

Can a Community Church be an Adventist Church at the Same Time? *One Congregation's Quest for Relevancy and Orthodoxy* | BY TODD LEONARD

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is at a point in its history where hard decisions have to be made, not even for the sake of carrying out the gospel's call to reconcile the world to our Father but just in order for the church to survive institutionally as a meaningful part of North American culture.

Except among first- and second-generation immigrant populations, North American Adventism is dying. In 2008 the average age of an Adventist was 51, while the average age of a resident of North America was 36. All signs point to this denomination and its churches losing their ability to connect in any meaningful way with young adults and any age group that has adapted to mainstream society.¹ And most thought leaders in the church are at a loss to explain this incapability or suggest any strategies, supported by empirical evidence, that are proven to reverse this trend and help church membership grow among indigenous people groups. Even Elder Ted Wilson stated at his first press conference as the new General Conference president that he wished he knew the answer to the question of why less success attends traditional Adventist outreach in more economically advanced nations.²

People are working hard to come up with solutions to this decline and lack of societal impact. Much has been written about the need for change in organizational structure, reasons to embrace growth models by other evangelical churches, calls to revisit and clarify our denomination's theology, and appeals to pray and fast for spiritual revival and transformation. All of these proposals hold potential. But how does a local church integrate different structures and methods while waiting for the denomination to do the same? How can it work out a reimagined theology in the local context? What does



The Canton Church stage

revival and reformation actually look like? And, ultimately, how does a local church and its members become part of its community in such a way that it results in drawing people into the life and ministry of the congregation?

Existing Adventist congregations and new church plants around the world are wrestling with the answers to these questions in their local contexts. The following is just one of those stories.

An Encouraging Start

Canton, Georgia, is a growing community on the north side of metropolitan Atlanta. Like much of the metro area over the past fifteen years, Canton has seen a large influx of young, middle-income families seeking affordable housing within easy driving distance to their jobs and the leisure and cultural activities of the city. But with its growth, it has also seen the problems of crystal methamphetamine abuse, domestic violence and poverty having an increasing impact. With the housing boom, Canton has also attracted an influx of undocumented migrant workers from Latin America, which brings additional economic, community health, and political issues for the city to face.

The men, women and children who launched Canton Adventist wanted to develop a church that would be a



Canton Church co-hosts Forever Fed with Liberty Hill United Methodist Church

welcoming, relevant and meaningful faith community for the young, unchurched families in their community while investing significant time to address the challenges that faced our neighbors and friends. In April 2006, eight families moved into 2,000 square feet of retail space and opened our doors to the public. In just over two years we had outgrown that space and moved into our current location, a 70-year-old chapel. Our average worship attendance peaked that summer at 70.

The growth that occurred from April 2006 to August 2008 can be attributed in large part to three phenomena: (1) Adventists who had moved into the area and were looking for a church home, (2) Adventists and their families who were not in the habit of church attendance but decided to start attending again at Canton Adventist, and (3) families that had one spouse with and one spouse without an Adventist background who found our church environment to be meaningful and relevant to both. Hardly any of our growth came from active members switching from another local Adventist congregation to Canton's. From its inception, Canton Adventist has been a church made up of and led by adults under the age of

45. This is still true at the time of this writing. Two-thirds of currently-attending adults fit that age demographic.

What drew these individuals and families to our church? Anecdotal evidence points to:

1. an acceptance of people no matter their background;
2. a comfortable informality in worship style and activities;
3. an atmosphere free from the judgmental criticism too prevalent among many Adventist congregations regarding diet, dress, leisure activities, Sabbath observance and relationship status;
4. an active children's ministries program and dedicated children's staff;
5. relevant, thought-provoking Bible teaching and the use of current music in worship;
6. a freedom to ask questions and publically disagree with Adventist conventional wisdom without fear of recrimination;
7. and the ease of friendship development through social events and small groups. For many church members, Canton Adventist has been a place to heal from the wounds suffered in other congregations.

Growing (and Shrinking) Pains

That is the good news. Now here's the sad news.

Toward the end of 2008, the congregation reached a crisis point regarding its identity. Because our church had attracted many marginal Adventist families, we had a bunch of people whose lifestyles didn't fit the profile of a typical Seventh-day Adventist church member. We had social-drinkers, co-habitors, jewelry-wearers, movie-goers, pork-eaters and poker players. The result of having so many atypical Adventist members resulted in an atypical congregational culture.

For some, this was a breath of fresh air and a sign that our church was doing something right and was evidence that we needed to push the envelope further. For others, while they were thrilled to be attracting these people, they were also concerned that our church was not doing enough to lead them to be both graceful and morally upstanding Adventists.

For the first group, the concern was that as well as we had done in attracting Adventists on the fringes back to church, we had, so far, failed to attract unchurched people to our church who had no Adventist background. We had not, in their opinion, connected to our community in any real way. So they felt that, as refreshing as our church culture was, it still had obstacles it had to remove in order for the community to be attracted to an Adventist church.

The second group was more concerned with the question, What are we bringing people into? They worried that our church was not discipling people into an understanding of Adventist truth and the practice of godly living. They felt that, while maintaining a welcoming environment, there needed to be more teaching and training in the areas of Sabbath-keeping, healthful living, Ellen White literacy, and worship sacredness. For them, there was no point in reaching out to the community if our church was not going to take seriously its responsibility to uphold, model and pass on the ideals of Adventism.

We reached the boiling point in January 2009 with the presentation of two sermons, back-to-back. I shared a sermon on the Last Supper and how Jesus invited a very messy group of people to join him as he reinterpreted the elements of the Passover meal to point to the salvation provided through his death and resurrection. I expressed my conviction that the church of Jesus would always be a mess, but its messiness does not undermine its call or its witness to the world. I told our church members it was

OK that they were a mess, that I was a mess and that we should embrace each others' messiness while continuing to passionately pursue God's call to love our messy city.

The following Saturday, one of our founding members, who functioned as our head elder, gave the sermon while I spoke at the other church in my district. He spoke on the Last Supper's roots in the Passover meal and talked about how Pharaoh's heart hardened to God's voice which ultimately resulted in his and many Egyptians' destruction. He said that Passover and the Lord's Supper were calls for us to remain humble and to listen to God's voice and put our trust only in him. He warned that if we do not trust in and obey God's voice, we are in danger of losing his favor and ultimately losing our salvation. As God's last-day people, he concluded, we need to trust in the inspired voices and teaching that have faithfully brought our denomination to where it is today. If we don't, we are in danger of being shaken out.

The fallout from these two sermons resulted in one group being very angry at me because I had taken a stand for a congregational culture that would not seek to resolve all the messiness in belief and behavior while the other group got angry at the head elder for reminding them of all the reasons why they had left Adventism in the first place. I was told by one person that I should leave the Adventist denomination because I was not devoted to it and its teachings, while the head elder and others who were sympathetic to his viewpoint felt that they were being shunned by those who disagreed with them.

Eventually, this division resulted in our church's losing our head elder and several other families. These people had been crucial to our early growth and success as a congregation. Their passion, dedication and selflessness helped stabilize us and empower our ministries. Losing them was a major blow to our stability and our spirit. For those who left, they felt betrayed and rejected by a church to which they had given their heart and soul. It took them and our congregation a long time to recover from the hurt and anger from that split. And, while in one way those who stayed with Canton Adventist felt that the split needed to happen, we are still haunted by the loss of those relationships. For me personally, the fact that I was unable to keep us all together and move forward has been the greatest failure in my ministry thus far. And since that episode in our history, we have yet to have an average monthly attendance of over 40.

But what I have come to understand through my reading on starting new churches and my interaction with a number of church planters is that the questions of identity are common during the early years of a church's life. And as clear as its identity and vision may seem at the beginning, it continues to evolve as new people come on board, as its leadership matures and as it gains insight into the culture and needs of its community. No matter how hard you work to have clear objectives before you start a church, there will be needed adjustments along the way as you face the realities of congregational life and community ministry.

I believe wrestling with identity is an even bigger issue specifically within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Anyone who grew up in Adventism can attest to the cookie-cutter appearance of the denomination's congregations. You could walk into any church building—on this continent or any other—and hear the same songs, follow the same order of worship, listen to similar sermons, attend the same adult and children's Sabbath School classes, read the same books and magazines, eat the same food at potluck and dress according to the same standards. It only makes sense that when a new church does not have the same appearance, people will question whether it has the same substance.

Finding Our Story and Our Mission

In 2010 two developments took place at Canton Adventist that began to define its substance. First, our Sabbath worship gatherings became defined by the seasons, stories and scriptures of the Christian year. By journeying through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Proper Time, our congregation became a people with a story—the story of God and His people. We are becoming what the Adventist Church has always claimed itself to be: a people of The Book. We give voice to the patriarch, the psalmist, the prophet, the apostle and, most importantly, the gospel writer. We walk in the footsteps of Jesus week by week.

Amazingly, even though the practice of following the Christian year is a mainline church tradition, our embrace of the calendar has put us more in touch with Adventist priorities: at Advent, we spend as much time looking forward to Christ's second coming as we do looking back at his first; at Lent, we hear God's call to reacquaint ourselves with our own mortality and need of



Canton baptism

divinity and hear his invitation to simplify, to leave bad habits behind, to pursue healthier, more holistic ways of living, and to re-experience the gift of Sabbath rest. At Easter, we turn our attention away from what we need to do to improve our lives and celebrate what Jesus has already done through his death and resurrection, and what he is doing and will do in us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, by placing ourselves in God's story, we've had to ask hard questions of ourselves, our congregation and denomination. We are more convinced than ever that now is not a time to rest on substandard answers to life's most important questions. We must keep pushing. We must keep challenging. We must keep wrestling with God's call in our lives and in our church. Because we have integrated a more intentional liturgy—in a less formal, more contemporary approach—Canton Adventist is going deeper into the story of God.

The second substantial component of our church life has been the engagement with our community through ongoing acts of service and friendship. We called 2010 the Year of the Splash. Our goal was to soak Canton with the beauty and love of God. Beginning in January, up to half our congregation worked together to throw birthday parties every other month for 15–20 children at the Cherokee Family Violence Center (CFVC), the largest transitional housing program for victims of domestic violence in the United States, which happens to be less than a mile from our campus. Easter weekend, we partnered with The Quest, another congregation in the city, to put on a massive Easter egg hunt for the kids.

In 2011 we will continue our ministry at the CFVC and explore new ways of serving the kids and their moms.

As we look back on what we started at the CFVC, we humbly believe that with that one small step of faith, God brought two other opportunities for us to serve the city with our limited membership and finances. In August, we were approached by Forever Fed, a mobile food ministry affiliated with Liberty Hill United Methodist Church, to host a monthly meal in our campus church's neighborhood for the families who live at or below the poverty line. Since then, we have welcomed up to 100 people to our campus each month for a delicious, nutritious meal served by our two churches.

Around the same time, a wonderful couple approached Canton Adventist about hosting a weekly Christ-centered support and recovery ministry at our church. In October, they began a new chapter of Celebrate Recovery, an accepting and healing gathering that provides support and accountability to people who want to break free from addiction, anger, grief and any other hurt, habit or hang-up in their lives. Each Friday evening 20–30 people come together to experience the power of community gathered in the healing presence of Jesus. Through Splash, Canton Adventist is beginning to live out its mission to our city. We celebrate the connections we have developed with local non-profits. We cherish the relationships we have with other churches in our city. And we take pride in our facility's location in the lower-income part of town. We are right where we want to be.

We don't know whether we'll start attracting more unchurched people. We don't know if we're Adventist enough. But we feel we're headed in the right direction. We'll see. ■

Todd Leonard has led Canton Adventist from its inception and is part of the leadership team at Buckhead Community Fellowship, another progressive Adventist congregation in Atlanta.

Footnotes

1. Beckworth, David and S. Joseph Kidder. "Reflections on the Future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America: Trends and Challenges." *Ministry*, December 2010.

2. Newman, J. David. "Report: Ted N. C. Wilson Shares his Priorities for the Coming Five Years." *Adventist Today Newsletter*, June 25, 2010, <<http://www.atoday.com/content/report-ted-n-c-wilson-shares-his-priorities-coming-five-years>>.

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