

GOD'S HEROES EMERGE AT GNYC CHURCH PLANTING FESTIVAL 2018

Evidence of an exiting Nor'easter greeted the 700 participants of the Church Planting Festival upon arriving at the Saunders Trade and Technical High School on Palmer Road in Yonkers, NY, on March 3, 2018. Uprooted trees and the crispness of the air after the storm served only to emphasize the urgency of the Greater New York Conference of Seventh-day Adventists' Church Planting Vision: *Every Disciple Making a Disciple and Every Church Planting a Church* in fulfilling the commission of Revelation 18:1.

"The Battle Cry continues" was the theme of a day filled with celebration, inspiration and preparation of gospel heroes in planting churches; carrying on the movement that started in 1902 in the crowded metropolis of New York City with its various ethnicities. Welcome was given by organizer of the event, Dr. Manuel Rosario, Personal Ministries and Sabbath School Director, and Church Planting Coach, Pastor Steve Leddy. Stories emerged throughout the day of men and women who pressed forth with ingenuity, strength, bravery and firm commitment to the cause of God in bringing the gospel to all people.

The term "Übermensch" or a "superman" or "Superheroes" became popular in the 1920's as the world was searching for heroes, and despite the proliferation of modern superheroes in entertainment, a solemn class of gospel workers through church planting are going forth conquering in the name of the Lord Jesus. The GNYC Church Planting Festival of 2018 highlights the work of the Holy Spirit in 42 new church plants since 2015 in a quest to plant a total of 100 churches by 2020 as a portion of the North American Division's overall goal of 1,000 churches.

Dr. Rosario states that, "We are not planting Churches, we are planting a movement." He emphasized the necessity to "Press together, Press together," to move forward with the work. Sharing that he took inspiration from the apostle Paul who went out planting then returned to give reports, Dr. Rosario said, "It's about the movement, a new culture." In leading the prayer session of consecration, Hispanic Ministries Director, Michael Guerrero said, "Prayer is to listen, Prayer is to hear God." He invited the assembly to pray together in pairs in inviting the Holy Spirit to lead the event. The event was conducted in both English and Spanish.

Pastor Jose Cortes Jr., Associate Ministerial Director for Evangelism of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists shared the recommended definition of a church plant by the NAD as: "A newly recognized mission group, less than five years old, that serves the community and worships regularly with the goal of becoming an organized church." In his opening remarks he stated that, "We need to take care of our families before we can have success in church planting. Families are more important than our ministries. Our children are more important than ministries," he implored.

"Why Plant churches? Don't we have enough churches already?" "No!" was his response to the self-posed question. Pastor Cortes made the point that we plant churches for reasons of reaching our neighbors; to continue the Adventist Movement; and that if we don't plant churches, we will become a cul-de-sac in the Adventist Highway. "We do not have enough churches." He further shared that although there are over 14Million people in Greater New York, there are only 200 congregations in GNYC, and if combined with the North Eastern Conference it would be 300 churches. "We need 560 churches to reach every 25,000 people of the 14Million." Through the message of Pastor Cortes, the church planters were to understand that a church that does not reach beyond the four walls is not a church but a club. And that we need to embrace the different approaches that will meet different groups. Jesus wants to save those who are different from us. "Put away our preferences and give New Yorkers organizational permission to plant churches that may look a bit different, that will reach people who were born in New York and surrounding territories" he urged.

Present at the occasion were Dr. G. Earl Knight, President of the Atlantic Union, and his wife Yvonne Knight, Ministerial Spouses Association Coordinator; the entire leadership team of the GNYC were also present led by Pastor Henry Beras, President of the Greater New York Conference; Secretary, Dr. Alonzo Smith; Treasurer, Ebenezer Agboka; along with the Corporation Leaders and Departmental Directors. Dr. Knight acknowledged the movement in GNYC saying, "We celebrate the 42 churches that have been planted with the support of Pastor Cortes from the NAD. Forty-two planted so far and we will not stop! Next year is the year of evangelism for the Union. Atlantic Union is in total support of this program, also."

Highlights from the 42 churches giving reports included: the Manantial de Vida in Queens which Started with 12 members and now have 60. Bethany, introduced by Pastor Lara, Director of the Publishing Ministry, started in January with 4 people, grew now to 26 members with the aim: "Each one Reach One." Bethany declared that, "Christ did not say they should come to us, He said we should go to them." Mount Sinai in Central Park in Spanish Harlem announced that the first baptism registered in GNYC over 90 years ago there and they have returned to the area starting with 8 people and now 46 people gather. 138st Spanish SDA in the South Bronx started in a beauty salon with one family and are now 25 people worshipping, giving free cooking classes to the community, with South American Chaplains helping in the ministry. My Gen, a youth gathering of young adults of 2nd and 3rd generations ministers to the need of the New York natives in a unique Café setting. With a focus on the health of the community, they meet at the Northeastern Academy. New York Punjabi SDA, a group of East Indians, started with 15 and are now 25 persons reaching people from Pakistan and other countries. Ambassadors, in Far Rockaway Queens, started after Hurricane Sandy with non-Adventist Single Moms and now have a thriving Autism and Health Ministry.

Pastor Henry Beras, Conference President, in the featured message, based on Joshua chapter 6, likened the church planting mission to that of the mission that which God had sent Joshua around the city wall of Jericho to understand that the victory belonged to God. "It was not about them, it was about God," he said. In paraphrasing the story of Joshua in taking Jericho as "I've given Jericho into your hands; It's yours don't worry," he parlayed that into assurances for the gospel heroes that God has given us NY City, Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Long Island, and Upstate. Saying of God, "I have given you the City." "This," he said, "is our City and State. It is ours because God has given it to us. But we have to work as we have it. It is about God. New York is in our hands. God is our Captain." Using, as an example of the targeted saturation, the Dunkin Donuts fast food chain model with 600 stores in NY which is more proliferate than any other enterprise, in occupying any space that is available, was the ideal for church plants model. He acknowledged challenges in planting churches but noted that victory is assured because "God has given the City in our hands." "We have to conquer NY to the glory of God's name." "Hold on if you have challenges," he said, "maybe when you walk around the wall God will give the victory." Participants streamed to the altar at the call for a prayer of consecration led by Dr. Alanzo Smith who, along with his grandson, seven-year-old Mylanzo Smith, had also introduced the speaker.

Spiritual songs of praise and musical accompaniment were provided by Professor Jairo on the Keyboard and Guitar and the Yonkers Praise Team. Special Music by Ms. Debra Webb filled the auditorium assuring that "He'll Do It Again," among other selections. Mr. Edison Alvarez also provided special music on both the Alto and Soprano Saxophones respectively, culminating with a Saxophone Duet with Professor Jairo. The theme Song "Brightly Beams our Father's Mercy," was sung and played throughout the day. Of special note were the reports of the churches and the Parade where they entered holding up LED candles signifying that God had lit the way in NYC's hearts.

On exit interviews, attendees were enthused and encouraged by the day's gathering. "Truly, we could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. We could see with our own eyes how the Lord is moving powerfully,"

said Pastor Rosario. Pastor Steve Leddy, “Fantastic! What I like is how many young people were here. Seeing young families, [and] teens, that really is encouraging, because they are starting out right—early. And if they get this in their DNA early they will just explode in ministry.” Dr. June Smith, “It was such an inspiration to see the energy and the passion that our members have.” Young church planter Ariella Murez from Wappinger SDA, “Today was a very amazing experience.”

Pastor Steve Leddy, in a call for more Saints to step forward to be trained in the Church Planting Intensive, a program of the Church Planting Institute of the Greater New York Conference, noted that the, “Theme of Super Heroes are currently popular in the entertainment industry. We are called to be superheroes. We are called to make a difference for eternity.” The call to enter ministry was followed by an audacious challenge, “Are you ready to be a super hero for God?”