

Discussed: camping, raising money, canoes, protruding bones, brainstorming, respect, teenagers, bonding

Pathfinders: Blazing a New Trail through Suburbia

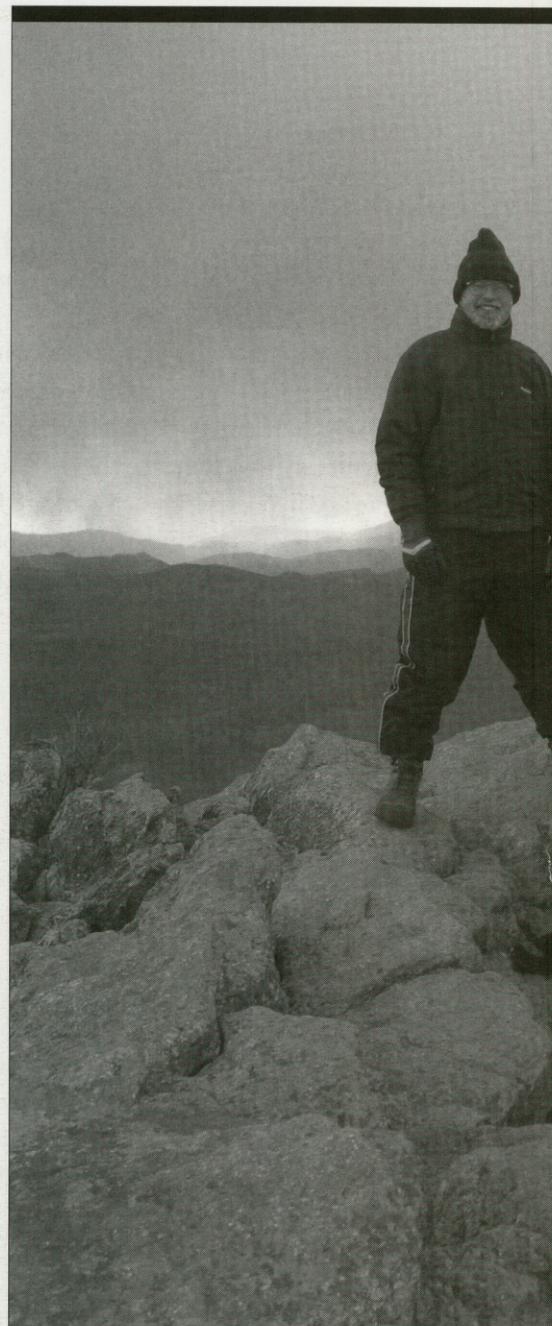
By James Coffin

In an increasing number of predominantly Caucasian Seventh-day Adventist congregations in North America, Pathfinding is an idea whose time has come...*and gone*. Even in many of the Pathfinder clubs that effectively attract fifth- and sixth-graders, the ranks are thinning by seventh and eighth grade. And high-schoolers? Forget it.

Markham Woods Church, situated in a northern suburb of Orlando, Florida, faced just such a problem back in the early 1990s. In a church that boasted almost four hundred children and youth between birth and college age, fewer than thirty were Pathfinders. Potential adult participants responded to pleas for help as if we were threatening a root canal without anesthesia.

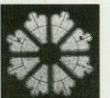
"In the summer of 1992 we took serious note of what we were achieving. It wasn't much. Certainly not what we'd like," says Karen Gardner, Markham Woods Church's Pathfinder director since 1993. "So we moved for a radical overhaul. We had little to lose, and there was always the chance that we'd happen upon a winning formula."

As the congregation's youth pastor at the time, I sat down with a group of people who between them had scores of years of Pathfinder experience. They weren't radicals or rebels. They all believed in Pathfinding. But they had to admit that what we were doing wasn't meeting *their* expectations—let alone those of potential Pathfinders.





Some 125 Pathfinders and adults took a four-day trip to Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina in January 2005. Many saw snow falling for the first time. At Chimney Rock, above, grades 9-12 Pathfinders posed for a photo while enjoying the novelty of a windchill of seven degrees below zero.



In our discussions, we focused on two main questions. First, what could our Pathfinder club offer that young people wanted but weren't likely to find at home, at school, or at Sabbath School? Our conclusion: outdoor adventure, with a strong social component. Second, what did our youth *not* like about Pathfinders? Our conclusion: the militaristic regimentation, the uniforms, the marching, and the honors, which reminded them too much of school. (Ironically, in many non-Caucasian clubs, these elements are draw cards, not turnoffs.)

In what doesn't seem a particularly innovative move, we decided that our reformulated Pathfinder club would revolve around camping—six times per year. We also decided that, granted the busyness of life (for both adults and youth), and granted our inability to enlist enough adult helpers, we would limit our Wednesday night meetings to twice each month. In the summer months, when absenteeism was typically high, we would simply provide recreational activities (swimming, bowling, miniature golf, and the like).

Our church had recently completed statements of mission, philosophy, and goals. We drafted our own for Pathfinders, using a similar format (see next page). “We

tried to let the statements truly dictate what we would and wouldn't do with the club,” says Delby West, a major player in the club at that time and currently the congregation's children's ministries coordinator. “For example, shortly after formulating our mission, we were invited by another Pathfinder club to join in an overnight lock-in at a video arcade. We declined—because the activity didn't help achieve our voted goals.”

“We intentionally sought to move away from the militarism inherent in traditional Pathfinding,” says Gardner. “Further, uniforms were an expense in both money and time that we were unwilling to pay—granted the rate at which children outgrew their uniforms and the cost of acquiring and maintaining them. The cost had to be born by the parents, the club, or the church, and none could really afford it. Just ensuring that the insignias were appropriately sewed on was a logistical challenge of major proportions.”

Initially, however, the group wanted to retain a simplified dress uniform, the components of which could be worn outside of Pathfinder activities, guaranteeing maximum usage and economic efficiency. Opting for white polo shirts and black shorts or slacks, our club looked great.

In October 2001, the club took an out-of-state trip to Lost Sea Cave in Tennessee, where it also visited Lookout Mountain.



For an amazing number (mainly boys) the “uniform” became their weekly church attire—dressy enough to satisfy parental criteria but relaxed enough for comfort.

When our Pathfinders went to a union-wide camporee wearing our new uniforms, our leaders overheard several grudging compliments from adults in other clubs about “those rich kids from Markham Woods.” The reality? Our uniforms had cost only a fraction of what everyone else had paid. (Currently we simply issue each Pathfinder and staff member one sweatshirt and two Pathfinder T-shirts of our own design—and we change the design about every four years).

However, Pathfinders from other clubs weren’t as generous as their leaders. They openly harassed our youth because they looked different. So, upon our return, and after much discussion about a variety of issues, we decided to participate no longer in conference, union, or division camporees—because we didn’t fit in and because such events were so expensive. (Many Pathfinder clubs spend huge amounts of time simply raising money.) We had to ask ourselves: “What’s our goal? Is it to maintain the forms of traditional Pathfinding? Or is it to provide an effective ministry for our children and youth?” We opted for the latter.

Certain that we could provide more appealing activities for considerably less money, we voted (a) to take a major, memorable out-of-state trip every three years in lieu of camporees; and (b) to invest in durable goods for the club—which now include a custom-built equipment trailer and chuck wagon, twenty canoes on two trailers, dozens of backpacks, two school busses, a pickup truck, and an array of smaller investments—in addition to enough tents to handle camping crowds of more than 150, plus tents for backpacking.

“While we may have shed the military trappings,” says Gardner, “logistically we’re better equipped than some armies! We’ve had several families join our congregation just because they saw all the Pathfinder equipment in the parking lot and said, ‘Wow! This church must really be interested in its youth.’”

Continuity of quality leadership has been a huge factor in the club’s success. The club has developed a reputation for excellence—not that things don’t go wrong or that staff don’t have to scramble to deal with unexpected circumstances. But overall, Pathfinders, parents, and staff know that club procedures are well thought through and well executed. The youth want to join and adults want to help—which is a huge turnaround from the old days. The adult-child ratio on cam-

Markham Woods Pathfinder Club

Mission

The mission of the Markham Woods Church Pathfinder Club is, through outdoor adventure activities, to develop in the church’s young people a lasting respect and love for God, for family, for others, for the church, and for nature.

Philosophy

Pathfinder-age young people are at a pivotal stage in their lives: They are establishing their own identities, fine-tuning their values, and assuming increasing responsibility. To assist in this developmental process, the Markham Woods Church provides active Sabbath School and Christian Education programs. The Pathfinder Club offers an additional experience that is both unique and appealing, that is not part of these other ministries, and that for many may not be available anywhere else.

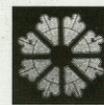
Young people have a natural love of adventure. Thus the Pathfinder Club utilizes camping and other exciting outdoor activities to teach lessons and develop individual and team skills that will be beneficial throughout life.

pouts is often as high as 1 to 2.

Gardner, who is also church treasurer and office administrator, does much of her Pathfinder organizing “on the clock.” “A volunteer would need huge amounts of time to administer an operation that involves so many people and has so many details to be attended to,” she says. “Few—if any—volunteers in our congregation would have that kind of time to give.”

Besides partially paying for a Pathfinder leader, Markham Woods Church provides an almost unheard-of level of support for the club. For example, this year’s church budget allocation is \$19,200—in addition to \$3,300 for the Adventurer Club (grades 1–3) and \$600 for the Eager Beaver Club (age 4 to kindergarten).

But the support doesn’t only come in the form of money. The church has really jumped onto the bandwagon. One of the pastors goes on *every* campout—and there



have been more than seventy campouts since the reorganization in 1993! Several elders—in fact, more than 20 percent of the entire elder group—are active in the club.

Senior elder Morris Weir has been our main camp chef for years. “It’s as much fun for the adults as it is for the kids,” he says, which may explain why so many elders choose to participate. The fact that I was youth pastor at Markham Woods before becoming senior pastor gives the club some advantages, too. Everything combined means that Pathfinders and other ministries for children and youth always receive high priority.

To make it easy for parents to bring their children

to Pathfinder meetings, the church launched a program several years ago called “Souper Wednesday.” At 6:00 p.m., an hour before Pathfinders, Adventurers, Eager Beavers, and the church’s midweek adult Bible studies begin, the church starts serving complimentary soup, bread rolls, and fruit. The idea is that parents can come directly from work to the church. The cost of the meals is borne by the church budget—as are the costs for *all* of the church’s social/recreational activities, whether for children, youth, or adults.

Our “free for all” philosophy, as we call it, has had a significant impact on Pathfinding. There are no

Markham Woods Pathfinder Club

General Goals

1. Teach spiritual concepts through outdoor adventure activities.
2. Teach young people both individual and team skills.
3. Develop in each young person a sense of self-worth and self-reliance.
4. Create a bond of friendship and respect between young people and adults.
5. Ensure a sense of belonging to the individual unit, to the Pathfinder Club, to the Markham Woods congregation and to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.
6. Inspire a desire to serve others.
7. Promote a love and respect for nature.
8. Instill a sensitivity for the feelings of others.
9. Teach personal responsibility and self-control.
10. Encourage young people to transfer the skills and lessons learned in Pathfinders to the family, school, church, and community setting.

“Free for All” Philosophy

Many organizations “nickel and dime” their members nearly to death. Markham Woods Church seeks to be an exception. As part of its overall philosophy, the church doesn’t charge for social/recreational activities. For three reasons:

1. It’s a pain to always be collecting money at events.
2. We don’t want to exclude the “have nots” from participation.
3. It’s more efficient just to give money to the Church Budget than to pay for services from the church—because money given to the church is tax-deductible.

For example, if a family in the 30 percent tax bracket pays \$100 to participate in a church function, that’s \$100 gone. But if a family in the 30 percent tax bracket is allowed to participate for free, with absolutely no strings attached, yet chooses to donate \$100, their gift is tax-deductible. And they have just saved having to pay \$30 in taxes. They can keep the \$30 for themselves or use it for other charitable purposes.

But won’t some people take advantage when you merely encourage giving but don’t demand it?

Probably. But the fact is, most people want to contribute. So, overall, the positives of such an approach far outweigh the negatives.

If you feel you benefit from Pathfinders, give generously to the Church Budget.

Pathfinder dues; membership is free. Of course, nothing is ever truly free. Someone has to pay. But the way participants pay is through their contributions to the church budget, not as a “fee for service.”

The advantages are at least three-fold: First, the approach removes the distinction between the haves and have-nots. Those who are able, pay. Those who can't, don't. But everyone participates. Second, it makes giving more efficient. Fees for service aren't tax-deductible. Freewill giving with no quid pro quo is tax-deductible, freeing up more money for the giver or for some charity. Finally, it makes life easier for event organizers not to have to collect money.

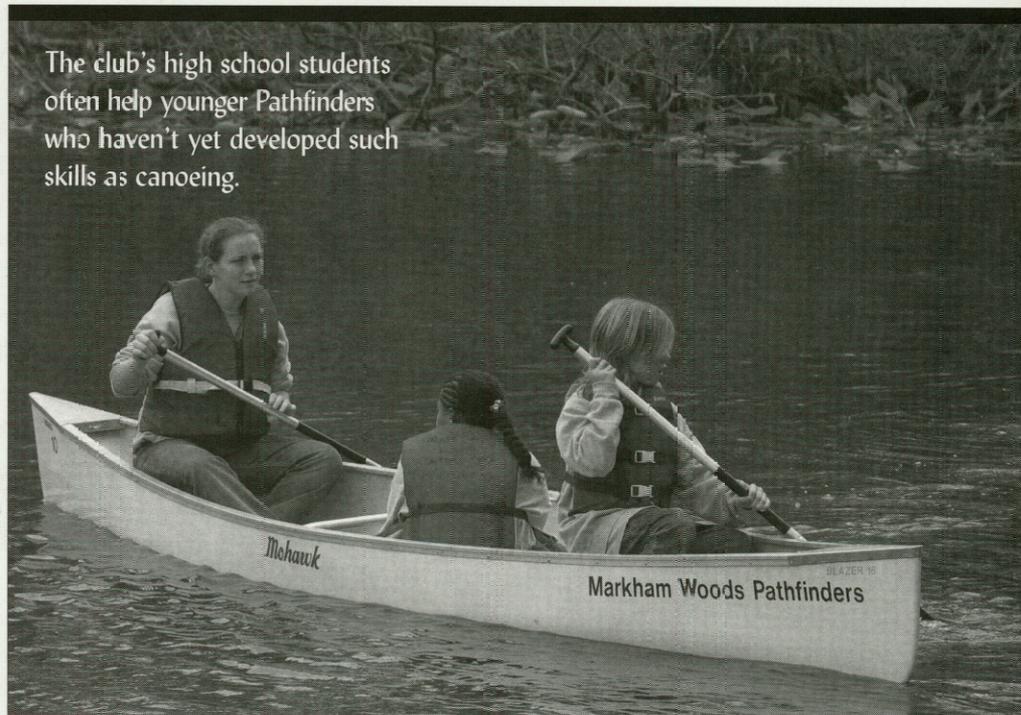
So far, people have responded marvelously. Between church budget allocations and gifts directed specifically to the club, the Markham Woods Pathfinders haven't had to do a fundraiser for the past seven or eight years.

Another great help has been the church's repetitive calendar, which allows adult volunteers and Pathfinders to plan ahead and avoid church scheduling conflicts. “We camp on the second weekend of September, October, January, February, March, and April,” says Gardner. “We don't cancel campouts, and we don't reschedule campouts—maybe three times in the past twelve years (usually because of hurricanes!).”

Gardner continues: “If someone from another club were to ask me, ‘Would you be available to speak to our leaders on Sabbath, October 14, 2006?’ without looking at my calendar, I could immediately reply, ‘No, because I'll be on a campout with *my* club.’ The other entities of our church work around our campout schedule, ensuring that no Pathfinders or staff have to decide between another major church activity or the Pathfinder activity. Being given that kind of deference tells us that our ministry is seen as important.”

Initially (following the reorganization in 1993), each campout was themed—orienteeing, snorkeling, first aid and rescue, canoeing, camp cooking, bicycling, survival. The two meetings leading up to each campout were spent developing the skills that would be needed. These skills were

The club's high school students often help younger Pathfinders who haven't yet developed such skills as canoeing.



further honed on the campout. Although the Pathfinders didn't earn honors per se, we definitely taught many of the skills for which honors are offered. We simply did it in a much more fast-paced fashion. But with great results.

Often campout activities would require a combination of several skill sets. A different cluster of counselors was responsible for organizing the activities of each campout. And some definitely cutdid themselves.

Our “9-1-1” campout, organized by a local family practitioner, was probably our most memorable. He effectively utilized the skills of two church members, a former U.S. Navy Seal, and an employee of the Orlando Police Department. The OPD employee was able to borrow a whole fleet of (confiscated, impounded, crime-connected!) walkie-talkies from the OPD, as well as a professional-grade assortment of rubberized “wounds,” which ranged from protruding bones to disembowelment. With the addition of appropriate “blood,” mud, and torn clothing, the mock injuries were stomach-turningly realistic.

The Pathfinder rescue teams would receive a call such as: “A man was fishing on the shore of Lake Pravatt when he was attacked by an alligator. His lower left leg has been ripped off and only a bone shaft remains. His companions have applied a tourniquet and are standing by for instruc-

tion and help. He can be reached by following the park service road half a mile to a huge double-trunked oak on the left. Then follow a course thirty degrees east of north for approximately three hundred yards.”

The exercises involved a variety of skills the Pathfinders had learned—in addition to first aid and rescue. After the Pathfinders had done their rescue, county paramedics came in an ambulance and demonstrated how they would have dealt with each case.

At first, the themed campouts worked wonderfully. However, with the passage of time, the skill levels between veteran and novice Pathfinders became so disparate that the pre-campout instruction became more problematic. What has resulted is a perpetual reinvention of the club. “Something will work well for two, three, or four years, then it ceases to work,” says Gardner. “We brainstorm and take a different approach. Certain aspects of the club have never changed. Others have changed many times. But the perpetual fine-tuning and restructuring is what has kept the club alive and vibrant.”

One major issue we had to address was an increasing number of high school students who wanted to remain in the club. In 1992, we had none. Today we have about forty. Young people who had fallen in love with the club didn’t want to leave just because they were in high school. How could we effectively incorporate them? Initially we created a separate club—Club Wilderness—which sponsored such exciting activities as a week on the Appalachian Trail. But

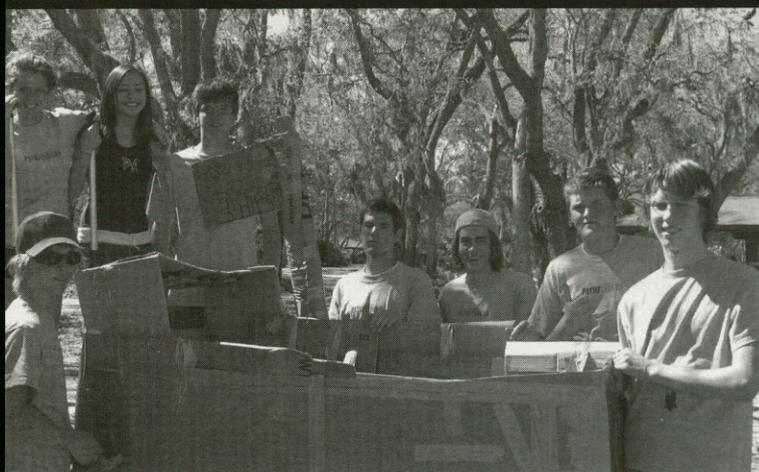
the youth liked the adventure and social mix of Pathfinders. They themselves pushed to remain.

Today our club has grown to just over one hundred and includes members from grade four to grade twelve—with an increasing number of counselors now coming from the post-grade-twelve group who still don’t want to say good-bye. Nor do we want them to.

“Had someone suggested to me a few years ago that we could have fourth-graders and high-school seniors excited about going on the same campout, I’d have thought they were crazy,” says Gardner. “But it has worked amazingly well.”

Gardner cites three reasons. “First, although all age groups go on the campouts together, eat their meals together, and usually have their worships together, a lot of activities are separate. [The club is divided into three distinct subsets—grades four through six, grades seven and eight, and grades nine through twelve.] Second, many of the high schoolers were Pathfinders when they were in the fourth grade. So they take the presence of the younger set in stride. Third, we really emphasize tolerance and forbearance. And it seems our preaching has succeeded.”

“The club’s prime behavioral expectation is respect for everyone,” says West. “Our club—and our church, for that matter—declares itself a ‘No Put-Down Zone.’ We’ve really work hard to ensure that kids don’t say negative, cutting things to each other. While put-downs inevitably slip through, the fact that in every aspect of church



High-schoolers, left, admire their cardboard-and-duct-tape boat at a campout in March 2005. Above, this boat-designing group called themselves “The Elites.” Right: *Not an SOS*; this group won the “longevity” competition by staying afloat almost half an hour.



Markham Woods Pathfinder Club Discipline Policy

1. When an adult has issued a clear directive to a child or group of children and they do not comply, the adult will take the child/children to a club leader and explain in the presence of the leader the exact behavior that is being requested.
2. If after receiving such an unquestionably clear directive in the presence of a club leader the child/children persist/s in noncompliance, the Pathfinder leader will place a call to parents, and the child will have to explain what he or she is doing or not doing and why. The club leader will answer any questions.
3. If, after this phone call, the child/children still fail/s to comply, parents will be called and requested to come get their children.

life we so consistently promote universal respect pays big dividends in the long run.”

“For example,” says Gardner, “recently our Pathfinder staff overheard a group of kids talking about a teacher. ‘She wouldn’t do well at Markham Woods,’ one kid said, ‘because she’s terrible about putting kids down.’ So it’s clear that, despite their lapses, their sensitivities are being heightened.”

When our club first changed directions in the early 1990s, Florida Conference Pathfinder director Cheeko Cotta was deeply concerned. However, with the passage of time and the obvious positive results, he recognized that, although outside the mainstream, our approach seemed to scratch where it itched. Cotta has been a model of support, adroitly walking the tightrope between encouraging innovation such as ours and seeking not to upset those within the conference who are committed to more traditional Pathfinding.

“Our goal is simply to find something that works,” says Gardner. “If the traditional format works for a club, then don’t change. If it’s not working, then brainstorm until you find an approach that does. And don’t try to carbon-copy us or any other innovators—because our ideas don’t work indefinitely even for us. We’re always having to adjust.”

“One of the greatest benefits of the Pathfinder club has been the bonding that takes place,” says West. “In Pathfinders we have students from several Adventist

schools, several private schools, and several public schools. Some are Adventists and others aren’t. Sabbath School and our youth socials don’t provide the opportunity for friendship development afforded by a weekend campout. Pathfinders is the place where all this diversity gets cemented together.”

The same is true for the adults. Doctors, lawyers, carpenters, teachers, nurses—a huge array of people who love outdoor adventure and young people—have found in Pathfinders a church within a church. They’re a close-knit group who really enjoy being with each other. They look for every opportunity for interaction and fellowship.

“Pathfinders has been fertile evangelistic soil for the young people, but even more so for adult helpers,” says Gardner. “One of our current elders had been outside the church for a couple of decades, but he started helping with Pathfinders to be with his kids. He discovered a group of people and an approach to spirituality that he could relate to. The rest is history, as they say.”

“A few years ago,” Gardner continues, “the Pathfinders were surprised to discover that one of the leaders in the grades seven and eight section was soon to be baptized. They were staggered to discover that this man, who (with his Adventist wife) had been offering their go-to-bed prayers on campouts and who led out in highly creative worships, was himself just finding his way spiritually. Unbeknown to them, he was being ministered to *by* them as much as he was ministering *to* them.”

Gardner, who has directed the club continuously for more than twelve years, says she has found both great reward and great challenge in her role. “If you were to talk to our Pathfinders, their parents, or the volunteers who make the Markham Woods Pathfinder Club possible, every one of them could cite things that need to be improved,” she says.

“We’d all like to do things a lot better,” Gardner goes on. “But despite our shortfalls, we’ve seen a response that’s truly gratifying. It’s been impressive enough to convince me that even in suburban, affluent, postmodern, predominantly Caucasian situations, Pathfinding is still viable. It’s simply a matter of structuring the approach to meet the situation rather than trying to make the situation fit the structure.”

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