’d love to hear how you are going so please stay in touch with me:

* Creating a loving environment in your church. Many young people don’t have healthy relationships with adults. You and your church have the opportunity to engage these students in a caring and Christ-like way. Get to know them not so you can “win” them over but so you can be a trust-worthy friend to them. It starts when they walk through the door. Greet them with love even if they only mumble back to you week after week. Kids are experts in reading body language. Let the love of Christ exude out of you. Be more concerned that they would experience the love of Jesus them more than you want to tell them off for what they are wearing or if they are swearing.
* Plan for a regular youth or kids orientated Sabbath targeting the students of your local Adventist school. Make a big deal out of it. Ask your local Chaplain to promote it at their school chapel service and hang up posters around the school.
* Sponsor an exciting visiting ministry such as EP (Endless Praise) or Iron & Clay into your local school and then have a follow up concert at your church either on the next Friday night or Sabbath.
* Ask yourself this question: “What is more important? My cultural preference for church or Jesus’ desire that not one of these children should perish?” Unfortunately some of us are more concerned with maintaining our ideas of how church should be as opposed to the reality that there is a world that Jesus loves perishing right under our noses.
* It’s not about entertainment but it is about engagement. If young people are falling sleep in your church service rather than blaming it on their lack of spirituality or sleep, consider for a moment the methods of Christ’s teachings (Mark 13:34 – He never spoke to them without a parable). He always engaged the crowds without compromising the message.
* Develop trust between you and their parents. Over communicate if you have to. Let the parents know you are not there to abuse, brain-wash or harm their children.
* Once they come along, it’s about creating memories. Create excursions and events that allow them to have fun and to create memories for life such as STORMCO, camps and social events. And once a strong relationship has been developed, and complying with all child protection safety precautions allow them into your home **only** if you know it is **safe** for them. Probably more advisable if you have children the same age as them. Some of the best memories are created over food and fellowship.
* Be intentional and laser-focus your evangelism. Although you will be tempted to lump your events targeted at your non-Christian children/youth along with that of your own churched children/youth it is important to remember that both audiences are slightly different. If you have to chose between the two target audiences, you should always target the non-Christians as they have less opportunity to learn about Jesus and we also underestimate just how much our own Adventist children/youth really know about Jesus.
* Create strategic links.
  + Get your church board or representative to meet your local Adventist school chaplain or principal and ask them, what can our church do to serve your school students and their families? There may be families in need of food or clothing or young people in need of mentoring. Or quite simply a working-bee at the local school where you get golden opportunities to work alongside non-Christian parents and children. This is needs-based evangelism. Your church board can take this even further by strategically choosing a school that will you partner with and support over the long-term. This way your church gets to build a win-win relationship with your local school and the students become familiar with your presence. Good deeds and goodwill that will eventually lead to the good news.
  + Volunteer a child/youth-friendly & safe adult in your church to assist in bible studies at your local school or to help out in sports events. They will be familiar faces when the students eventually walk through your doors.
  + If you cannot see your Sabbath worship service changing to accommodate the needs of the students anytime soon, you should create interim measures such as a Friday night youth group; a weeknight teenage small group; a school holiday programme (VBS); quality Sabbath School teachers and lessons; or a Saturday evening social event. Even if your Sabbath service is engaging you want to make them into disciples not just church attendees so you should still try these events.
* It’s always about movement. Getting them through the door is not the goal. It’s keeping them there until they are trained, equipped and empowered to be sent out to bring others through the door. A youth event is only as good as the next step in your strategy to make them into disciples and to be baptised. It’s always about moving them to the cross and to be self-discoverers of God’s word and to be people of prayer.
* It takes time. Be patient. Wait on the Lord. Never give up.

A last word of warning, it’s all about environments not programmes or events. A one-off event is not going to have students kicking down the door of your church. However several of these events overtime will send the message that your church is genuinely interested in young people. It’s also about us as a people being evangelistic as opposed to running “evangelism”. You can have the best youth programme planned but young people can detect where there is major conflict and a lack of love in the church. It’s not about what we do its about who we are and whose we are!

I’ll be praying for you all. God bless you in your efforts.

Andre Afamasaga ([andrea@macarthur.adventist.edu.au](mailto:andrea@macarthur.adventist.edu.au))