

# “Connected to the Word,

# Connected to Jesus”

**Learning the book of John makes a deep impact for many at the 2023 Pathfinder Bible Experience division finals**

**BY KIMBERLY LUSTE MARAN**

**M**ore than 150 teams participated in the 2023 Pathfinder Bible Experience in Tampa Bay, Florida, on April 21-22. This is the second year the event is back in person after the COVID-19 pandemic forced the event online in 2020 and 2021. This will also mark the second year that teams unable to travel could participate remotely in real time with those gathered in Florida.

Last year 63 teams gathered in person at the Lane Events Center in Oregon, while 30 teams joined online. Organizers are thrilled about the high number of teams that attended the event held this year at the Florida State Fairgrounds Expo Hall. The venue was able to accommodate a large number of spectators in stands high above the testing floor.

“We’re excited that so many teams qualified and made the trip to the finals after studying the book of John—a number that amounts to close to 4,000 people here in the venue,” said Armando Miranda, Jr., an NAD Youth and Young Adult Ministries associate director and club ministries director. “The year the kids study the Bible is about memorization—and so much more. It’s a faith-building experience that will last a lifetime.”

Miranda shared that one of the three teams online included the Agat-Santa Rita Waves PBE team from the Guam-Micronesia Mission.



As the Agat team prepared for the division finals live testing, Pathfinder and team scribe “Abigail” remarked, “I’m excited to be a part of this and experience something new. I’ll have great memories from this experience.” The time zone differences for the Agat team and others online didn’t dampen their enthusiasm, which was rivaled only by those gathered in person.

Shearna Tolbert, the Agat team coach, said, “I love PBE. It’s so rewarding to work with these young people, see their growth, and witness their excitement about learning the Word.”

All nine unions from North America were represented, along with four teams from the British Union. Four teams qualified from Korea, and one was able to make the trip—a first for PBE.

After a Friday evening vespers that set the tone for the weekend, approximately 4,000 people filled Expo Hall on Sabbath for worship and, of course, the question-and-answer portion of the Bible testing, which got under way at 8:00 a.m. After lunch, Pathfinders and their supporters gathered for a special worship program, followed by the team certificates award ceremony.

“This is one of the most significant events that the Seventh-day Adventist Church hosts,” said G. Alexander Bryant, NAD president. “It is about studying the Word of God and to get young people inspired and motivated to study. The Word of God is powerful because it helps them in so many different ways.”

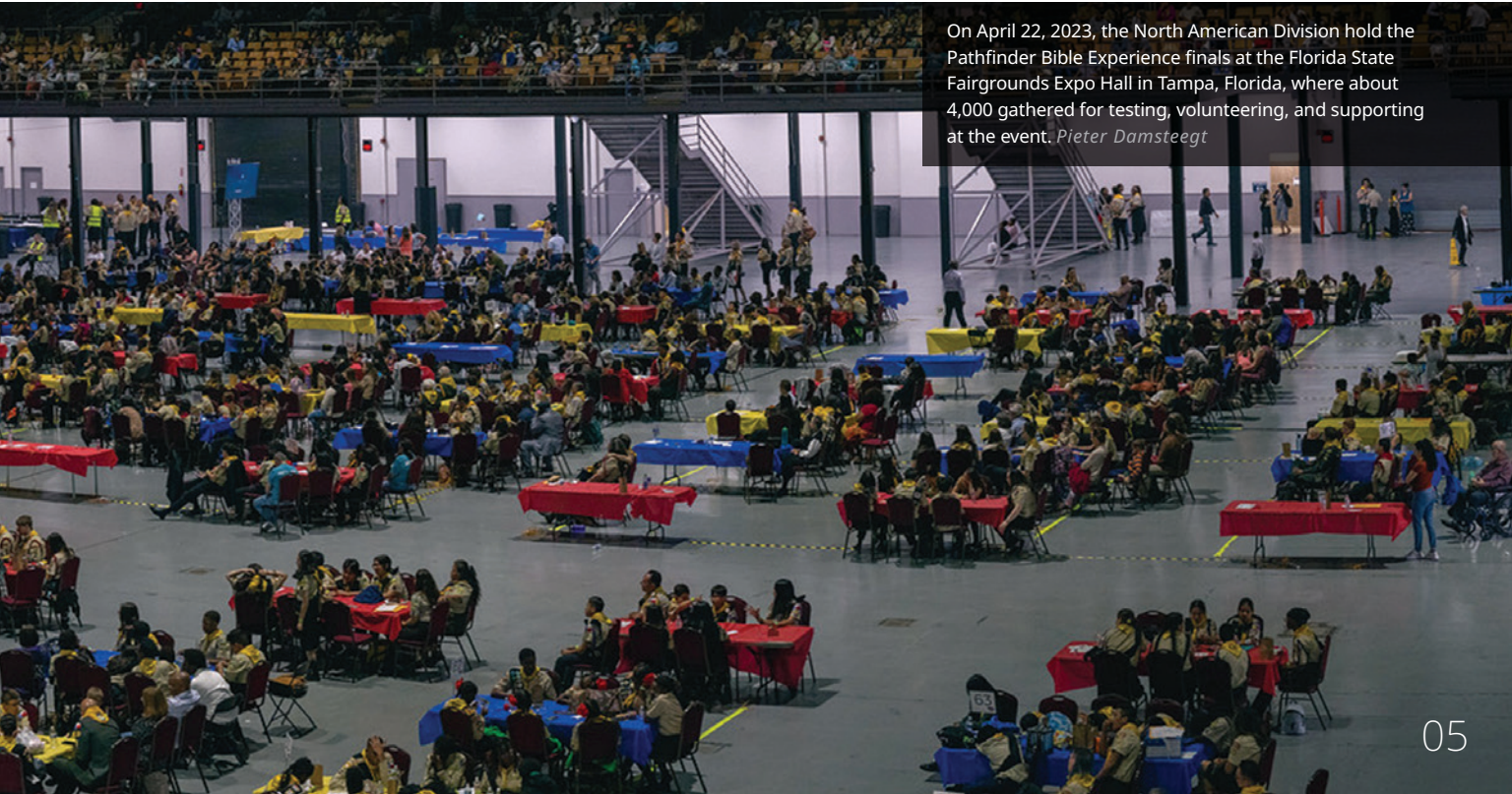


The Agat-Santa Rita Waves Pathfinder Club PBE team participates online during the 2023 North American Division finals on April 22. *Shearna Tolbert*

Bryant, who donned his Pathfinder uniform at the PBE event, explained: “It helps their intellect. It helps their spirituality. It helps prepare them for every state of life that they will face. . . . Studying the Word of God goes beyond today—it will stay with them for the rest of their life, not only this life but also for eternity.”

“It took a lot of practice and work and memorization,” said Donna Martel, a Pathfinder from the Texico Conference. Martel explained that her team started studying around September, and as time drew near for testing, they met up to three times per week. And while it was difficult, Martel said their coach was kind and supportive—and it was all worth it.

“The biggest blessing is that we’re all able to work together to answer these questions, and God has been help-



On April 22, 2023, the North American Division hold the Pathfinder Bible Experience finals at the Florida State Fairgrounds Expo Hall in Tampa, Florida, where about 4,000 gathered for testing, volunteering, and supporting at the event. *Pieter Damsteegt*

ing us, being with us, just answering our prayers as we all worked very hard together as a group. It's really fun once you get the hang of it."

Martel shared that she learned something special from studying John. "God is always with you. He's guiding you through everything. He makes sure you're OK, and He supports you all the day," she said with a chuckle at the inadvertent rhyme.

"The book of John is the premier book of being connected to Jesus, and these kids have learned all of that. They've memorized it. Some of them know the whole book by memory. I figure that's going to stay in their minds and in their hearts for the rest of their lives," said Tracy Wood, NAD Youth and Young Adult Ministries director.

"The Spirit speaks through the Word at times we don't anticipate. All of a sudden a verse or a word pops into our minds, like, 'Oh. Wow!' This is so informative for our young people and their journey in discipleship. It's just massive for them," Wood added.

### Test Taking and the Test Takers

Since 2012 the journey to the PBE division level has been a four-step process. The teams, which are comprised of up to six people, are first chosen by their clubs to compete in their local districts after months of Bible study and memorization. Those who score within 90 percent of the highest score advance to the conference level. The same pattern continues through the union level all the way to the division.

One first for this year was that testing was conducted in four different languages: English, Spanish, French, and Korean.

Another first at this year's finals was the full digitization of the testing at each table through hard-wired Internet, which facilitated a smooth process through the testing portion of PBE.



Excited teams hit the stage to receive their award certificates at the 2023 PBE finals event. *Kate Wolfer*

One hundred fifty-five teams participated in the testing, with 152 in person and three teams online. The teams were asked 90 questions based on the biblical book of John.

The quiet rumblings of excited Pathfinders 10 questions to the finish gave way to a loud roar of achievement and joy as the final question was read and answered. Those that scored within 90 percent of the highest score were awarded first place, which was earned by 105 teams. Forty-eight teams received second-place finishes; two teams finished in third place. As the teams climbed the stage to receive their certificates, then moved to the photo finish area, many cheered excitedly along the way.

"I just love to see the kids really stretch themselves in memorization, but not only that, I love to see them realize that memorization is simply the first step in learning the Scriptures. Then they start learning it and applying it, and [at church] sometimes the kids know their Bible a little better than the pastor does," said Gene Clapp, North American Division Pathfinder Bible Event coordinator, with a smile.

"My dad was in Pathfinders before. And I first went because my sister was there, but I actually liked it, so I stayed. I like growing spiritually with friends," said Nalainie Matheson, of the Lynchburg Crusaders of Faith Pathfinder Club from Virginia. "This PBE is my favorite because we got to meet people from different countries, some from Korea, from Britain, and all over, and I got people's signatures. This is the first time I've actually made it to the division finals."

### International Teams

"We are so excited to have, for the first time, a team of eight from the Korean Union. They traveled across the Pacific all the way to the East Coast to be here with us. Four Korean teams qualified, but couldn't make the trip," Miranda explained.

The team enjoyed several days in Florida, including making friends at Friday vespers held at a local church and the program at the fairgrounds on Sabbath. Their experience culminated with the finish of testing and a team photo op.

"We give thanks to God for getting us here safely," said one of the Korean Pathfinder team coaches, adding that they were glad that John was chosen for the testing. "The book of John is plain; it makes it easy to understand Jesus Christ, and that makes it [meaningful] to the children."

In a rebuilding year after the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, according to Kevin Johns, British Union Conference Youth Ministries director, four teams made the trip across the pond from the British Union to the finals in Florida: one from

“The book of John is the premier book of being connected to Jesus, and these kids have learned all of that.”

the North England Conference and three from the South England Conference, while a couple joined online. PBE has been such a blessing that the British Union now holds their own PBE as a major annual event. “It’s impacted our entire division,” said Johns. “The Pathfinder Bible Experience is a phenomenal program that has grown by leaps and bounds, and we now have a division-level testing with countries from all across our division involved.”

Johns explained that this year has been particularly meaningful. “We have 234 Pathfinders who have requested baptism, . . . and we have a whole list of others who want to be more prepared. This all came from the same experience of having studied the book of John,” he said.

### French Connection

The impact of studying John seemed to be felt by many of the Pathfinders, including the teams from Canada, some of whom tested in French.

“We’ve participated since 2019, and we had some technical difficulties when we were participating during COVID, so we were never able to get to the finals, but we worked hard, and we’re really happy,” said

Xavier Cloutier, a member of the Saint-Georges Seventh-day Adventist Church Lions of Juda Pathfinder Club. “It’s really motivating to work with a lot of other Pathfinders who have the same love for the Word of God and studying, and it’s really fun to do this Pathfinder Bible Experience—it’s actually the Bible Experience that got us into Pathfinders.”

“It is just a great experience to do with friends, and it is also fun and enriching to learn and memorize the Gospels,” said Xavier’s sister Audreanne, through a translator, Naomi Chiorean—another Pathfinder from Quebec. “I enjoy being with my friends, my brother and sister, and being on a team makes it all worthwhile.”

### Year After Year

Another key element to the success of this growing event is that Pathfinders who “age out” of the testing come back to volunteer. While many church members and family members support the teams and work as volunteers at the event, the group that makes organizers the most excited are the young adults who serve in a variety of ways, including through the year as team coaches and counselors and, as event staff, the finals.

Wood explained, “As they stay connected in Pathfinders from grade 9 to grade 12, which is the TLT [team leadership training] level, it carries on when they’re done in Pathfinders and in high school into their young adult life. It carries on in a powerful way, because we’re seeing here, in this building, that there’s a whole lot of young adults behind the scenes doing a lot. As I

look around—and I’ve always got my eyes on young adults—at the support staff, the judges, the technical staff, and those that are at the tables as coaches, I estimate that there’s a good 200 young adults here . . . serving in different capacities.

“They’ll grab that old uniform and put it back on, and they just want to be part of this network of leaders. It’s inspiring,” Wood said.

The gift of continued support for this event is one that the NAD hopes will continue. “I think about how the Holy Spirit is going to use all the experiences that the Pathfinders are having preparing for this event and being here in the event—and what’s going to happen later down the road in their spiritual journey,” said Wendy Eberhardt, NAD vice president for ministries. “It’s exciting to think about how the Lord’s going to use this time and hopefully make the kids who are here Pathfinder leaders in their local church.”

“This is a God thing and we’re excited that the Word of God is primary for all of our students here today,” said NAD Youth and Young Adult associate director Vandeon Griffin.

Added Miranda, “This is a community of faith that they belong to. That is a key element for our Pathfinders, our young people, as they keep growing and facing challenges, to have a support system that they can say, ‘Hey. You know, we went through this together. You’re going to help me out, and we’re going to keep walking together.’”

*Kimberly Luste Maran is editor of Adventist Journey.*



Teams check to see if they answered a question correctly as they answer questions about the book of John at the 2023 Pathfinder Bible Experience. *Pieter Damsteegt*