

NURTURED BY NATURE

BY CRISTIAN MODAN

When Romania's government toppled, Adventist youth leaders faced new challenges. Under a restrictive government, young people were naturally drawn together to sing and study, and that was enough to keep them enthusiastic about their church and their relationship with Christ. With the coming of the MTV generation, however, the church needed a new program to meet the needs of youth. I believe that God inspired us to begin outdoor activities to fill this void.

Without being formally recognized as a youth leader, I began to lead a teen group. I noticed that one of the most popular activities was visiting a forest near Bucharest. The games we played bound us together. With the easing of government restrictions, our youth group became involved in evangelistic activities in Glina, a village where we had only a handful of Adventists. As our friendship with this group deepened, we began holding seminars and Bible studies. The group began to grow. We continued to go to the forest each Sunday, taking our new friends with us. When we invited non-Adventist friends to the youth group, they gladly joined us in our weekly visit to the woods. The bonding was so great that the newcomers came to our evangelistic meetings in Glina, too.

Then our group decided to go camping. For the next three years, this proved to be the most popular activity of all. During this time, all the youth became more committed to the church, and most of the non-Adventists decided to be baptized. I began to realize that we had stumbled onto a powerful and efficient soul-winning tool—getting young people out in nature and letting the Lord impress their hearts.

One of the key factors in my youth leadership was a visit to the Georgia-Cumberland Conference in the southern United States, which was made possible through an invitation from the conference youth and children's department. There I enjoyed five wonderful weeks of training for ministry to Pathfinders and youth. During that visit, my youth work and vision were greatly impacted

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by 10 days that I spent with Dr. Carl Swafford in Southern Adventist University's Outdoor Ministries Class. I not only learned about many outdoor activities and acquired many resources, but more important, I came to understand how to lead young people more effectively.

A New Program for Teens

These ideas helped me start a new program for teenagers in Romania, which I called "Companions." I felt that between Pathfinders and adulthood, we often lost the teenagers. To prevent this, we used the ideas that I collected in the United States to train more than 400 youth leaders who, in turn, worked with 2,800 teenagers across Romania.

Outdoor activities are the core and unifying factor of our training courses. Nothing can compare with the experience of going through outdoor trust-building activities and then discussing them. Last week at a training camp for teenage leaders, we spent some time discussing the concepts they had learned. Here is what they said: "It was impossible to do it alone," "We needed a leader," "We needed to think again about everything," "We needed to hold hands tightly."

A teacher can say things like that, but words never penetrate the mind as does experience. Unity and cooperation evoked the most reactions from the group. If you cross a marsh depending only on some small boards and the hands of friends, then find that you can build a small church out of the boards, you better understand the relationship between people and the church. Its members are a group who will lend you a trustworthy hand to

advance together to the kingdom. Such lessons are best learned in outdoor activities.

Another popular training activity is "Solo time." We give people brief written assignments and then send them far enough into the fields that they cannot see or talk to one another. As they quietly meditate on the activities, they think about how they fit into God's plan for their lives. One note said, "Choose an element from nature and write what it tells you about God." The ideas expressed and the ways the young people discovered God in nature were diverse and unique. The lengthy discussion held afterward produced insights that were as good as the best sermons. However, the youth discovered these truths for themselves through observation and careful thinking. Such discoveries go to the heart and stay there.

The final instructional note usually says something like, "Think about your life. What would you change? What is God telling you? Are you ready to minister to other teenagers? What changes would that bring to your life?"

Young people come out of the woods changed after that sort of activity. You can see the calm determination on their faces. They have spoken with the Lord. Even pastors who went through that exercise said that it was one of the most powerful experiences of their lives.

This past year, I went to a meeting where we involved 130 teenagers in group activities outdoors. The next day, a parent told me that her son and his friend had decided to join the youth group after returning from the excursion. She and others had tried unsuccessfully many times to involve these boys in youth groups, but they never agreed until they went to the woods together. Later, they said that if they had known what fun the youth were having, they would have joined long ago.

Training Leaders

In my three years of youth work at the

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conference and union levels, I have found that training the leaders and then supporting them in their work is the most efficient mode of operation. After conducting training courses following this pattern, my fellow youth directors from other conferences have concluded that outdoor activities are very motivational.

In the nine days of similar training for Pathfinder leaders, the first four are mostly theoretical. But the rest of the program focuses on practical experiences, most of which are outdoors. Without exception, the normal study atmosphere changes to bursting enthusiasm by the fifth day as we apply in carefully chosen situations the things we have learned. The chance to be outdoors, to find your way through a forest, to give first aid to an injured person, or to rescue a person 12 feet below you gives meaning and purpose to

the assignments. Such activities have completely changed the participants' vision. Some people came for training who had not fully decided to join the program and serve others. With few exceptions, after participating in the outdoor activities, they began to appreciate the significance of the program and wanted to become involved.

The first year we held training camps, two young women complained about the busy program and on the fourth day, wanted to go home. The fifth day, after practical activities began, their opinion changed entirely. Not only did they stay to the last day, but they also were sad to leave the camp. Thus we prepared Pathfinder leaders for more than 4,500 youth who, in turn, replicate what they have learned for their units. Is it any wonder the young people are excited?

I strongly believe that outdoor exercises must be carefully selected to encourage unity and practical lessons. Leaders need to be qualified persons who can ask insightful questions and help young peo-

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unites young people for about six months, after which they look forward to the next camp.

In 10 years of working with youth, I've discovered that no other activity so effectively helps youth to enjoy Bible study, mission projects, and service-oriented lifestyle as outdoor ministries. These bind young people together and help them make important decisions. That is why I believe that the church must give careful thought to developing a system of outdoor activities with trained personnel. In a world that is moving away from country life to big cities where we are surrounded with manmade objects, we need to go back to nature and focus on the created things from which Jesus took His parables. In both Pathfinders and the school curriculum, we need to give more importance to this powerful life-changing tool—the study of nature. ☞

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Spiritual Impact

Youth workers in Romania say that most of the important decisions to follow the Lord or witness for Him are recently being made in summer camps. Ever since such camps were illegal and had to be organized secretly, they have been popular with the youth. Camps are so important for the children that we hold them even where we don't have our own campgrounds or land. Each year, finding camping spots becomes more difficult, and we struggle to gain approval with each new state policy. But we will not give up. The enthusiasm provided by a good camp

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