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**Inter-America: Church to prepare children for a life of ministry**

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Long since retired, Denis Baird, now 92, was working as a full-time Seventh-day Adventist minister and in 1975 launched what is now South Africa's National Council Against Smoking, an organization that helped the country in the 1980s to ban smoking on South African Airways domestic flights.

Many health workers say South Africa's tobacco industry was intertwined with the apartheid government and that going against it meant long shot odds. In 1967, Baird's angle to challenge tobacco companies was a simple request: tell him the amount of nicotine and tar in their cigarettes.

When companies refused to offer information on ingredients, he contacted what is now the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. Officials there agreed to study the cigarettes and requested 200 samples of each cigarette brand. For the study's integrity, they needed them delivered personally.

Baird took a flight to Atlanta, his luggage mostly filled with cartons of cigarettes. High above the Atlantic Ocean, he said he remembers having no doubts on the outcome of the study.

"I felt very strongly that it was going to work. We had strong indications that cigarettes in South Africa were very dangerous." The rate of lung cancer among smokers in South Africa was much higher than in other countries, he said.

Months later the results concurred. Cigarettes in South Africa were found to contain more than double the rates of nicotine and tar than most cigarettes produced in other countries.

The results created an uproar when they were published in 1978 by Dr. Harry Seftel, a professor of medicine at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and a co-founder of the council with Baird.

Baird's council work was in addition to his job as a full-time local church minister. His ministry career also included posts as a conference president in Rhodesia - now Zimbabwe - and the Cape Conference in South Africa.

Today, some 5.4 million people die annually due to tobacco related illnesses and this figure is projected to increase to more than 8 million a year by the year 2030, church health officials say.

Some countries have shown a steady decrease in smoking, such as the United States and...
Australia. But smoking is increasing in other parts of the world, including many developing countries, health experts say.

"Unless interventions are put in place and on a wide and broad scale, these statistics are unlikely to improve," said Dr. Peter Landless, associate Health Ministries director for the Adventist Church. "The battle will never be won unless current smokers are targeted and assisted to stop smoking," Landless said. "It is crucial and important to focus on preventing the initiation of tobacco use, but it is equally important to assist people to stop smoking as well as to lobby for tobacco restrictions and control."

In 2000, the American Cancer Society gave the South Africa Government's Ministry of Health a Luther Terrey Award for its support of tobacco legislation. The society said smoking rates in 1998 had dropped 30 percent since 1991 because of government efforts, which serve as a model for other low-income countries in dealing with tobacco industries.

"[Baird] is a role model," said Saloojee. "The foundations were laid by the work that he did."
Christian Gamaliel Perla has been preaching since he was five years old. Perla is still in disbelief that his love for sharing the gospel has taken him this far.

Perla, who is originally from El Salvador but lives in Costa Rica, reflected on the story of David facing Goliath found in 1 Samuel 17, and presented three principles to the more than 80 church leaders and staff in attendance.

"You must be like David, who was concerned in honoring God, who put on the armor of faith, relied on God for strength, communed and trusted God for his life," said Perla.

"Stand up and be strong and let Inter-America know wherever you serve now that there is an Almighty God who can conquer the battles for you," he added.

Perla further encouraged church employees to begin each day with God. "We were born to serve. Every morning as you begin the day speak to God and let His light shine in us," added Perla, who leads a small group of 10 children every week on the campus of the Central American Adventist University in Costa Rica, and participates in several ministries.

Perla represents a core group of 7,000 active child preachers throughout the territory who preach the gospel in churches, lead small groups and witness in their communities.

It is this core group of active children as well as the more than one million children who attend Adventist Churches every week, which has prompted church leaders to support those who oversee children's activities throughout the 21 unions or regions in the IAD territory.

In order to strengthen children's ministries, the IAD will hold its first children's ministries leadership convention in a few months. More than 450 children's ministry leaders and teachers will have the opportunity to strengthen their skills to disciple the thousands of children ages 0-14 who love Jesus, said Dinorah Rivera, children's ministry director for the church and organizer of the event.

"Our church is on its way to emphasizing and recognizing the importance of investing in our children as they proclaim the everlasting gospel and as a way of retaining them in the church," said Rivera.

Inter-America's Children's Ministries Leadership Convention will include seminars, workshops, special speakers, inspirational music, and recreational activities. The event is scheduled to take place on July 10-15, 2012, at Camp Kulaqua in High Springs, Florida.
For more information, visit http://childmin.interamerica.org

View photos of the day in at our flickr photostream here