

Campus churches

Optional extra or imperative inclusion in our *Next Gen* schools

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Gateway, our church on campus, is a most exciting initiative. Three individual parents approached me in the car park after school a week before our campus church officially started. Their common question was “Pr Mel, I hear there is a church starting on campus. Can we come?” All three came to church that weekend, with their families. They love the community of faith they have discovered there. Each has become active in our church and has chosen to follow Jesus. This choice alone has added great value to their lives. New families keep coming to see what our campus church is about. They come because they love what they have seen in us, and want to know more. In my years as a pastor, I have never had anyone walk up to me in a car park or on the street and ask if they could come to my church, or if they could join my church. It happened three times in our first week of having a campus church, and grew out of an already-established relationship.

An unprecedented opportunity to invite children and their families with limited prior knowledge of God and His ways to consider Him and choose Him

Never have our schools been so well placed to influence the lives of Australian and New Zealand families. Before us lies an unprecedented opportunity to invite children and their families with limited prior knowledge of God and His ways to consider Him and choose Him. In a growing number of schools, we find ourselves in a position where students from non-Christian or nominal-Christian families make up the greater percentage of student enrolment. At the same time, many of our schools have become schools of choice in the private sector and enjoy a growing reputation as places of learning that deliver not only excellent academic achievement but also produce high quality citizens and leaders through an intentional program of values transmission, relationship building, community service, and life-skills development. Parents today are looking for more than just education for their children. They are looking for the added value that good schools provide. A concurrent development sees us with more chaplains in schools than we have ever had. In Australia, government support and funding of chaplains in schools has helped boost this very

positive trend. This initiative alone has raised awareness of the important role chaplains play in schools. It has enabled some schools to hire chaplains for the first time and other schools to strengthen their already existent chaplaincy program.

Identifying opportunity

Dr Barry Oliver, leader of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the South Pacific region, recently identified Christian education as core to the mission of the church¹. This was a strong affirmation of the role of our schools in reaching unchurched families in our community.

Our school campuses could be the sites where our most fruitful kingdom growth occurs over the next decade if we are wise enough to maximise what we have. No other ministry arena has such wide and open access to the homes and hearts of secular families. Families who know nothing of God have already opened a door towards a life of faith when they enrol their children in our schools. Trust forms naturally as committed Christian teachers invest in bringing out the best in each child. Relationships with parents strengthen as children grow and learn and become.

Our campus church

A strong chaplaincy program was seen as an integral part of our school's vision for growth over the next decade. Pastoral care workers were recruited with the skill and life experience to meet current and future needs. We recognised that parents who chose to send their children to our school liked what we did, and supported our values. We saw that parents considered our school an inviting, safe place, with a strong commitment to bringing out the best in their children. This provided an excellent foundation to invite families to explore and experience what sat underneath our values and commitments—our faith. It was seen as important to plant a church on campus, a place that was neutral and already known and trusted by school families.

An initiative was taken to start a church on our school campus with the express vision to be a church for the families of our school. Our campus

church is growing rapidly. This is not just a church that meets on campus. It is a church that is intimately connected with and supportive of the life of the school. Our pastor has an office on campus and is a part of the school chaplaincy team. The chaplains are a part of the pastoral team of the church. There is a memorandum of understanding between the school, the church and the conference that sets terms of reference for the functioning of the church. Our head of school is a key player in the life of the church, and our church pastor a key player in the life of the school. Our school and church are by no means perfect; we have our share of challenges. But God is here, He is in this, and it is an exciting place to be.

The role of chaplain

The role of the chaplain in such a future is crucial. The chaplain forms a vital link between the school, the church and the families we seek to reach. Chaplains help build stability, resilience and strength into the lives of students, enhancing the learning that takes place in the classroom. The pastoral care team works alongside teachers and family members in helping students reach for and achieve their best. Every encounter is an opportunity to “make God touchable”², to show we care, and to extend unconditional love and support. The chaplain provides spiritual leadership to all on campus, and provides a bridge to a new life experience within the campus church faith community.

The future

We have struggled for years to find a way to support and demonstrate genuine care for secular families in Australia and New Zealand. We spend larger budgets and greater effort on programs that convince fewer people to consider our faith. Alongside this trend, the Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia is aging, and we find it difficult to contemplate a future of decline. We don't need to. That is not God's intent for His church. He has given us a way ahead to an exciting future of kingdom growth, a future that sees our school campuses being strategically transformed into centres of pastoral care and selfless service. In so doing, they become ministry centres, inviting people to a full life with God.

Our campus church commissioned a group to plan for as many ways as possible to build friendships with school families and to invite them to come along to church and check it out. The chaplains are a part of that group. Everything is geared towards making church a welcoming and safe place for the unchurched as well as a place of worship for committed believers. We want church



[Avondale School collection]

to be a place where people feel secure, valued, included; a place where quality networks develop and lifetime friendships form; a place where people meet God, and grow to treasure being in His presence. The *Gateway* story has only just begun.

Our experience points to a way forward that holds rich reward. Inherent are some important system strategies worth considering:

1. Plant a church on every campus, with the clear intent of reaching the families of the school.
2. Staff the church with a pastor or pastors who have the ability to fit seamlessly into the life of the school and who relate well to the local community, men and women with charisma and energy, who are Spirit-filled and forward looking. Campus churches call for our best pastors.
3. Place a chaplain in every school. The chaplain works with students, staff, parents / families, and the church pastor and is the relational bridge between school and church.
4. Develop a strategic plan that is embraced by the school and the church for reaching the families of the school.
5. Reprioritise system resources. Within the Adventist system, deploy evangelism funds from Conference, Union and Division resource pools to fund specific evangelistic initiatives the school or campus church embark on. Access Global Mission funding for church plants on school campuses. Such funds could be used to support chaplaincy or campus pastoral placement in smaller settings or for a 'start-up' period. Within other church systems, access whatever funds are available to underwrite and ensure the success of this venture.

The combination of excellent school, campus church, and a dedicated teaching and chaplaincy team could well be our most effective evangelistic

A future that sees our school campuses being strategically transformed into centres of pastoral care and selfless service

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strategy for at least the next ten years. Ours is not the only school moving in this direction. A number of other schools have realised the benefit of good schools having a strong chaplaincy program and an integrated campus church, and are already seeing the results of their investment. This paves the way towards an exciting future.

Leading church administrators and educators within the Seventh-day Adventist system have recognised the vital importance of chaplains to the future of our schools. The recent Australian Union Conference Education Consultation³ invited submissions and extensive discussion on the future of chaplaincy. Several key gaps were identified, with a clear will to move towards resolving the issues tabled and to promoting the growth of school chaplaincy into our future. Current proposed recommendations and discussion revolve around the following:

1. That a strong chaplaincy program be implemented in each school.
2. That chaplains invest in the pastoral care and support of our teachers.
3. To position chaplaincy ministry as a calling to pastoral ministry in the fullest sense, and that a steering group be established to:
 - develop a national chaplaincy program;
 - create national guidelines for the employment and professional development of chaplains;
 - establish guidelines for career paths for chaplains, including ministerial internships where appropriate;
 - create a formal network for chaplains;
 - clarify the relationship between the chaplain and local church;
 - develop guidelines for the funding of the chaplaincy program;
 - develop strategies to ensure chaplaincy services extend to all teachers;

4. To explore the possibility of providing undergraduate studies for chaplains;
5. To enhance connectivity between local churches and schools by developing strong partnerships between the ministry, the principal and the chaplain; and that the spiritual sponsorship of school students be promoted within the local church.

While still at an early stage of development, there is clear recognition of the importance of chaplaincy ministry to the future of our schools, and a deep commitment to building capacity and depth in the chaplaincy program into our future.

Using our schools as a vehicle to help people and to educate them for this life and the next is not a new idea, but it seems that God is rebirthing this strategy as a most important way to build His kingdom in our post-postmodern society. It is a strategy built on meaningful long-term relationships, something deeply important to today's generation.

We have a rapidly growing number of unchurched families who send their children to our schools. They like what we do, or they would not entrust their children to us. They like and support the values we stand for. They appreciate the unconditional care and genuine interest we show them. Their children are making decisions for Jesus during weeks of spiritual emphasis, and are studying the Bible with our teachers and pastors. In very many cases, all they are waiting for is the invitation to come, and to “taste and see that the Lord is good”.⁴ **TEACH**

Endnotes

¹ Australian Union Conference Education Consultation Opening Address, March 18, 2009, Melbourne Victoria.

² Term used by Mother Theresa to describe the work we do when we act as “a pencil in God's hand,” demonstrating His love to others through our actions.

³ Held in Melbourne, Victoria, March 18–19, 2009.

⁴ Psalm 34:8

“*All they are waiting for is the invitation to come, and to “taste and see that the Lord is good”*”