

EHUDDLE OFFERS INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR SHARING CHRIST

BY CHRISTELLE AGBOKA

When Nitza Salazar became Washington Conference’s Children’s Ministry director in October 2018, a church member asked, “Can you do a Christmas program so my son can be Joseph?”

Dumbfounded, Salazar, who recently moved to Idaho Conference, asked for clarification. “You want me to make a Christmas program . . . so your son can be Joseph?”

“Correct. My son has Down syndrome. He’s been asking me to be Joseph and hasn’t had the chance.” Deeply moved, Salazar launched Special Stars, a Christmas pageant featuring Adventist and non-Adventist children with disabilities.

From February 13 to 15, 2023, at the eighth annual eHuddle, a visioning and leadership conference hosted in Gladstone, Oregon, by the North American Division’s (NAD) Ministerial Department, attendees learned of several initiatives, like Salazar’s, uniting the church and community. More than 150 pastors, conference- and union-level evangelism directors, administrators, elders, and other leaders gathered for the first in-person eHuddle since 2020, with thousands more watching via Facebook and YouTube.



At the eighth annual eHuddle, several presenters speak on reaching people through online ministry, including YouTuber and church consultant Justin Khoe (speaking on a panel here). *Nick Wolfer*

“If you want to take the gospel commission seriously, meet people where they are—online.”

Referencing the February 12 Super Bowl, Jose Cortes, Jr., eHuddle organizer and NAD Ministerial Department associate director, said, “This week we’re going to huddle for a few moments, see the good plays across North America, then go back into the playing field to make sure we win. And what is winning? It’s reaching, reclaiming, and retaining people for Jesus in His name!”

The event uncovered best practices within eHuddle’s six actions of evangelism: love, serve, baptize, equip, plant, and revitalize. The mix of short presentations by practitioners, questions and answers, roundtable discussions, and take-away tips was a hit.

“As a first-time attendee, I walked away with creative ideas and practical tools that will enhance my ministry. And the best part was mingling with like-minded disciples,” said Christian Martin, pastor, Living Hope Seventh-day Adventist Community Church in Haymarket, Virginia.

Defining Our Reality

On the first day, Ivan Williams, NAD Ministerial Department director, revealed there are more than 370 million people within the division, but 1.2 million Adventist Church members. Presently the NAD has only 4,386 licensed and ordained ministers.

Nonetheless, Williams said, “God specializes in the majority being reached by the minority.”

The eHuddle also presented volunteer lay pastors (VLPs), who support pastors in the gospel work, as critical to the NAD’s goal of planting one church per 25,000 people.

Kyoshin Ahn, NAD executive secretary, shared the results of a major survey the NAD commissioned from Gallup USA in 2021 on how Americans view the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The poll revealed that 32 percent of those polled were familiar with the church, and of the 42 percent willing to give an opinion on it, only 8 percent had a favorable opinion versus 34 percent unfavorable.

However, Ahn noted Sabbath and Saturday were the words most frequently associated with the church, a positive since, in modern society, “the Sabbath is becoming more meaningful [for] many Americans.” Ahn added, “We’re happy to see two [other] words most associated with us are Christ and Jesus. It means we’ve made significant progress in the public perception of our church over the years.” He suggested focusing on Jesus and the Sabbath to reach more people.

“We need to find creative, better, and wiser ways to maximize our strengths, bringing our message of hope and wholeness closer to millions in North America,” he said.

Alan Parker, a religion professor at Southern Adventist University, offered further insights, including an October 2022 Barna study showing that “65 percent of teenagers in the United States identify as Christian, and 60 percent are motivated to learn more about Jesus.” Parker added, “Gen Z may be the most open generation in several generations to religious faith and learning about Jesus,” and urged attendees to reach Gen Z while they could.

Christ’s Method in 2023

Throughout eHuddle several presenters cited Christ’s method of meeting felt needs, then ministering to people, as their inspiration.

Tandi Perkins, director of development for the Alaska Conference’s Arctic Mission Adventure (AMA), shared that in one of the 11 villages they serve, Gambell, located 40 nautical miles from Russia, the Russia-Ukraine conflict elicited fear. When the AMA’s native leader asked them to do a workshop on how to manage fear, they partnered with the local pastor and others to speak to 75 children in schools, and other community members, about fear. This initiative and others contributed to 12 baptisms in Gambell, with 12 more lined up in AMA’s other villages.

Church planters also told stories of soul-winning through community work. For Dustin Serns, pastor of Life Bridge church in University Place, Washington, during COVID-19 a free dental clinic opened doors. They’ve now hosted eight free health clinics with 900 patients and \$400,000 worth of health care. They’ve also planted a 50-member church, including patients.

The ministry vehicle for Michael Lewis, senior pastor at South Park Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was home renovations. Working with a developer and contractor, the church bought and renovated houses seized by Birmingham for taxes. During renovations, they mingled with people, discussed community needs, and spoke about Jesus. Once someone accepted Christ, the church put them in a house. Today, the ministry has renovated four homes and birthed a church plant of over 76 people.

Investing in Children and Youth

Another common thread at the eHuddle was investing in children and youth. Presenter Daniel Hall, pastor of Mount Olive Seventh-day Adventist Church in tiny Marion, South Carolina, revived a church of only six members (average age 69) by engaging in a child-focused compassion project. The church merged community service with a nightly evangelistic series, with promotional flyers stipulating that visitors who stayed for the program would receive the night's giveaway.

The project included backpacks filled with school supplies, diapers, and a community baby blessing. This model yielded 51 baptisms, with 20 more people baptized by year-end, 90 percent under age 50. Hall explained their strategy for reaching millennials and Gen Zs through their children. “[People] love their kids and want to invest in their spiritual journey. And if you win the kids, eventually you’ll win their parents.”

Others spoke of initiatives, including transitioning community children from a church-run soccer club to Adventurers; starting Sabbath children’s programs that drew kids, then their families, to church; and creating spaces where teens felt safe discussing taboo topics.

Casting a Wide (Inter)net

Presenter Justin Khoe, YouTuber and church consultant, challenged attendees to turn their weekly sermons into one piece of daily gospel content for different platforms.

Colby Maier, pastor of Bloom church in Portland, Oregon, who reached 247,000 followers on Instagram, 321,000 on TikTok, and 1.1 million on YouTube in one year, read a message from a 14-year-old who was contemplating suicide and begged God for a sign. They wrote: “I went onto YouTube shorts, and the first video I scrolled was . . . of you praying for whoever’s on the other side of that screen. I started sobbing. That video saved my life.”

Plugging his church in his videos’ comments section has also brought 50-100 people to the church in the past few months.

“If you want to take the gospel commission seriously, meet people where they are—online,” Maier stated.

The Case for Baptism

Presenters also made a case for baptism, as people’s decisions for Christ can be met with hesitation and barriers. “Baptism should be treated like enrollment, not graduation,” said Debleaire Snell, Breath of Life speaker/director and Oakwood University church pastor.

Elizabeth Talbot, speaker/director for Jesus 101, argued that rather than insisting people know everything before baptism, the Bible supports baptizing individuals who understand the gospel, then continuing their learning in community.

This segment sparked a lively debate online and offline. Regardless, most tended to agree that discipleship and instruction should not end at baptism, and relationships fuel retention.



↑ At the eighth annual eHuddle, hosted Feb. 13-15 in Gladstone, Oregon, by the NAD Ministerial team, presenter Nitza Salazar, now in the Idaho Conference, shares her story of starting “Special Stars,” a Christmas pageant for children with disabilities when she was Children’s Ministries director at Washington Conference. *Luis Sanchez*

What Is a Disciple?

A critical aspect of eHuddle is vetting definitions and initiatives related to evangelism and church planting, and this year eHuddle examined the definition of a disciple. If accepted by eHuddle attendees, the following definition will be adopted for future eHuddles: “A disciple is someone who loves Jesus, lives by His teachings, and leads others to Him.”

This year’s event showed that churches with clarity on what “disciple” means thrive. For instance, at West Palm Beach Spanish church, led by Pastor Herbert Lopez, members are asked to attend worship services, join a small group, and serve in a ministry. Since 2016 the church has expanded to include an English group and, through a VLP, planted a church.

West Palm Beach English pastor Giovanni Esposito, who with copastors Lopez and VLP Magdiel Gonzalez, presented at eHuddle, left energized. “It was inspiring to hear stories of leaders who did not give up. We need to be bold for Jesus. God calls you and me for such a time as now!”

Salazar later shared that a VLP from Australia came to her after her eHuddle presentation, tears in his eyes, and said, “Now I know why I am here.” Her presentation encouraged him to start a Special Stars in Australia, including his son with autism.

She concluded, “My heart rejoices seeing how God works and how getting together for such events recharges and motivates us.”

Christelle Agboka is assistant director of communication for the North American Division.