IAD News

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More than 500 leaders and teachers took part in the first-ever IAD Children's Ministries Leadership Convention held at Adventist-sponsored Camp Kulaqua in High Springs, Florida, July 10-15, 2012. It was an historic event which gave them the opportunity to share their passion for, and recommit to, the work of directing children to a closer walk with Jesus. The IAD territory is literally bursting with thousands of children from birth to 14 years old attending weekly church services and related activities, according to Dinorah Rivera, children's ministries director for the church in Inter-America and organizer of the event.

"We want you to become genuine disciples of Jesus in order to shape the kind of disciples Jesus needs His children to become," said Rivera during the five-day event. "If we want a church tomorrow, we need to invest today in those we hope to be the church of tomorrow." One of the keys to membership retention lies in the effectiveness of children's ministries in the home and church, added Rivera.

Top church leaders agree, saying that strengthening the membership among children and youth in the church is a top priority.

"We want every child stepping into our Adventist churches to experience joy, and discover God's love and grace through the spiritual leadership of leaders and teachers," said Pastor Israel Leito, president for the church in Inter-America.

Attendees participated in dozens of seminars on effective leadership, children's health, spiritual development, technology, psychology, and more.

Linda Koh, children's ministries director for the Adventist World Church, spoke to the hundreds of leaders and teachers about spiritual giants that will carry through the challenges of life.

"As children's ministries leaders, we need to become strong effective disciplers of children, and encourage, empower and equip parents and families to be able to guide children and be able to provide the kind of supportive churches in which they need to grow," said Koh. In keeping with the theme of the convention, "Fit With Jesus", Koh challenged leaders to be a model, to be honest and stay connected with Jesus.

"We are here because we believe in this ministry and work with all our might to nurture our children spiritually," said Mari Ruth Murillo, who, along with 50 of her peers, traveled all the way from the South Mexico Union, where she serves as children's ministries director.
Murillo, who oversees training for thousands of teachers in churches catering to more than 20,000 children, said the convention was key to reaffirming her commitment to and passion for working with children week by week. She said the South Mexico Union boasts more than 4,500 child preachers and a vacation bible school that averages 12,800 attendees each year.

"Our goal has always been centered around bringing spiritual stability and helping children find and develop their gifts in our congregations, and this convention with its array of experts and speakers will enhance our mission," said Murillo, who is currently coordinating efforts to complete certification of 9,000 teachers throughout the hundreds of churches in South Mexico.

Shirma Alexander Harris of Trinidad and Tobago was elated to be part of the convention. A preschool teacher during the day and children's ministries director at her Signal Hill Seventh-day Adventist Church, she was struck by the presentation made by Barbara J. Newman, a church and school consultant from Children's Learning Center Network, who spoke during the convention.

"We need to be more interactive in catering to the needs of children with disabilities that come into the church," said Alenxander. She knows of one 13-year-old special needs child in her church that could benefit from using tools like a ball, or other particular activities that could be helpful for the child in participating in church activities.

"It was clear that as leaders and teachers it is our responsibility to work with parents to prepare these children to love Jesus just like every child we embrace in our Sabbath School classes and every activity involving children in our congregations," explained Alexander, a mother of a 10 and a 17 year-old..

"Children are my passion and my biggest motivation in what I do," Alexander added.

Passion for children was visible as Loraine Bernal, children's ministries director for the church in Jamaica, basked in the event with a dozen or so of her leaders and teachers. She oversees more than 24,000 children back home and left with a better understanding in the 26 years of working with children that methods towards connecting and discipling children have to change.

"We are competing with so many distractions that captivate our children's mind, like video games, television, dysfunctional homes, food addictions and we as leaders must think outside the box if we don't want to lose opportunities to inject Jesus into their hearts," said Bernal.

Bernal was particularly happy to see during the convention better ways to reach children with a healthy lifestyle. Promoting nutrition and health in Jamaica has been particularly effective in a society plagued by obesity and lifestyles diseases in children, said Bernal.

Already this year Bernal has organized several health fairs specially geared to interactively educate children in the church and the community on eating well, exercising and dealing with issues that can affect their health.

"We are serious about the health of our children," said Bernal who is working with the public school system in Jamaica to begin a series of health and nutrition activities for pupils in the coming months. "Reaching the children in our community is part building a better church as well," Bernal added.

Vianka Mendez of Guatemala was particularly thankful to be part of the convention. As children's ministries director for the church in the metropolitan region in Guatemala City, she was stunned to learn the extent in which children can be traumatized and abused after a disaster.

Mendez sat in the three presentations made by a team of Loma Linda University experts on responding to the physical and emotional needs of children after any type of disaster which disrupts life.

"Crime and violence toward children can dramatically increase after a disaster, and it is essential to become prepared to protect children in such events," said Beverly Buckles, Dean of the School of Behavioral Health and chair of the Department of Social Work and Social Ecology at Loma Linda.
Learning to identify the signs reflected in children affected by a disaster was something Mendez and her group from Guatemala are eager to tackle and share information with their children's ministries leaders and teachers.

"I had never realized how vulnerable children could be after a disaster and looking for simple and deeper signs could aid in protecting them from being further affected," said Mendez.

"Our country is affected by natural disasters almost every year and we must be on the look out to apply techniques to help children overcome the trauma and help them through the process," said Mendez. It’s not an easy task, said Mendez, but one that can be well coordinated with churches and professionals in the community.

Convention delegates also viewed presentations on how Bible and history confirms creation versus the teachings of evolution in an interactive way, teaching kids in discipleship, leading kids to love and lead in worship, family ministry that impacts home and community, how to involve children in missions, vacation bible school new programs and activities and more.

The event left Rivera excited and thankful as she continues efforts to equip children's ministries leaders and teachers who are passionate about the hundreds of thousands of children who enter churches and congregations throughout Inter-America.

"I dream of a church that not only teaches children how to be 'Fit with Jesus' but lives in constant discipleship and seeks out the needs of the community," said Rivera.

For more information and to find resources on Inter-America's Children's Ministries Leadership Convention, visit cm.interamerica.org

To view a photo gallery of the event, visit www.flickr.com/photos/interamerica

image by Libna Stevens/IAD