Are Evangelistic Seminars Still Effective?

A Pastor Explores Whether Evangelistic Seminars Are Still Effective

Plus: Are We Commitment-Phobes?
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One thing is for sure: Jesus doesn't give us permission to fall silent, to sit in our pews and wait for someone to show up. We have to find a way to break through the noise. So, how are conscientious congregations drawing people to the Seventh-day Adventist message today?—Story by Loren Seibold

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LEA EN ESPANOL

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Are We Breaking Through the Noise?

February 5, 2014 · by Michelle Bernard · in Uncategorized

A pastor explores whether evangelistic seminars are still effective

Article by Loren Seibold

When I was still a young pastor, I invited a conference evangelist to one of my small churches. I remember working together before the meetings on a mail-out brochure with the headline “Blood on the Moon.” It had hot, florescent colors; pictures of beasts and the requisite whore of Babylon. At the time, I thought it rather garish, but it brought some people to the meetings and a few into the church. (To the evangelist’s credit, his presentations were far more spiritual and sensitive than his brochure depicted.)

Today the competition for people’s attention is even fiercer than just those few decades ago. Never before have so many had so much to sell, and they know how to do it effectively. When we join the advertising fray saying, “Hey! Over here! Look to us for the answers!” we’re part of a massive chorus. Why should they respond to our voice when a new SUV or new Oprah Book Club selection will salve the soul for a few moments? Why attend our event with a myriad of fabulous activities taking place?

Does this still break through the “noise?”
One thing is for sure: Jesus doesn’t give us permission to fall silent, to sit in our pews and wait for someone to show up. We have to find a way to break through the noise. So, how are conscientious congregations drawing people to the Seventh-day Adventist message today?

**Finding What Works**

With many reports indicating that Americans are losing interest in religion, some churches have tried innovative outreach methods. A few years ago, when the price of fuel was climbing, a congregation I know paid down the price of gas for a day at a local station. I even read about another denomination’s congregation that passed the offering plates full of money for people to take!

More commonly, churches try to attract people with interesting worship services. The biggest and best-attended churches have a massive pipe organ and choir for one service, and a couple more featuring a well-choreographed band of professional musicians. Though Jesus could get away with having nothing about his appearance that attracted people (see Isa. 53:2), the pastors of these churches are extraordinary entertainers.

However, not all churches have such financial or human resources. In Adventist congregations, evangelistic events are still the most popular way to bring people into the church. According to a 2009 survey for the North American Division1#, 23 percent of church members have helped with a Revelation seminar, 27 percent with other kinds of Bible seminars and 29 percent with public evangelistic meetings. Larry Witzel, once a pastor and now president of the evangelistic resource company SermonView, based in Washington, says his understanding of what draws people has evolved. “Ten years ago, I was talking about innovation,” he says. “Now my mission statement has to do with finding and propagating effective ways to spread the gospel.”

Based on the fact that SermonView mails a million pieces a year, Witzel believes “the most effective methods for Adventist churches are still based on prophecy and last-day events, but with a modern twist.” He adds, “For event-based outreach, direct mail is still the best tool, and prophecy the most effective message, but it needs to be relevant to the struggles and curiosities of today, communicating with contemporary language and design.”
Congregational-Based Evangelism

For over a century, public programs dominated early Adventist outreach methods. Early church pioneer William Miller wasn’t a professional speaker, but he taught with urgency and reasoned arguments. When that winning message merged with early American revivalism, the result was tent and camp meetings that won thousands to Christ.

Adventist evangelism reached its apogee in the work of African-American evangelists. Generations of pastors modeled their method and message after pulpit giants like E.E. Cleveland and C.D. Brooks. Pastors of my baby boomer generation participated in professionally choreographed programs that targeted entire metropolitan areas, were held in stadiums and convention centers and featured multimedia programs, and where the church identity was often concealed.

During that time, some pastors returned to simple teaching, using tools like Daniel and Revelation seminars. These were not only less expensive to pull off, but they also brought evangelism back into the local congregation and signaled an end to the era of keeping congregation-building events at arm’s length from the members.

I recently made the acquaintance of some congregational leaders who are shaping Adventist evangelism for a new century. Jennifer Jill Schwirzer, a member of Pennsylvania Conference’s Chestnut Hill church in Philadelphia, is a renaissance woman: counselor, speaker, writer, musician and composer—a set of spiritual gifts perfect for crafting a unique evangelistic event. A few years ago, Schwirzer felt inspired to set the book of Revelation to music, an effort that evolved into a Christmas cantata released this past December titled The Lamb Wins. With the help of her pastor, Tara VinCross, Schwirzer used the same theme for an evangelistic event. Her Revelation teachings, she says, were “classic Adventist.” Her approach wasn’t. “I made a concerted effort to present every teaching in the light of the Lamb,” she explains. “Jesus the Lamb was the central figure, the focal point of the doctrine.”
Music has always been part of evangelism, but The Lamb Wins didn’t rely on a structured song service and sermon. Woven in with Schwirzer’s presentations were folk, contemporary, traditional and urban sounds, even rhythmic spoken word. “What kept people coming was our multilayered approach, with rich content, creative presentation and relationships,” she surmises.

Diego Boquer, pastor of Chesapeake Conference’s Glen Burnie and Brooklyn churches in Maryland, has only been in ministry three years, but already he’s learned what congregational-based evangelism can accomplish. In his churches, he makes sure some kind of soul-winning activity is happening every month. He invites literature evangelists to generate interests. Church members do health-based events to serve the community. Boquer’s Bible worker, Tyler Trahan, not only gives Bible studies but also teaches members at both churches how to give them. In the meetings, each message ends with a table conversation, where members and visitors get acquainted.

Pastor Boquer has tried both prophetic and gospel-centered styles of evangelism. He feels that prophecy appeals more to mature people and the baby boomer generation. Witzel agrees. “Though we see people of all ages responding to our advertising, the evangelistic event advertised with big, bold colors and mysterious, provocative imagery tends to draw an older audience.” (Interestingly, Witzel says response rates indicate that advertising cards inviting people to study the Bible and to get to know Jesus work better if they’re not prophecy themed.)

Both Boquer and Schwirzer raised enthusiasm for their events through social media. But, warns Witzel, social media isn’t church. “People get passionate about online Bible studies, but, at the end of the day, the most important thing is connecting with a local congregation. Just learning the message is an incomplete experience,” he says.

Taking a Different Approach

Some congregations feel they can provide a full experience without event-based evangelism. “The Stillwater church decided years ago to reach out with the gospel to the community and grow the church through the everyday life and ministry of the church family,” says Dave Hutman, who pastors the Ohio Conference church based in Vandalia. Stillwater designs worship and other church events for unchurched families and heavily invests in community service programs, including six to eight home fix-up projects for needy families each year, the Oasis ministry for those in the sex industry, the Good Neighbor House Adventist Community Services center in downtown Dayton, health events, concerts for community projects and more.

Community service works “if you’re creative and know how to partner with the community,” says Gary Gibbs, director of the Chesapeake Conference’s Ministerial department. But, Gibbs
says it’s hard to separate community service and event evangelism. “Community service is the entering wedge, but in my experience, usually the baptisms are coming in through proclamation,” he adds.

**Keeping the Focus on Christ**

Whether drawing people through service or meetings, the key appears to be how much investment people in the pews have in doing Christ’s work. Probably because the Stillwater congregation is so intensely involved with so many people in their local community, its membership growth equals or exceeds that of congregations that do solely evangelistic seminars. “We have never held a public meeting,” says Pastor Hutman. “All of the new members have come through the life of the church, interacting with others.”

Schwirzer’s church in Chestnut Hill is welcoming seven new members, with others continuing to study. Between meetings last year and this year, Pastor Boquer has added more than 20. Both are optimistic about new members remaining in the church, because they designed their events from the church’s foundation—focusing on congregational involvement and friending visitors rather than just imparting knowledge.

“Church members sometimes object to the prophetic approach,” Witzel acknowledges. “They want to win new members by introducing them to Jesus.” As presented by these new evangelists, however, prophecy is more Christocentric than it used to be. Even through the difficult teachings and occasionally alarming prophecies of Revelation, Schwirzer insisted that “the character of Jesus came through every part.” Pastor Boquer designed his own series specifically so that he could make Jesus the center of every prophetic teaching.

Never before have we had so many excellent tools to help congregations break through the culture’s noise and reach people for Christ. Good marketing and clever programming aren’t enough. Prophecy may draw people to an event, but all agree that the goal is to create a relationship with Jesus and His church.

Ellen White seems to agree. “Only through a living faith in Christ as a personal Savior is it possible to make our influence felt in a skeptical world,” she wrote. “The gospel we present for the saving of souls must be the gospel by which our own souls are saved” (Ministry of Healing, pp. 469-470).

*Loren Seibold is a pastor in the Ohio Conference.*

[http://www.columbiaunionvisitor.com/are-we-breaking-through-the-noise/](http://www.columbiaunionvisitor.com/are-we-breaking-through-the-noise/)
Protestant pastor and a congregational researcher recently tackled what many have referred to as “the 20/80 problem,” which they define as “20 percent of the members doing 80 percent of the work, while most of the rest do nothing.” In their 2011 book *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church’s Spectators Into Active Participants*, the authors use national research, field studies and hundreds of interviews with members of various denominations—some of the most extensive data available to date—to determine a diversity of approaches to the issue.

The authors determine that some of the main reasons members lack commitment is that they are affected by individualism and consumerism popular in American culture, they have experienced disappointment with their church and lack a willingness to give back, they lack an understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus or their church simply lacks organization and good leadership.

Is this also true in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? According to some Adventist leaders and members in the Columbia Union, the information is accurate. Eugene Anthony, who pastors Allegheny West Conference’s Berean church in Ashtabula, Ohio, and Mount Zion church in Erie, Pa., says his members have “struggled with time issues, getting to church on time, attending prayer meeting and Sabbath School, fulfilling a two-year office and faithfully returning their tithes.” He also concurs that only 20 percent of his members regularly commit to church positions, and those that do commit usually end up leading more than one department.

Diego Boquer, who pastors Chesapeake Conference’s Glen Burnie and Brooklyn churches in Maryland, says he faces the same challenges but tries to be sensitive to the fact that members face busy lifestyles. “In my experience, the most difficult element to commitment is time, regardless of how well thought out, exciting and well explained the plan is. Everybody is busy,” he says.

Bonnie Heath, a member of Allegheny East Conference’s Walnut Street Community church in Pottstown, Pa., agrees but says that members need to be honest about how much time they spend in front of a screen (TV, computer, tablet) and on other nonessential activities. Although she, too, is spread thin, she says she will make time and has participated in activities that focus on helping people in need. “I really weigh my willingness to sacrifice my time by the impact it will have and the relevance it has,” she says. “I’m not interested in activities that only involve the church,” or, she adds, hold positions that require a lot of meetings, especially if they aren’t well organized.

Linda Elliott, who has held numerous positions during the past 40 years at Chesapeake Conference’s Atholton church in Columbia, Md., simply made church work a priority, which she
notes was a common practice when she started. Now she wishes more people would step forward and realize the blessings they could receive. “It’s fulfilling for me. I grow in every position,” she says.

Is lack of commitment a consistent problem across cultures? Cesar Gonzalez, who pastors three Chesapeake Conference churches in Maryland, says that while he also faces lack of commitment issues, there is a distinct variance between his English and Spanish-language congregations. “There is a definite difference between the two cultures that diminishes as Hispanics assimilate to American culture,” he explains. “I think the reason is that the Hispanic culture is more family-and group-centered. But, as immigrants start to become more successful, they also become more independent from each other. Those ties don’t disappear entirely, however, and I must admit that, as a pastor, I have more leverage with Hispanic members.”

**FINDING SOLUTIONS**

To get those inactive 80 percent participating, each pastor has chosen a different approach. Last year Pastor Anthony says he grew so concerned about the problem in his church, that he presented a pointed sermon one Sabbath to address it. He provided numerous Bible texts about the seriousness of taking and keeping a vow, like Ecclesiastes 5:4, and reminded members that committing to follow Christ means choosing to live like Him. “The sermon caused some of them to reflect on their commitment to Christ … and how far they have fallen from that,” he shares. Since getting them thinking, he says many members are experiencing an improved relationship with Christ and are more involved.

Pastor Boquer tries to improve member involvement through four steps: discovering what each one enjoys doing, being clear about how much time a position or ministry will require, providing specific training and following up with support and recognition. However, he warns, “You cannot expect people to commit time, resources, talents and their lives to a blurry and cloudy vision or goal. It is not fair to a sincere church member to be persuaded by shame or fear to commit time and energy to a plan or mission that is not well thought out and may well end up in failure and frustration.”

Pastor Gonzalez says he doesn’t aim to change people—“Only the Holy Spirit can do that”—but to provide an environment where the human and divine can meet. “The irony is that people today are looking for the same thing … happiness, inner peace, fulfillment. Even if you take God completely out of the picture, it takes time, energy—in short, commitment—to even begin to achieve these things,” he says.

Gonzalez tries to get people to understand that when they commit to the church, they are committing to Christ, but he also realizes this is only successful if church is done correctly. “When people are able to feel the presence of God in a place, there is a value in that experience that completely changes the equation. But people need to commit to get there,” he says. “I think the only thing that will change all of this is when we finally make Jesus the center of our religious experience—not culture (including Adventist culture), not history (personal or otherwise), not politics (especially church politics) and, most of all, our own selfishness.”

Heath believes people need to feel there is purpose in their commitment. She adds, “If lives are going to be changed, if people are going to be reached and have an opportunity to engage with us, then that is going to be impactful.”

Elliott points out that one of the best ways her church has found to get commitment-wary members involved is to start young. “There isn’t a lot of mentorship going on with the youth and young adults, which I think is really important,” she says. After all, it was a mentoring program that set her on a long path of volunteering.

**FACEBOOKED:**

**Does your church struggle to find committed volunteers—and keep them motivated?**

Our love for Christ and others isn’t measured by how busy we keep ourselves. Sometimes limiting the focus to one area and giving it “our all” instead of being spread thin is the best plan of action.

—Jessica Czeizinger

I don’t think we do much [as over-minister] as under-train and -mentor.

—DeeDee Bindernagel

I do not believe it is a matter of not being willing. … I believe members do the best they can with the time allotted them in a 24-hour period.

—Linda Brown

Your Turn

**Think you might be a commitment-phobe?**

Think you might be a commitment-phobe? Take our quiz at columbiaunionvisitor.com/commitmentquiz, then visit facebook.com/columbiaunionvisitor and tell us how you did.