In Inter-America, students put away books for day of prayer
Division-wide initiative is part of denomination’s Revival and Reformation

GODencounters marks decade of young adult ministry
Organizers challenge new generations to pursue 24/7 relationship with God

In U.S., Adventist school’s efforts help Jewish athletes keep Sabbath, compete
Fort Worth’s Burton Adventist Academy’s fight helps Houston’s Beren school play
For the second consecutive year, thousands of students attending Seventh-day Adventist schools and universities throughout the denomination’s Inter-American Division put away their books to spend a day focused on prayer and Bible study.

The special day follows Inter-America’s Constant in Prayer initiative, launched last year, which falls under the Adventist world church’s spiritual Revival and Reformation initiative.

Last Wednesday, some 500 students, teachers and leaders gathered for a special program at the University of Southern Caribbean (USC) in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, the hub of the event, and one of hundreds of campuses top church leaders toured through throughout the territory.

"This day of prayer was meant to be a call to all our students and teachers for a closer communion with God through prayer and the study of the Bible," said Gamaliel Florez, Education director for the church in Inter-America. "Christian Adventist education has its foundation in the Bible, which affects the entire design of the curriculum."

Students sang and prayed together throughout the two-hour program at USC. University President Clinton Valley led prayer sessions with students, later saying that the experience was “meaningful and refreshing.”

The 52 schools in the multi-island region involved in prayer and other activities are all geared toward "refining the [spiritual] values so that you can impact the wider community," said Dr. Hillary Bowman, Education director for the church in the Caribbean Union.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, students participated in a series of dramas and special music. They prayed with young people who are struggling with addictions in a nearby recovery center. Elementary and secondary students also paused to pray for parents who dropped their children off at school and joined in prayer sessions.

In Nassau, The Bahamas, more than 900 students and teachers gathered at Bahamas Academy to learn that they can pray about their needs. Students shared testimonies of answered prayer and were given the opportunity to have church leaders pray for them.

In Willemstad, Curacao, nearly 400 elementary students at the Advent School Noord Roozendaal wrote down their prayer requests, prayed together, sang and learned about the importance of prayer.

"We are delighted that this day of prayer throughout our schools and universities has been instituted permanently in our Inter-American Division educational system," Florez said.
The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Inter-America serves more than 173,000 students with 1,002 schools, among them 14 universities. The territory includes Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and the five northernmost countries of South America.

GODencounters marks decade of young adult ministry

Pastor A. Allan Martin, along with Jeff Gang, founded GODencounters a decade ago in an effort to enhance ministry to young adults who attend Seventh-day Adventist churches. [photo: Jim Culver]
Godencounters, a series of weekend young adult "tune-ups" marks a decade of ministry since the initiative began when two Seventh-day Adventist pastors wanted to spruce up a ministry to young adults at a camp meeting.

In 2001, pastors A. Allan Martin and Jeff Gang found themselves in charge of the young adult break-out groups at Florida Camp Meeting and wondered what they could do to reach beyond the paltry attendance. Most of the attendees were in their 40s and simply wanted air-conditioning while waiting for their kids to be let out of Sabbath School.

Martin and Gang met with local young adults to pray and seek out what could be done with the opportunity to better reach younger generations. That spawned the next year what has now become Godencounters, a weekend series of spiritual gatherings designed for young adults, challenging them to have a 24/7 encounter with Jesus.

The series addresses young adult themes such as relationships, worship and service, drawing life lessons from successful biblical characters who encountered challenges similar to those often faced by those out of high school through pre-parenthood.

“We asked, ‘what might we do with young adults, to challenge them to have an ongoing relationship with the living God, not just spiritually entertain them in a program,‘” said Martin, who now serves as pastor of the Younger Generation Church, which meets at Arlington Seventh-day Adventist Church in Texas.

Martin said that ministry events are too often about "loyalty to the institution" or creating a “spiritual high” moment. “Rarely do they intentionally plan for the process that follows long after the event is over.”
The series is typically preceded and followed by several weeks of prayer and discussion, using online social networks, blogs and recommended readings to connect young adults with each other and facilitate an ongoing relationship with God.

There are several GODencounters series held around the United States each year. They often meet Friday night, Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon.

One GODencounters event was held during General Conference Session in Atlanta in 2010. More than 3,000 attended, making it one of the largest events in the ongoing series.

“GODencounters is a continuous growing experience for young adults who are serious about ministry in their churches,” said James Black, Youth & Young Adult Ministry Director for the denomination’s North American Division. “We’re very passionate and serious about getting this out.”

Black says he gets requests for the series worldwide. GODencounters was recently held in New Zealand and Ghana, and organizers are planning events for Canada and the Philippines next year.

On a recent Friday night, visiting pastor Roger Hernandez led a GODencounters series in Fulton, Maryland, drawing life experiences from the biblical character of David.

“Like many of you,” Hernandez told the audience, “he had been promised big things – he was to become king. But he had to go through a lot and didn’t understand why bad things were happening even though he was living faithfully.”

Hernandez said David was on the road to becoming king but lost his spouse, job, spiritual leader, house, best friend and even his dignity.

“But what David learned can speak to us today in three ways,” Hernandez said. “One, you attract the type of person you are. Two, be and give your best even when you’re at your worst. And three, God is enough. David wrote the classic Psalm 142 while in a cave.”

One attendee said it was as if all three of the weekend’s messages had been created just for him.

“Don’t you love it when God does that?” Martin said. “When we pursue an encounter with God, we are often delighted to find our God has been pursing us all along.

For more information, visit www.GODencounters.org.
More than a decade of dogged persistence by a Seventh-day Adventist academy in Fort Worth, Texas, United States, may have helped another parochial school – this time an Orthodox Jewish institution – gain a tournament rescheduling to move a game away from the biblical Sabbath, which both Jews and Adventists observe.

Facing a federal lawsuit filed by three parents and three students at the Houston school, the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools (TAPPS) said it would relent and reschedule a semi-final game away from Sabbath hours. That would allow students from the Robert M. Beren Academy, the Orthodox Jewish school, to compete.

The lawsuit, which included the Mansfield (Texas) Independent School District, slated to host the competition, alleged religious discrimination on the defendant's part, which is prohibited under civil rights laws.

Annise Parker, Houston's mayor, and United States Senator John Cornyn, were among those who called on TAPPS to make an accommodation, media reports indicated.

"Unlike many people, TAPPS does follow the law, and we will comply," TAPPS Executive Director Edd Burleson told the Houston Chronicle, which was among several national media outlets that covered the story, along with ESPN.com and The New York Times.

The Sabbath question was one Burleson had faced before, beginning in 2001. That's when Burton Adventist Academy, located in Arlington, Texas, a Fort Worth suburb, had "a really good basketball team," school athletic director Kevin Klein recalled.

Even though the Burton team had a 17-3 season, and won the agreement of the other schools slated for that year's playoffs, TAPPS was adamant: the rules were the rules, and unless the Burton team played, they'd forfeit the game. The school stood its ground, which must have disappointed the students.

The same thing happened in 2004, he added. The school had a great year, was playoff bound, but
their hoop dreams were dashed by TAPPS, despite support in the community and from local media.

“The kids deserve whatever they earned,” Klein explained in a telephone interview with Adventist Review. “If they earned the chance to play for a state championship, let them play for it.”

By 2010’s fall soccer season, however, there was a crack in the TAPPS wall: if Burton Adventist Academy would secure, and pay for, an alternate venue for the soccer final previously scheduled for the Sabbath, TAPPS would accommodate them. The school complied, but the team lost its semi-final match, keeping them from the championship game.

Klein and the school saw it as a victory: here was an opening for Sabbath-keepers to compete with other private and parochial schools, while remaining true to their beliefs. A similar situation happened in 2011 with Burton’s basketball team: the school made arrangements to cover rescheduling expenses, but lost a semifinal match.

Still, the growing momentum for Burton’s students, now joined by national attention to the Beren Academy’s case, may lead to a real change by TAPPS leadership.

“Our team having that opportunity really was a key part of this,” Klein said, before departing to watch the Beren team play a pre-Sabbath game. “I’m just thrilled that it happened.”

Beren’s coach Chris Cole agreed: “All we asked for was a chance and we got it,” he told ESPN.com.

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