Natural Church Development Report for the Adventist Church

When the Natural Church Development survey was first introduced in 1998, I became one of the first five pastors to utilize the tool in my local congregation in North Dallas. Since that time, hundreds of Adventist churches have taken the survey! Those churches that have followed up with implementation, based on the results, have experienced growth in: tithe, offerings, membership, and baptisms (verified by research conducted for DMin dissertation by Rodney Mills). There have been a number of compelling reasons as to why I have heartily embraced Natural Church Development as an evaluation tool for the local church:

1. The principles are solidly grounded in the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy.
2. It gives the church an objective view of where they are currently at. Reality can be faced.
3. It gives the church hope. There is something practical they can do to improve their church.
4. It is not a one time program. Used properly, it becomes part of the life of the church.
5. Healthy churches find success in retaining new members who join through soul-winning efforts.
6. The natural end result is a church that more effectively reaches the harvest AND multiplies daughter churches.

Since February of 2007, 427 Adventist churches in the United States have taken the NCD survey. Recently, Ian Campbell (NCD consultant and advisory board member from Australia), visited NADEI and shared with us the cumulative results. The good news is that we have seen a dramatic increase in our average church health from the first set of surveys (prior to 2007). Our current average now stands at 50.5, up from around 43. This is certainly cause for celebration, but most people don’t jump up and down about getting a "C" in school. A score of 50 is average, so there is still much room for improvement.

By category, our scores as follows (from highest to lowest):

- Need-oriented Evangelism 55.3
- Passionate Spirituality 54.3
- Gift-based Ministry 53.0
- Empowering Leadership 50.2
- Effective Structures 49.6
- Loving Relationships 47.9
- Inspiring Worship Service 46.8
- Holistic Small Groups 46.5

A study of this scale can begin to inform us of trends within the Adventist church. Some of the findings
are not surprising. The high and low positions of these characteristics have remained the same since 1998. As Adventists, we have a strong emphasis on Evangelism. Our challenge continues to be the development of Holistic Small Groups. Gift-based ministry has jumped from 2nd to last to 3rd. This improvement is encouraging. A troubling result is the low score of “Inspiring Worship Service.” Of the 11 questions related to “Inspiring Worship Service” on the survey, three are in the lowest 10 questions (of the total of 86 questions on the survey). One is particularly surprising, “I can easily explain why I come to the worship service,” with a score of 44 on this question. It would cause one to wonder how motivated members would be to invite others to a worship service if they can’t clearly explain why they attend themselves!

Valuable cultural insights can be gained by reflecting on the top 10 questions on the survey. Two questions related to “Need-oriented Evangelism” ranked #1 and #3 out of the 86 survey questions: “I try to deepen my relationship with people who do not yet know Jesus” (score of 67), and “I pray for my friends, colleagues, and relatives who do not yet know Jesus Christ, that they will come to faith” (score of 62). Two questions in the category of “Passionate Spirituality” ranked #2 and #5: “I enjoy reading the Bible on my own” (score of 66), and “The Bible is a powerful guide for me in the decisions of everyday life” (score of 62). These results are certainly encouraging! It is interesting that these four questions also score in the top ten for the Adventist church in Australia. Adventist culture is strong and transcends oceans.

We can also gain valuable insights by reflecting on the lowest 10 scores. The lowest two questions come from the category of “Loving Relationships”: “I can rely on my friends at church” (score of 40) and, “In our church it is possible to talk with other people about personal problems” (score of 40). These results give us pause to wonder how much relational vitality is taking place in most of our churches. Are we simply skimming the surface and wearing masks of “all is well” on Sabbath morning?

Finally, there is one question on the survey that has the greatest correlation on whether an Adventist church is growing or not. The score on this question rises and falls consistently based on the growth or decline of the church. It is question number 74, “Our leaders are spiritual examples to me.” This question scored the lowest for us in the category of “Passionate Spirituality” with a 44. Of all the results, this finding is perhaps the most challenging. Overall, the 11,837 Adventists in the United States who were surveyed find their leaders as being below average in Spirituality. If we want to see our churches grow, this is the most significant area that needs attention! The call to revival and reformation is timely!

Many thanks to Ian Campbell for providing this research and the beneficial insights! If you would like to know more about NCD or to order a survey, contact Andrea at 269-471-8303.

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**Long Lost Answers, at Last!**

*(Editors' note: At ASI Convention this past August, I had the privilege of meeting a lady with a wonderful story to share of the part NADEI [formerly the Soul Winning Institute] played in her salvation. She graciously agreed to write this story for our newsletter.)*

“If all the good people are going to heaven, and all the bad people are going to hell, what about all the in-between people like us?” I asked my teenage sister as we drove through town.

Having been raised in a Roman Catholic home, my faith in an all-powerful
God was unshakeable. But where was He? How could I connect? What was the purpose and meaning of life, anyway?

"If there is only one God," I thought, "there must be only one right answer, and I'm not going to rest until I find them."

As I grew into my adult years, tragedy followed. Three major crises abandoned me to discouragement and deep depression. Every time I tried to pull my life back together, it felt as if it was taken away from me again—as if I had no control. It was at this time that the Holy Spirit came noticeably knocking on the door of my heart.

"Patty, remember all those times you wanted to pick up the Bible and figure out the book of Revelation, but you never had the time?" I heard in a still small voice. Yes, I remembered. "Remember all those times you wanted to turn on the Christian TV channel you heard about, but you never had the time?" Yes, but I was always too busy. Too busy working. Too busy painting portraits late into the night. But now the words so gently came into my mind: "Now, you have the time."

I got up and turned on Channel 38. A woman's face appeared on the screen, and the first thing she said was, "It's not by chance that you've turned on this television program." She began to talk about Jesus, about why He died on the cross, about how He longs to come into our lives and turn our lives around.

Suddenly, completely free from my own doing, my life flashed through my mind like a panorama: things I had said, things I had done, decisions I had made—things that, at the time, I thought were the "right" thing to do. Now, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, I felt horrified to see my life from God's perspective, realizing for the first time that my sins had been hurting the very heart of God.

It broke my heart to realize I had been breaking His. I found myself on my knees, crying out to God.

"I'm sorry, Lord! Please forgive me! Come into my life and help me live the kind of life you want me to live!" There was a comforting Presence in the room that day, saying, "I love you. I forgive you. And I'm going to be with you."

The clouds of depression lifted. Peace, joy, and life-changing grace flooded my soul with a sense of God's love and forgiveness!

There was a problem, however. In the days that followed, I felt a strong urge to be with other believers, but had no idea where to go. I prayed that God would lead me to the church where He wanted me to be. As I drove through town, I saw many church signs, and would simply pray, "Which one, Lord? Which one?" I knew it had to be a church that studied the Bible. That was November of 1979.

It took God three months to answer that prayer. Fast forward to February of 1980. Unbeknown to me, Mark Finley had come to the Chicago area with a team of bible workers to start the Soul Winning Institute and a young man by the name of Mike had been attending some meetings. One day, Mike passed the hobby/craft store where I was working. He told me later that three times the Holy Spirit strongly impressed him to enter. So he did.

That's where Mike and I met for the first time. He asked me if I would like some bible study guides, and the next day, he came back with a whole pack of 27, which I eagerly devoured. I was overjoyed to find, at last, the answers to my questions—right there in the Bible! After meeting a few
times, Mike invited me to “church.”

It was a Wednesday night when we pulled up in front of an apartment building in Burbank, Illinois. “This doesn’t look like a church at all,” I thought. The sign outside said, “St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.” “Hmmm,” I wondered. “Where am I?”

To my astonishment, a woman by the name of Teenie got up and demonstrated how to make a healthy dessert. What—a church that teaches about health?!? (I had been studying nutrition for years and had dabbled in vegetarianism.) Mark Finley stood up and opened to the book of—you guessed it—Revelation! He used nothing but the Bible, showing how one verse explains another. A strong conviction flooded my heart that God had, indeed, answered my prayer and led me to the church where He wanted me to be!

Though Burbank was 45 minutes from my home, I didn’t miss a Sabbath or prayer meeting from then on. Curious visits to the Soul Winning Institute in Hinsdale allowed me to become better acquainted with Finley’s team and the Adventist message. Pastor Mark would so graciously take time to open God’s Word and answer my numerous questions.

A Daniel Seminar led me to the conclusion that if God was so in control of world affairs, He could surely guide this little life of mine. And then, after attending Pastor Finley’s evangelistic meetings in LaGrange, I was baptized in May of 1980, and became a member of the Burbank Seventh-day Adventist church.

Deeply convicted that God was calling me to serve Him and share the Three Angels’ Message, I began to explore training opportunities after being providentially laid off from work. Several options seemed plausible, but the secret desire of my heart was to attend the Soul Winning Institute.

In March of 1981, I received a call from Pastor Wright, offering a full sponsorship from the Joliet church to Finley’s program. Exuberant that God had opened this door, I launched into what I now consider to be the most vital turning point of my life.

During my training in Bible Work and Health Evangelism, I received invaluable experience not only in the classroom, but in the field. My outstanding instructors included Pastor and Teenie Finley, Alvin Kurtz, and Marion Kidder. At one point, there was a break in my studies as the Soul Winning Institute transitioned from its original location (a beautiful old building in Hinsdale leased for $1/year) to an apartment complex, becoming the Lake Union Soul Winning Institute (LUSI). As part of my training, I was assigned to evangelistic meetings with Pastor Fowler, evangelist, in Bolingbrook, Illinois, and simultaneously began bible work and health evangelism at the Joliet, Illinois church.

Those early years catapulted me into a lifetime of ministry, not without heartache and trials, but rich in meaning and purpose. I truly thank God for long lost answers, at last, and for the fruitful experience of soul-winning.

Since completing her training at the Soul Winning Institute (now NADEI) in 1983, Patty LaVanture has worked extensively in bible work and health education, specializing in cooking schools and training. Many churches, ministries, and physicians across the country have benefited from her inspiration and expertise. After working as a bible worker in Joliet, Illinois, then teaching at Eden Valley Institute for 9 years in...
Loveland, Colorado, she and her husband Mark joined Oak Haven/Country Life Natural Foods in Pullman, Michigan in 1992, where Patty currently serves as Director of Health Evangelism and an instructor at the Emmanuel Institute of Evangelism operated by the Michigan Conference. She is a director for the Wellspring Diabetes and Depression Recovery Programs developed at Lifestyle Center of America and serves as O.C.I. (Outpost Centers International) Field Vice-president for Eastern North America. Patty and Mark have 4 grown children.

**LifeWorks**

LifeWorks is the latest NADEI program designed for church and personal renewal. It is typically the first of a series of events designed for a total make-over in the lives of members and churches that may take a year or more to accomplish.

Dr. Ron Clouzet, the author of *Adventism’s Greatest Need: The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit*, and long known in 50 countries for his presentations on biblical spirituality, renewal, and the changing power of the Holy Spirit, is the main speaker/moderator for LifeWorks. The weekend’s aim is to present Christ and His relationship with His children in such a way that a person’s life can be fairly identified as a before and after experience.

In addition to powerful biblical presentations, participants can expect time for personal reflection as well as group interaction that will help them with the building blocks of a victorious life. Tendencies, habits, addictions, and a ho-hum Christian experience can all change in one weekend. Sometimes, depending on the organization for a specific series, fasting will be taught and encouraged.

Often, mountain-top spiritual experiences are short-lived or one-dimensional. LifeWorks is designed to avoid that by the group and individual work completed during the weekend. It leads participants to truly understand Paul’s statement: “It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).

The objective of the weekend is for participants to declare victoriously: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

**The Russell C. Burrill Writing Award**

Dr. Russell C. Burrill has been the standard-bearer for church planting in the North American Division. Church planting has been promoted division-wide through the annual SEEDS Conferences beginning in 1996. A generation of seminary students at Andrews University Theological Seminary, were exposed to church planting through Dr. Burrill’s classes. As a prolific author, Dr. Burrill consistently communicated his passion for church planting. One of his works was entirely...
focused on church planting, *Rekindling a Lost Passion*.

The *Russell C. Burrill Writing Award* is a scholarship program offered annually to any seminary student who registers for the SEEDS Church Planting Conference. To receive credit for the workshop, an article is to be submitted for potential publication. Among these articles, four will be selected each year to be professionally edited and published here on the NADEI web site.

You are invited to vote for the article whose author you feel would be the best recipient of the *Russell C. Burrill Writing Award*. The name of the author is purposefully withheld. On May 18, 2013, scholarships will be given based on votes received. First place will receive $500, second place $300, and third place $200. These funds can be utilized in the NADEI Resource Center for church planting, NCD and coaching resources.

Thank-you for taking time to read all four articles in entirety! **Please vote only one time.**

**2012 Finalists**

Church Plant in McKinney, TX Brings Light to a New Area

*The Church that Jesus Plants: A Biblical Portrait of Church Planting*

How to Motivate Our Church Members to Become Church Planters

*The Watermelon Church: Is Your Church Growing by Addition or is it Multiplying?*

Vote

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