



# TEACHERS AS DISCIPLE-MAKERS in the Classroom

Some years ago, alarmed by statistics showing that more than 50 percent of Adventist young people in North America left the church by their mid-20s,\* Pastor Don MacLafferty created the *Kids in Discipleship Ministry* at the Collegedale Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tennessee (now called the *In Discipleship Ministry*). The program focused on training parents to make disciples of their children. In 2003, Pastor MacLafferty and Principal Murray Cooper met to discuss the next step for a discipleship initiative they had launched the previous year at A. W. Spalding Elementary School (AWS), also in Collegedale, Tennessee. MacLafferty and Cooper wanted to train teachers to be disciple-makers of the children in their care.

In a recent interview, Cooper said, “Sometimes it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that just because we are a Seventh-day Adventist school where worship happens every day, all is good regarding the spiritual development of the young people. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Teachers and administrators need

to have their own walk with God first to lay the foundation for a school that is spiritually alive. With that foundation in place, there is no limit to what can happen in building spiritual relationships if the teacher is intentional about developing a teaching strategy, similar to preparing for the next math or reading lesson.”

For nearly 10 years, AWS has been proactive in focusing on discipleship. Two years ago, the teachers at AWS chose a single discipleship characteristic upon which to focus school-wide: time alone with God (T.A.G.). Teresa Littell wondered how she could possibly teach her kindergarten students to do T.A.G. when most could not yet read. “I know the Holy Spirit gave me my plan,” she declared. A friend had given her a small tent shaped like a shark. Using the tent to represent a “big fish,” Littell introduced the concept of private prayer, using the story of Jonah. She told her students, “Jonah had three days of time alone with God while he was in the belly of the big fish.” She and the children discussed what Jonah might have said to God during his private prayer time.

Littell asked her students to think about a special place at home where they could spend time alone with God. She gave

\* Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-Year Study* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2000), p. 35.

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each student a paper that said, “My Favorite Place to Spend Time Alone With God Is \_\_\_\_\_.” The children dictated to her the name of their favorite place, then drew a picture of it on the paper. Littell made a classroom book with the pictures, then circulated the book to each family. She sent a letter to each home explaining to the parents what their child was learning about spending time alone with God. Littell encouraged the parents to create their own T.A.G. as models for their children.

The fish tent has become the classroom place for T.A.G. One at a time, the children go into the tent during free time or whenever they have extra minutes throughout the day. Littell has taught her kindergartners that they can use the T.A.G. tent when, like Jonah, they have a problem, and also when they feel happy and want to share that with Jesus. Littell has placed Bible story picture books in the tent along with a laminated picture of a child praying to remind the children to pray during their T.A.G. Her students learn that when they spend time alone with God, they focus on His Word and come to value talking to Him, just as they talk to their friends.

Littell never sends a child into the T.A.G. tent; however, when a child comes to her and says, “I’m having a bad day,” is upset, has been hurt, or feels guilty for hurting another person, Littell says, “Do you want some time alone with God?” She has noticed on many occasions that a child will go into the tent shaking with emotional tension and come out calm. “It always touches my heart,” she said, “when I walk by the tent and see a child on his or her knees, head bowed, lips moving.” The T.A.G. focus has helped young students learn ways to connect to God in a meaningful way.

Recently, Littell’s classroom was packed with visitors for “Grandparents’ Day.” She wondered if she should take down the T.A.G. tent to make more space but decided not to. “The tent and what it represents are too important to remove, even for a day,” she concluded.

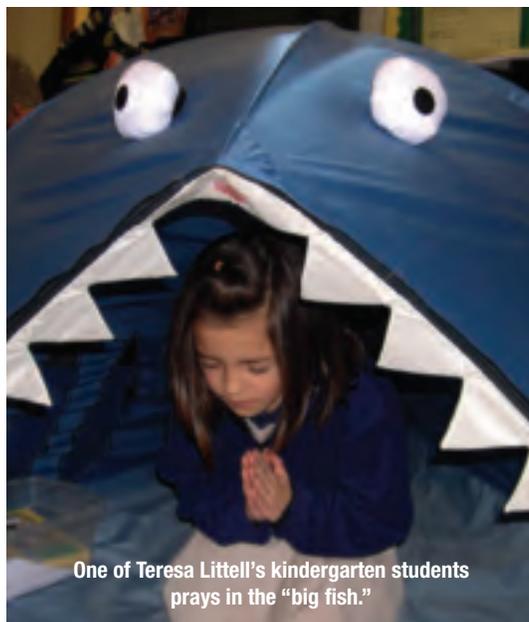
### Discipling Older Students

While teaching young children to connect with God requires intentionality, guiding earlites into a meaningful relationship with Jesus can be especially challenging. Cindy Ladi, 7th-grade homeroom teacher at Colledale Adventist Middle School (CAMS), has responded to the challenge. A specific area of her discipleship focus is helping students become authentic disciples through prayer. In her Bible classes, Ladi has incorporated meth-

ods that help her students experience intercessory prayer. Ladi teaches her students that Christians need trusted partners to share ideas, concerns, and the need for intercessory prayer. “I want students to become more comfortable sharing private needs with another person and seeking out this experience,” she says. She invites the students to choose a partner, share a need that they are comfortable discussing, and pray for each other.

Ladi also uses journals in Bible class, which she alone reads. During journal time, she invites the children to focus on the students in their assigned table groups. The students are to write specific ways that they can be a blessing to each member of their table group in thoughts, words, or actions. Ladi then has the students pray for each member in their group and look out for them throughout the day. When Ladi notices students who seem unwilling or unable to enter into the assigned journal activity, she suggests: “Keep it simple. Just connect to God.”

One day a week, part of Ladi’s Bible class focuses on T.A.G., which gives the students time for creative self-expression. “When they realize that they can be creative with God, it develops an openness in the way they express themselves to and with God. My students look forward to these moments with God,” Ladi says. Facilitating T.A.G. at school has expanded into students setting aside time at home for T.A.G.-related activities. “It’s exciting,” Ladi says, “to watch students discover that communicating with God isn’t boring and for



One of Teresa Littell’s kindergarten students prays in the “big fish.”

them to look eagerly for an opportunity to spend time with Him.”

One activity that Ladi’s students especially enjoy is going to the school Prayer Room, a place devoted solely to enabling students to get closer to God. In 2011, Ladi’s 7th graders created a Prayer Room to be used by the entire student body at CAMS. Soon afterward, Ladi introduced the class to the Prayer Room, the atmosphere to be maintained, and the procedures to follow. The activities are changed throughout the year to keep the prayer room relevant to students’ experiences. One current activity is called “Satan vs. Jesus.” Students look through a list of adjectives and categorize each one as describing either Satan or Jesus. They reflect on those that describe Jesus, then write one or more on sticky notes. They stick these to a “Jesus is. . .” space on the wall and reflect on how they can be more like Him.

Another activity is called “Children of God.” The students are invited to sign their names on a white board if they consider themselves children of God. They then trace their hands on a

sheet of paper and reflect on Jesus' love and how they can show others that they are His child. The instructions invite the students to write their names on their handprints, then tape them to the wall around the white board, thereby declaring to others who see their name that they are children of God.

A favorite activity is called "Lead Me to the Cross." The students write their prayer requests on a sticky note with or without their name. To encourage the students to take their requests to Jesus, the notes are tacked to a wooden cross. Students know that others who come to the Prayer Room will read their requests and pray for them. Ladi reports that the very deep and emotional appeals are often tacked to the back of the cross. One student said, "It really moves me to pray for my classmates." At times, students hesitate to participate, yet Ladi reports that even reluctant students try most of the activities.

One 7th grader did not want to go to the Prayer Room, but later decided to try it. Afterwards he said, "That was awesome." He then talked one of his friends into going there, too. "The difference I've seen over the years is the willingness to participate in spiritually focused activities because it's becoming the norm," Ladi said.

During the 2012 winter semester, Ladi's 7th-grade classroom conducted a Week of Spiritual Emphasis for grades 3-5 at A. W. Spalding Elementary School. "This helps my students build Christian leadership skills," Ladi says. If a student feels uncomfortable in a leadership role, Ladi links him or her with another student to create a leadership team. Another initiative Ladi uses once each semester challenges students to be a missionary at home by leading their family in worship. Ladi knows that for some students, this is the only family worship they have in the home.

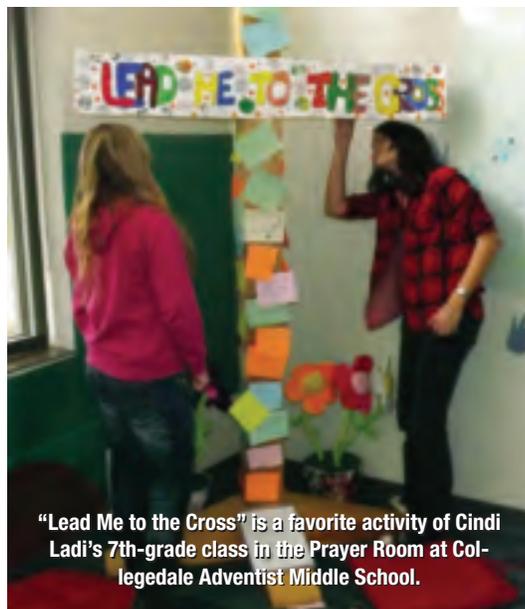
### Utilizing Volunteer Classroom Chaplains

Tom Fogg, principal of A. W. Spalding Elementary School, says, "One of the benefits of the discipleship program we initiated at our school is the strengthened relationships in our families as our students live discipleship at home. Another strength is the linking of the home, school, and church in working together for our children." One key element that has helped link home, school, and church is the use of parents, pastors, and church members as classroom chaplains. Individuals who volunteer to become a classroom chaplain commit to giving a worship experience in the classroom once a week, occasionally spending time with the students during recess, and facilitating

community outreach activities for the class. The students come to view the classroom chaplain as a spiritual mentor with whom they can share personal needs.

Carla McKenzie volunteered to be a chaplain at A. W. Spalding for a classroom that included one of her four children. She spent one school year each with grades 2, 3, 5, and 7. McKenzie said, "You go in thinking you have so much to offer spiritually, that you will give the children a foundation for private devotions and mentor them spiritually. After a while, you realize that the children are teaching you. It's incredible to me the level of sharing they did, telling me who Jesus was to them." The children also go home and encourage their parents to schedule private time with God and to have family worship.

In 2009, the Southern Union Office of Education and the Georgia-Cumberland Conference invited MacLafferty to train other schools to focus on discipleship. MacLafferty says, "*Schools in Discipleship* is a simple, practical way to call teachers and students to biblically based spirituality and a life of discipleship." The training event had three goals: (1) to invite and equip the members of each school team to deepen their personal walk with God; (2) to incorporate practical methods to bring intentional discipleship into the classroom; and (3) to unite the team to partner as representatives of the home, school, and church to disciple every child to Jesus Christ.



"Lead Me to the Cross" is a favorite activity of Cindi Ladi's 7th-grade class in the Prayer Room at Collegedale Adventist Middle School.

### Discipleship in the Bible Curriculum

Gerard Carter attended a *Schools in Discipleship* training event as the teacher in his school team of pastor, principal, parent, and teacher. A 7th-grade teacher at Duluth Adventist Christian School in Georgia, Carter came to teaching in mid-life from another career path. When he first started teaching, God gave him a dream in which he saw himself standing in heaven before God's throne. The Lord said to him, "Turn around." He turned and saw people lined up going into hell's fire. He recognized people he knew, students he was teaching. This experience made him passionate to lead his students into a saving relationship with Jesus. Attending *Schools in Discipleship* gave Carter practical methods to help him do this.

To bring discipleship intentionally into his Bible lessons, Carter utilizes three steps. First, he selects a Bible lesson from his teacher's guide, to which he adds a discipleship goal. Second, he identifies a story from his own faith experience that illustrates that discipleship goal. Last, he identifies a specific

choice to invite his students to make that grows naturally out of the Bible lesson and the discipleship goal.

An example of Carter's Bible lesson adaptation is the chapter "Faith Tried in the Fire" from the 7th-grade Bible textbook, the story of the three young Hebrew men in King Nebuchadnezzar's court. Carter added a discipleship goal to the lesson: to determine to take a stand for Jesus. As he led his students through the Bible lesson, he shared his own story of taking a stand for Jesus. When he became a Seventh-day Adventist, he had a conflict with working on Sabbath. One month after Carter took his stand for Sabbath, instead of being fired, he was promoted and given every Sabbath off. Carter invited his students to share stories of people they knew who have taken a stand for God, then to make a personal choice to stand for Jesus themselves.

Recently, Carter's students conducted a chapel for the school. A Korean girl and recent immigrant helped her classmates present the chapel program. Carter knew the girl had declared to her guardians that she was an atheist, so he felt pleased that she elected to help with the chapel. He reports that her heart is softening as she is being drawn to Jesus. "It's one thing to mentally say you understand what discipleship is about. It's another thing to intentionally disciple another. You have to be a disciple before you can make a disciple," Carter says.

### Discipleship in Education Training

One unique discipleship initiative in schools was started in 2009 at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee: *Discipleship for Teachers in Training*. The School of Education and Psychology strategized about ways to equip future teachers with discipleship philosophy, skills, and methods. Dr. Freddy Fuentes says, "All teachers have a serving role to make disciples. Learning to be a teacher is not all about the content. It's also about being connected to God and connected to others. The *In Discipleship Ministry* helped me visualize in a very tangible way a format where I can help myself and my students become better disciples—deepening relationship with God—and teach them how do that with their own students when they become teachers."

The university has implemented a three-stage discipleship program for education majors. Stage One focuses on how to develop and deepen one's own personal journey and is embedded in the Introduction to Education classes. This stage includes a one-day spiritual retreat when education students focus on methods of personal Bible study and prayer. Stage Two will teach methods to use in making disciples of the students in their future classrooms. Among these are methods to teach discipleship skills like leading others to receive Jesus as their personal Savior, to have the assurance of salvation, and to trust Jesus with day-to-day challenges. Stage Three will implement how to be a discipleship advocate in the home, school, church, and community.

Professor Faith Laughlin says, "For too long we have had generations of people growing up as Adventist Christians who are not truly disciples of Jesus Christ. It is the difference be-

tween learning about something or actually experiencing something. I liken discipleship education to studies I've done on language learning. You can learn about Spanish in a classroom filled with English-speaking people but not learn to use the language because you're not jumping in, not doing it. We need to teach our students about discipleship—what it is and why it's important—then give our students the tools they need to jump in and use it in their daily lives."

Fuentes and Laughlin have teamed up to bring intentional discipleship into the teacher education program at Southern Adventist University. "If our teachers are going to make an impact in their future ministry, they need to renew themselves by going constantly to the source—Jesus Christ," Fuentes said. "We want our teacher education program to point out the way to get there, to recognize that they can't have an impact with their own effort."

"Both of us," Laughlin said, "have taught in public schools as well as Seventh-day Adventist schools. We give our students specific tips on how they can be a disciple and a disciple-maker even if they're teaching in public schools. We need missionaries in public schools just as we need missionaries overseas. We let our students know that they will be limited, but it's not impossible."

### Scheduling Training Events

*Schools in Discipleship* training events are scheduled by union conference educational departments and offered by *In Discipleship* without training fees. At the time this article was written, four North American Division unions had held these events: Canadian, Lake, Southern, and Southwestern. The South Pacific Division recently facilitated a "Schools in Discipleship" training event in Vanatu.

School administrators and teachers within NAD who are interested in bringing intentional discipleship into their schools should contact their union office of education to request the scheduling of a local discipleship training event. Those outside NAD should contact their division office of education. For more information, contact *In Discipleship* at (423) 396-2120 or <http://www.kidsindiscipleship.org>.



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