
Church Growth Bloweth Where It Listeth

by Steve Daily

You begin to realize that something is different when you drive into the church parking lot. There are no spaces available. Not just during the 11 o'clock hour, but during all three church services held every Sabbath morning at the Azure Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church, 10 minutes from the Loma Linda Medical Center. After finding a place to park down the street or in a field, you enter a circular sanctuary that seems to resonate with life. Instead of organ music and hymnals, each service features lively Christian music with the words projected on a huge, overhead screen. The second service, which is filled with high-school and college-aged young people, includes a contemporary Christian band with drums, synthesizers, and electric guitars. Praise and celebration dominate the service; members worship God by raising their hands, clapping, and spontaneously shouting for joy.

As the music takes on a more meditative flavor each service also features "the garden of prayer." When a special appeal is made from the front, large numbers come forward to present their individual concerns before the Lord. As the congregation kneels in prayer, some members come to the front to present their requests to God. The elders leave the platform to lay hands on those who have come forward. There is a sense of involvement and participation in these services that

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is uncommon in Adventist worship.

Dan Simpson, who pastors the Azure Hills Church, is a man with a vision. He recognizes the diverse cultural and spiritual needs that exist today, and seeks to minister to those needs in the broadest possible framework provided by the gospel. When Simpson came to Azure Hills just over two years ago there were 400 to 500 people attending the worship service. Today, a typical Sabbath sees more than double that number—1,100 or so—attending church. Simpson implemented the three-service idea not for reasons of space, but because of his commitment to providing different worship options to a diverse congregation.

The first service, which begins at 8:15 a.m., is designed particularly for families with children. It is similar to the third service, except that it includes a children's story and more family-oriented emphasis. The youth service at 9:45 a.m. displaced the senior Sabbath school from the main sanctuary, causing considerable trauma in the minds of some longtime members. At the beginning, only 60 to 70 individuals came to the 9:45 service. Today, the average attendance at the youth service is approximately 400 and growing. During both second and third services, a number of other Sabbath school and education classes are offered: Pastor's Bible class, spiritual gifts, total healing, and healing damaged emotions.

The rich diversity of worship and growth opportunities, and what he firmly believes is the work of the Holy Spirit, are reasons Simpson gives for Azure Hills' attendance more than doubling in the past two years.

More significantly, the church's vision is not

limited to what happens on Sabbath morning. Associate pastor Dave Bottroff says, "Our goal is to provide the kind of caring, Christ-centered ministry that will allow us to minister to the thousands of former Adventists who live right in our community." To do this, Azure Hills has focused on the importance of lay pastors, and small groups, called "T.L.C. Groups" that meet each week in their homes. The goals of this program are explicitly spelled out in the church's statement of vision: To contact a minimum of two former SDAs every week; to have 200 lay pastors by the year 1990; and to have at least 1,000 people praying every day that God's Spirit will use this ministry to accomplish these goals.

Simpson, or Pastor Dan as he is called, points out that there has been significant resistance by some to these changes. For many it is a difficult task to move an established congregation of Adventists through this kind of transformation. First, Adventists tend to be quite individualistic in their approach to life. Secondly, members not only have to consider the traditions of the local church, but must contend with various interpretations of Ellen White's writings and the larger system of denominational structure. Finally, as the Adventist church becomes increasingly professional in nature, the time, energies, and priorities of church members are increasingly sucked away from volunteerism and church life. These are the challenges that face so many Adventist churches today. Simpson and his Azure Hills congregation seem to be providing a successful model for how these challenges can be met.

Another congregation that is providing new directions in Adventist worship is the Milwaukie SDA Church in Portland, Oregon. Six years ago it was a traditional Adventist congregation with 135 members. With the arrival of Pastor David Snyder, things began to change. Today, on a typical Sabbath, 800 people attend the worship service. The congregation has been forced to rent the 3,000-seat sanctuary of the New Hope Church, a fast-growing evangelical congregation in Portland. More impressive is the fact that half of Snyder's congregation each Sabbath is under the age of 30,

a phenomenon that today is virtually unheard of in North American Adventist churches.

Snyder attributes this growth and influx of young people to a number of factors, including contemporary music and bouyant praise in worship services; emphasis on a self-conscious commitment to love, acceptance, and forgiveness; Christ-centered preaching; and a persistent emphasis on prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. He says, "Our goal has been to revive the worship service by making it relevant, meaningful, exciting, and Christ-centered." After worshipping with the congregation, the conference president observed, "in this church you sing to God, not just about God." During the congrega-

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tional prayer it is not unusual for a quarter of the congregation to come down to the altar to offer their individual petitions to God. There is also an emphasis in this congregation on reclaiming inactive Adventists. Snyder estimates that approximately 100 of those who have joined the church in the past six years are former Adventists.

Transforming change never comes easily. As in Azure Hills, Snyder was faced with strong resistance by a vocal minority of the congregation when he first attempted to implement new directions in worship. He observes that Adventists generally do not know how to praise and worship God. When they are taught to worship, members can be threatened. Some resistance must be expected. But with prayer and patience change can come, and the barriers of opposition can be gradually broken down. As these barriers slowly disappeared in the Milwaukie Church, rapid growth followed. "On any given Sabbath it is not unusual for nine or ten pastors from other churches to visit our congregation just to observe what is happening," says Snyder.

The Azure Hills and Milwaukie congregations provide dramatic examples of what the Spirit is doing in Adventist worship today. But desire for

alternative forms of worship within the church, particularly by the younger generation, can also be seen in the growing popularity of small campus churches beginning to sprout up at Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities.

During the past four years Loma Linda University has given birth to two such congregations. Chapel Church on the Loma Linda campus is an alternative worship service that ministers primarily to young adults and graduate students. Sponsored by the University Church, it has grown rapidly with its emphasis on small groups, fellowship, and outreach.

Creation of the New Life Church, sponsored by the Collegiate Church on the La Sierra campus of Loma Linda University, has succeeded in more than tripling the attendance of college students at Sabbath morning worship services. The New Life congregation features very contemporary styles of Christian music, Christian drama, personal sharing, and other experimental forms of worship. All are designed to give the Holy Spirit freedom to open up new directions in Adventist worship. Last year, Walla Walla College also sponsored an alternative worship service, led by a number of faculty and supported by the pastoral staff, that enjoyed great popularity with students.

These new directions in Adventist worship reflect an increasing openness to what the Spirit is doing outside of Adventism. The last decade has produced a spiritual renewal in Christian worship that has had an impact on America's

younger generation. For example, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, which presently has more than 50,000 members and more than 200 congregations, started just 12 years ago (in October 1976) as a home Bible study group of only 12 people. Today, the original congregation in Anaheim, California, has approximately 6,000 members. Young people (and older people who are young at heart) seek and find in the Vineyard Christian Fellowship a Christ-centered, Bible-centered, and Spirit-centered form of contemporary worship. In fact, the Vineyard supplies a network of more than 150,000 Christians nationwide with music and worship materials, including the New Life Church at Loma Linda University.

Other fast-growing Christian congregations that have had a significant influence on Adventist churches described above include "The New Hope Church" in Portland, Oregon, whose sanctuary the Milwaukie Seventh-day Adventist Church rents, and the "The Church on the Way" in Garden Grove, California, whose lay ministry program, worship music, and "Garden of Prayer" worship segment have been borrowed by the Azure Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Some Adventists would argue that we do not need to learn anything from other congregations to facilitate our worship services. But the fastest growing, most youthful congregations in Adventism believe they are led by God's Spirit to break out of the old wineskins of formalism and to worship God in dynamic, contemporary forms.