Coping with the Unthinkable: Violence in SDA Schools

By Dale Johnson

Jane Simpson loved teaching. Beginning her second year in the classroom, and only 24, she still thought that she could change the world. But her new class at the Glen Park Elementary School in Fort Worth, Texas, never got to meet her. A few days before school started, Jane Simpson was stabbed to death in a portable classroom where she had been working alone. Charges against a 12-year-old who confessed to the crime were later dropped because of lack of evidence.[1]

Tragedies such as this don't happen only in large inner-city schools. They can occur anywhere. School violence spans geography, race, gender, and religion. According to the 1987 National Crime Survey, in just *one year* nearly 184,000 people were injured as a result of crimes in U.S. schools.[2]

School personnel need to recognize the causes of student violence. Low-achieving students who feel alienated from school activities tend to act out their frustrations through disruptive and violent behavior. Victims of low self-esteem, these students tend to be nonsocial, excitable, impatient, and unrestrained.[3]

Research shows that the following factors contribute to school violence:

- Students' perception of the consistency and firmness of rule enforcement,
- Student disengagement from the learning process and from the school community,[4]
- Family crises, such as divorce, unemployment, child abuse, and major changes in family roles.[5]

Many schools have detailed plans indicating what to do in case of natural disasters such as earthquakes or tornadoes. However, there is a tendency to think that school violence "can't happen here." As a result, few schools have developed any written or oral procedures to prevent violence or to deal with the consequences when it occurs.

Because of the traumatic consequences of assaults, shootings, harassment, date rape, and suicide, schools should do everything possible to prevent them from happening and have a plan of action ready if such incidents do occur. Schools also need to develop programs to deal with psychological problems produced by these kinds of tragedies.

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Schools *can* successfully implement programs to control violence. One approach that has proved successful involves interpersonal cognitive problem solving. Students learn to think about alternative solutions to problems, causal and consequential thinking, interpersonal sensitivity, means-end thinking, and perspective taking.[6] This type of program seeks to change students' attitudes, to develop skills for resolving problems, and to develop tolerance levels so that students do not act impulsively.

Structured learning groups provide another way to reduce aggression and violent behavior in children and adolescents. This program consists of modeling, role-playing, feedback, and transfer of training. Individual deficiencies are assessed through a check list, and then trainers work with five to eight trainees twice a week to help them learn acceptable behavior. Approximately 50 skills can be taught in this manner, including avoiding trouble with others, keeping out of fights, and responding to accusations.[7]

Research suggests that school personnel can use counseling and student involvement to prevent disruptive behavior.[8] Individual or group counseling support can lessen the feelings of powerlessness, anger, incompetence, frustration, and alienation that cause violent acting out by students. Increasing student involvement in social and curricular activities decreases violent behavior, strengthens personal commitment to the educational process, and improves self-esteem and self-concept.[9]

Any program that teaches positive values and behaviors, such as values clarification, character education, or Kohlberg's moral education, will help to resolve problems of school violence. Social skills training has been effective in controlling violent behavior and in helping students accept community standards.[10] Church school teachers can conduct such programs by offering Bible laboratories, analyzing moral dilemmas, and constantly teaching and modeling the components of a morally principled life.

Physical and Structural Factors

Physical and structural factors also influence the probability of school violence. Certain areas, such as hallways, corridors, washrooms, secluded areas, and hidden corners are more likely to be the scene for violence or intimidation. Preventive measures include the following: installing security systems to protect against vandalism, burglary, and arson; providing bright lighting and fences to create a safer environment; implementing an identification system to screen persons coming onto the campus; and using personal alarm systems or intercoms to protect faculty members and students.

Administrators need to take decisive action to ensure the safety of students and teachers on their campuses. Failure to do so can have disastrous consequences. Within the past year several students have been raped on Adventist campuses. A contributing cause was the lack of adequate lighting in parking areas and on well-traveled sidewalks. In one case concern over the violent behavior prompted administrators to quickly install proper lighting. However, at another school, three months after

the rape the necessary lighting had still not been installed because people were too busy with other work projects.

Assigning Safe Projects

Teachers need to think through the consequences of their assignments and try to anticipate deviant behavior before it occurs. Recently a high school history teacher asked a student to make an oral report on terrorism because his written essay showed expertise on the subject.

This student had previously violated criminal law, but was attempting to change his behavior. The teacher did not make any prior inquiries about the nature of the young man's oral report. At the end of the presentation, the student told the class that anyone could make a bomb from items found in the average home, and displayed a device he had made the night before.

The class bell rang, the teacher thanked the student for his fine report, put the bomb in the desk drawer, and slammed it shut.

Later that afternoon, a vice-principal visited the teacher to inquire about reports that he had had an exceptionally interesting class earlier in the day. The teacher described the events, saying offhandedly that he really hadn't thought about whether the bomb was "live." Subsequently, the building was evacuated. Bomb specialists from the local Air Force removed the bomb, which turned out to be one of the most powerful homemade devices they had ever detonated! It could have destroyed one-fourth of the building and killed or injured up to 400 students.

Although the student was disciplined, it was probably the teacher who displayed the greatest lack of judgment. To prevent such disasters, teachers should establish guidelines for show-and-tell demonstrations, develop an awareness of students' backgrounds and potential problems, as well as a sensitivity to the possible consequences of their actions.

Anticipating Trouble

Campus disturbances may result from educators being unaware of the climate at the school, or from a sense of naiveté.[11] Recently some high school seniors suggested adding to the school calendar a "hell week" when students could engage in various pranks.

At first the administrators thought that the students would just engage in harmless high jinks. But when people were injured by food fights in the cafeteria, when property was destroyed by vandalism, and when threats were made against teachers, the administration finally responded.

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Staff members were designated to patrol outside areas of the campus, monitor hallways, supervise the cafeteria, and videotape student activities. Hall passes were cancelled, and five pranksters were suspended from school. Editors of the school newspaper chastised school personnel for not dealing with the issue more quickly and directly.

The school employee handbook should outline recommended procedures for dealing with potentially violent situations. This handbook should be distributed to all school employees and volunteers. It should be updated regularly and reinforced by in-service training sessions.

Civil Disturbances

Civil disturbances, including looting, demonstrations or picketing, riots, sniper and hostage situations can be complicated to deal with. An action plan must encompass both prevention and control. Prevention should include being aware of suspicious people, recognizing potentially dangerous situations, and conducting seminars to teach students and teachers about crime prevention.

If a civil disturbance occurs, administrators need to monitor events carefully. Should the situation endanger either persons or property, a prescribed plan of action must be activated immediately.

Elements of the plan would include communicating with demonstrators, notifying law enforcement officials, alerting staff to assigned duty stations, and using communication equipment. Staff members must keep students in classrooms, prevent groups from gathering, and possibly record the activities of demonstrators through the use of cameras or tape recorders.

Date Rape

Date rape and gang rape are a serious problem at secondary schools and colleges. Surveys indicate that 24 percent of male university students have been sexually aggressive despite their dates' protest.[12] In a three-year study of 6,200 male and female students on 32 campuses, 15 percent of the women reported experiences that met the legal definition of forcible rape. More than half of these were date rapes.[13] A study at a major public university estimated that 20 percent of the female students had been forced at one time or another to have sex, with most of these cases being date rapes.[14] Experts say that students are much more likely to be raped by a date than by a stranger.

Date rape victims tend to share certain characteristics:

- They are unwary, even naive;
- They allow themselves to be alone too soon with a person they do not know well;
- They often suffer from low self-esteem and inability to be assertive.

Other facts that have emerged from studies of date rape:

- Victimizers are more sexually active than other males, and often have a history of antisocial behavior;
- In many cases, there is a prevailing attitude or a local societal standard that encourages males to act aggressively.

Prevention of sexual assault, and particularly date rape, should be a major concern of SDA secondary schools and colleges. Schools must make clear that there is never any legitimate excuse for silent or date rape; carefully supervise the early stages of dating; encourage group activities or double dating until acquaintance is well developed; develop educational programs explicitly detailing proper sexual behavior and attitudes for both men and women; offer training sessions to help students acquire self-confidence and assertiveness skills; encourage reporting and prosecution of improper conduct; and teach young women how to resist assault.

Addressing the Effects of Violence

School employees need to understand both the physical and emotional effects of violence. The psychological toll of sexual assault can be especially devastating. A large cross-sectional survey of two Los Angeles communities compared lifetime diagnoses of nine major mental disorders between those who reported having been sexually assaulted at some time in their lives, and those who had not.[15] Sexual assault was a strong predictor of major depressive episodes, substance abuse, and anxiety disorders such as phobias, panic disorder, and obsessive/compulsive behavior.

In addition to prevention programs, schools should offer counseling and crisis intervention programs, or make professional referrals, in order to assist those who have suffered sexual violence.

Suicide Prevention

Another form of violence—suicide—is becoming more of a problem in Adventist schools. Many teachers, from junior high to college professors, know at least one student who has attempted suicide during the past year.

Research has found that suicide is related to dysfunctional family life, stress, chemical addiction, lack of communication with significant others, as well as to the death by suicide of a close family member or friend.[16]

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The second-leading cause of teenage deaths in the United States, suicide strikes every socioeconomic group. There are 350 suicide attempts for every completed suicide among high school students. Three percent of all high school students will attempt suicide in any given month.[17]

Teachers and administrators must be alert to the symptoms of suicidal students. Loneliness, shyness, withdrawal, tenseness, extreme perfectionism, con-

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tinual academic failure, and impulsiveness are frequently seen in children who ultimately take their own lives. Young people with poor impulse control may commit suicide without intending a fatal outcome.[18]

There is considerable speculation about the reasons for the recent increase in adolescent suicide. The work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi presents insights helpful for school personnel. His research indicates that teenagers spend little time with adults—approximately 40 minutes a day alone with their mothers and less than five minutes alone with their fathers.[19] Most of this time is spent in repetitive activities such as eating, shopping, cleaning, or unwinding from the tension of work or school.

Csikszentmihalyi says that to prevent teenage suicide we must create reasons for adolescents to want to live. Young people spend from five to seven hours a day alone, and four hours with peers, yet it is through contact with adults that they acquire the values, traditions, and skills of society.[20] School personnel, as well as parents, play a crucial role in this process.

Intervention and Remediation

Schools can take a team approach to early intervention and remediation. This intervention team should include the administrator, some classroom teachers, special services personnel, campus chaplain, and the classroom teacher who refers a particular student.[21]

Schools can provide successful mentoring or advising programs to help foster individual students' academic and personal growth and nurture a purpose for living. The following approach can help guarantee a successful mentoring program:

- Identify and enlist prospective advisers;
- Provide training and orientation;
- Clearly define relationships between advisers, support personnel, and students;
- Allow students and adviser to have a role in choosing one another;
- Encourage frequent discussion of problems, improvements, and unforeseen developments;[22]
- Make sure that employees have no more than 15 students to advise.

Crisis Intervention Plans

Each school should have a plan for crisis intervention in the case of emergencies such as killings, suicides and fatal accidents, rape, or even the natural death of a teacher or student. On one SDA college campus the students had to cope with the sudden deaths of two popular students. It was evident that the issue still remained unresolved three months later when 90 percent of the student week of prayer speakers struggled with the issue in their talks. Crisis intervention could have helped the students work through their feelings and find peace and meaning from the tragedy.

Research suggests that school personnel can use counseling and student involvement to prevent disruptive behavior.

The school crisis team should include guidance personnel, school psychologists, administrators, and teachers. During the initial assessment, the following areas can be discussed: the intensity and nature of the crisis; the emotional needs of students and staff; identification of the high-risk population; parental notification; as well as short-term or long-term strategies.

Schools may have to improvise if certain specialists are not present on their campuses. Academy or college guidance personnel or psychologists, hospital chaplains, Adventists with psychological training who live in the community, state certified public school personnel who are well-acquainted with Adventist doctrines, or people in related occupations such as psychiatric nursing, mental health, or counseling could be called upon to help develop a crisis intervention team.

Crisis intervention strategies include the following:

- Identify those most likely to need help, such as friends of the victim, shy or withdrawn students, and particular classes or grade levels;
- Make sure that someone is available at all times for individual or group counseling;
- Provide teachers with the skills they need to talk with students about the tragedy;
- Assist teachers or other staff members who feel unable to hold class discussions or to cope with the tragedy themselves;
- Make a list of resource materials and distribute it to teachers, parents, and students;
- Invite specialists to help individuals deal with their own reactions.[23]

School personnel can take the following steps to prepare for and cope with disasters:

- Meet regularly to help one another;
- Designate a crisis team member to write press releases and develop strategies for dealing with the media;
- Assign team members to telephone specific persons in the community such as the pastor and parents, or answer incoming calls about the crisis;
- Allow teachers some time out to nurture the healing process;
- Recognize that the crisis will spill over into unrelated areas, causing interpersonal conflicts;
- Allow more personal space to those affected by the crisis.[24]

It is natural for teachers to believe in and to trust people. However, violence is a fact of life in today's society. Because of this, schools must develop plans to prevent violence and deal with it when it occurs. They must provide assistance to heal the psychological and physical damage that occurs from these tragedies. Through their trust in the Lord and their confidence that all things ultimately work out for good to those who love God, Christian teachers and administrators can offer healing and hope for a better world where "there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4, NKJV). □

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Continued on page 46

heeded by Lima.[34] When the visiting commission arrived, Fernando seized the opportunity to showcase Plateria's indigenous students' lobbying for social change. Commissioner Erasmo Roca, head of the Ministry of Development's Labor Bureau, reports on the "spectacle" that Stahl orchestrated:

> What a beautiful spectacle it was for us, just a few days after our arrival in Puno, to see nearly two thousand Indian evangelists [sic] from the region of Plateria..., who, in correct military formation and led by two musical bands, paraded before the commission.[35]

Inhabitants of the neighboring town of Azangaro may well have taken a cue from the "evangelists," massing fully 8,000 such greeters, also "in correct military formation," when the commission arrived in their tense town a few days later.

As a result, nervous landowners wired Lima for troop reinforcements and at least one local *indigenista* leader was placed in preventive detention. News accounts report that the local elite debated whether the same fate ought not to be accorded to Fernando Stahl.[36]

The Stahls doubtless took no small satisfaction in contrasting the 1913 forced march from Plateria with the demonstration of solidarity that Fernando staged just seven years later. The earlier band of eight captives had been lashed together with leather thongs and herded "hatless and coatless" over the same 21-mile course to the taunts and jeers and assaults of captors and onlookers. Now, that course was traversed by a throng of disciplined Aymara and Quechua intent upon demonstrating to the visiting dignitaries that the gospel had liberated them from the internal and external principalities and powers that had formerly held them in bondage.

A Concluding, Unscientific Postscript

Responses by poets, politicians, and academics on three continents to the Stahl chapter of the Adventist story suggest that the narrative remains an inspiring one. Tapping that capacity for inspiration will enable us to successfully transmit our Adventist heritage.

If we as teachers are to articulate to our students an account of Adventism that is compellingly attractive, we must demonstrate that Adventism makes a difference. To show them how identifying with the Adventist story shapes and sustains lives will support our claim that it is worth taking seriously. It will give that story meaning and highlight its validity. The Adventist story will thus provide hope and renewed confidence to those, young and not-so-young, who wonder whether that story is true. Only as we tell such stories as the Stahls'—which integrate believing and being in a way that only stories can—will our students continue to sense the need for belonging. □

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[14] Stahl, pp. 85-88; in the chapter entitled "Una raza oprimida," he discusses at length the abuses perpetuated by the wealthy landowners, as well as the prefects, subprefects, and priests; for the English version, see *Land*, pp. 105-107.

[15] Dan Chapin Hazen, *The Awakening of Puno: Government Policy and the Indian Problem in Southern Peru, 1900-1955* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1975), offers a concise summary of the Stahls' endeavors: "Adventists have consistently been in the forefront of change in the Altiplano—the missionaries combined appeals for individual salvation with a broad-based program of medical, education, and market facilities open to all" (p. 121).

[16] Estimates vary in part, no doubt, due to differing definitions as to what constitutes a school. Key variables include home school, village building, church-owned building, misssion-appointed teacher. The number 200 comes from Hazen (p. 122), although he recognizes that "official church statistics only indicated around eighty," Ted Lewellen *(Peasants in Transition: The Changing Economy of the Peruvian Amyara—A General Systems Approach* [Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1978, p. 130]) also estimates the number of Adventist schools at 200.

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COPING WITH THE UNTHINKABLE: VIOLENCE IN SDA SCHOOLS

Continued from page 24

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