

Local church: Gateway Adventist Centre, Vic

BY JARROD STACKELROTH

THE CITY OF MELBOURNE ROSE around us as we walked toward Federation Hall, the facility hired by Gateway Adventist Centre (GAC) from the Victoria College of Arts. The facility may only be temporary accommodation for this young church, but it is a good location for a church aimed at university students and inner city residents. We were welcomed inside by the greeters, with genuine warmth and given a tour of the Sabbath school class options. Rather than being divided by age or social groups, the classes are aimed at spiritual maturity. There's a Discovery class for seekers straight off the street, an Explorer class, going through foundational knowledge, a class for long-term members, and a Mandarin speakers class, among others.

GAC is a young church with a remarkable story. Just five years old, it has already given birth to a new congregation, with another "due" soon. The church is full of driven, young professionals, lay people who are highly educated, successful in business, and well qualified, yet give freely of their time in the most important of tasks, "growing the kingdom" in the Melbourne metropolis.

A new sprout

A few weeks later, I found myself in another lecture theatre at Swinburne University's Hawthorn campus for the official

launch of GAC's first church plant, Gateway Hawthorn. There was excitement as about 40 people filled the seats. It felt like a family reunion, with a sense of community and acceptance, and a smile on everyone's face. With a baptism that afternoon, the buzz seems underscored with a determination to win people for God's kingdom. There is a feeling that with God anything is possible, and the musical item of the day was the old song that says, "Little is much, when God is in it."

President of the Victorian Conference, Dr Dennis Hankinson, echoed these sentiments, reminding GAC of the call to spread the gospel, and how to find meaning with God as the main thing is to find happiness and direction. The dedication service was simple yet beautiful and Pastor Wee Fong Choo spoke challenged the congregation with the question, "What is the good life?"

The numbers in this new group are about the same as those, with which GAC began. GAC grew from being a church plant itself, with only 35 people, to a church of more than 140. It is that passion to grow God's kingdom that is causing these churches to multiply.

First steps

There are often few Adventist churches in or around our city centres—real estate costs are high and undeveloped land is hard to find, and connecting with people is difficult. Melbourne had none, meaning a whole demographic of people had little chance to hear the gospel. GAC is a Global Mission church plant. It targets anyone interested in becoming Christians but is well placed to reach the 100,000 university students and staff, from the three universities in the city and the 70,000 people who live and work in the inner city.

In 1999, a group of 22 young people from the Forest Hill Asian church,



most aged between 19 and 25, decided they needed to reach their friends in the city. They realised the need for a church in the city of Melbourne. However they felt they needed to be equipped for this work, so they began training in personal revival and preparation, Adventist identity and message, and CARE group leaders training. These young people started activities and Sabbath afternoon worships in the city, while running two 16-person small groups. After worship services, there would be a lifestyle program, with topics like stress management, how to write a resume and health. In August each year, they would run an evangelistic campaign.

Johnny Wong, elder and foundation member of GAC, describes those early days using the biblical phrase, "the Lord added to the church daily." He says the young people were motivated to come to the city because "this is where their friends were and there was a growing urban community in the city."

After two years of preparation, on March 22, 2003, GAC began meeting every Sabbath morning in the city with 42 people in a rented lecture theatre. GAC received support from the General Conference through the Global Mission program, which allowed GAC to begin as a member-led church plant. Now, through commitment and training, their weekly worship has grown to 170 and they have begun their own plant.

Vision

Gateway's vision statement is "To be a soul-winning, bible-based, training centre that multiplies churches in three years." "We have adopted an outreach model based on the New Testament church and Spirit of Prophecy," says Mr Wong. "Many have observed that we have taken a 'back to basics' model—home groups, personal work and public proclamation."

While church planting is important it



Small groups—in members' homes and in focused Sabbath school groups—are a key element of Gateway's ministry model.

is more of a by-product of hard work. “In my opinion, church planting is just another Christian buzz word,” says Mr Wong. “It is all about soul winning. When we win souls for the kingdom, we naturally need to set up a congregation to meet them. That should be the focus.”

Due to property prices in the city, GAC has yet to own its own church. But they are working toward this as rent of university property is increasing. They have received a grant of \$A820,000, as part of the South Pacific Division’s strategy to increase the focus on local churches.

University student clubs sponsored by the church mean GAC can hire venues for less. GAC currently sponsors three clubs, because many of the new seekers are contacts from university. Since 1999, 84 young people have been baptised, 44 per cent of these have been university students, 12 per cent high school students and 35 per cent working young adults. They are attracted through the clubs and the health, language, and prophecy classes run by the GAC training centre.

Once seekers come into contact with members, the members have been trained and know how to grow their interest. GAC members are perhaps some of the most trained in the country, making contacts at university, business places and in the course of whatever profession they are working in. Such is their commitment, that since General Conference vice president, Pastor Mark Finley, challenged young people to become full-time Bible workers for six months, many GAC members have taken time off from being doctors, professionals or successful businesspeople, to answer the call.



Gateway provides many opportunities for building community, such as a recent soccer match.

Because we CARE

CARE groups are a key component of GAC’s ministry and outreach. CARE stands for “Christ’s Attitude Reflected in Everybody.” In 2002, GAC began their CARE group system with 16 people. Currently, more than 160 people meet in homes each week. Each small group must have at least one “seeker”—someone not baptised—to be allowed to operate. There is a strong sense of outreach in these groups, with an emphasis on creating a sense of community, a sense of direction and leadership, accountability and training leaders to create their own groups.

In 2006, every CARE group at GAC experienced at least one baptism. “CARE groups and public evangelistic meetings go hand-in-hand,” says Mr Wong. “We run yearly evangelistic meetings, while the small groups provide the groundwork and bring people to the evangelistic meetings. In the Bible there is a model of public proclamation and home ministry. This is what we model.” Gateway still uses public evangelism but as an end call, rather than a hook.

Growing the kingdom

So where does the Gateway journey lead? “Our vision is to continue to plant churches and win souls,” says Edmund Yeoh, who runs the GAC training centre and is project leader of the Hawthorn plant, as well as working as a young business manager for Orica. “Success is to plant new churches. No doubt, we will begin another church plant as we address new ministry areas, such as young families. These new ministry areas not only address our changing demographic at Gateway Hawthorn as well as Gateway City, it also creates further outreach opportunities with young families.”

While many members are of Asian origin, GAC welcomes everyone and is a very multicultural church. But the next church plant being planned is a Chinese Mandarin church. “Our young people who are Chinese-speaking have a burden to reach their friends, thus we are planning and praying for the work among this community,” says Mr Wong.

Meanwhile, GAC measures its growth on a baptism ratio, rather than sheer numbers, as they believe the critical mass is only



The next Gateway: The launch of Gateway Hawthorn at Swinburne University’s Hawthorn campus on May 24.

120-150 people. In 2007, the ratio was 5.6, meaning it takes 5.6 members to find one baptism in the year. This compares with the baptism ratio in Australia over this period of about 50.

But GAC’s ministry and programs are also spreading and having an impact around the world, with many GAC alumni returning to their home countries and starting up CARE groups there. Last year they supported a project called Mission Indonesia and worked with several churches there for revival, CARE groups and discipleship training. They have had members conduct training throughout Australia and in New Zealand, Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indonesia.

The Gateway question

As I stand among the young people of Gateway singing the final hymn I realise this is what heaven will be like. People of different shades and language but who are one family, sharing and singing and smiling together, praising God and honouring His sacrifice. The question is, how many of the people we know, work with and study with will be there to share that with us on that glorious day. Gateway is driven by this urgency.

“We are to ask ourselves in every level of church ministry—board, to committees, to programs, to people ministries—are the things we are doing for the purpose of finishing the work?” says Mr Wong. “Is it part of fulfilling the gospel commission? Will it win souls? We are to question everything we do at church.” **R**

For more information, visit <www.gatewayadventist.org>.

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