

The Role of the SDA Church in Social Mobility in the Ghetto - The Case Study of Laventille

Introduction

According to Sorokin, “the church as a channel transported a great many people from the bottom of society to its apex.”¹ In fact, in the medieval period, the only possibility which existed for the advancement from the lower grades of society to the higher was via the established church. To a large extent, the same is true also for the post-modern period as the church provides the forum for interactions on different levels. For many, their sole personal contact with high ranking members of society commenced with the church and such relationships have frequently been the window for social advancement in one form or another. Core to the philosophy of Adventism is the enhancement in the quality of life of peoples everywhere. It seeks not only spiritual growth but the holistic development of the individual – the head, heart and hand. As such, the church’s organization has developed programmes aimed at achieving this end. Following in this trend Laura Lee Vance argues that, “as a result of Adventist emphasis on participation in higher education, Adventists membership is highly correlated with upward mobility.”² Through the adoption of Christ’s principle of meeting people’s basic needs, various facets of the church combine to minister to the less fortunate and in this way social

¹ Pitirim Aleksandrovich Sorokin , *Social mobility*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998), 167.

² Laura Lee Vance, *Seventh Day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 73.

mobility is achieved. Within the confines of this paper Social mobility relates to, “any transition of an individual from one social position to another.”³

Several aspects of the Seventh Day Adventist body foster upward social mobility. With its primary objective as the fulfillment of people’s basic needs, the Community Services Church empowers all members and interested persons to make positive changes through the hosting of various skill development programmes. As cited by the SDA Church Manual, the group initially catered primarily for the preparation and distribution of food and clothing to persons in need. However, its purview has since been extended to include adult education, home nursing, counseling and the empowerment of the under privileged through the process of skills training. In this way, persons are able to gain employment or become entrepreneurs via the establishment of cottage industries thereby improving their living conditions.

Even more effective than welfare in terms of outreach and social mobility, is the emphasis the church places on education. It aims to facilitate the all round development of people through a specially designed system of education which aspires to “restore in man the image of his maker.”⁴ To assist in this, the organization of the church has instituted a structured system of education which significantly impacts the life chances of individual members. Though, the focus is essentially the spiritual and not necessarily the socio-economic advancement, since the lifestyles proposed and the programmes

³Ibid, 133.

⁴ *SDA Church Manual*, 117.

instituted are designed to achieve maximum benefits, social advancement for all involved is inevitable. This paper therefore seeks to determine the role played by a specific church in assisting its members in particular and the community in general to improve their socio-economic conditions. Many have testified of their impecunious existence before accepting Christ and the remarkable change in their fortunes thereafter. Bull and Lockhart, in their book, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh Day Adventism and the American Dream*, noted that, “when converts join the church they are usually persons of limited education and low economic status and they are likely to obtain some economic benefits from discipline, hard work and supportive social network fostered by their new faith.”⁵ They have indicated that there is a strong drive towards social mobility in the Adventist church because of its emphasis on education. Notwithstanding this fact, this paper will attempt to show that a solid system of support is necessary for upward mobility in depressed communities.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the Seventh Day Adventist Church is not an opulent organization. When compared to religions such as the Roman Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, Anglicans and to some extent the Pentecostals, Adventists are very close to the bottom of the economic ladder. Notwithstanding, there are several congregations which can be safely identified as middle class churches. These include, Petite Valley, Tacuragua, Stanmore Avenue, San Juan, Dabadie, Arima and Sangre Grande SDA churches. They are populated primarily by middle class professionals then followed by members of the working class. In a very generic way, such congregations tend to be invisible in the communities in which they are located largely because of their conservative outreach methods. The socio-economic background of church membership therefore has strong implications

⁵ Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh Day Adventism and the American Dream*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 352.

regarding the implementation of churches programmes and policies as well as the methods of evangelism employed. As such, while there is a general uniformity across congregations, methodologies differ significantly at times. It is therefore posited here that these creative techniques employed by some congregations have impacted the social mobility of persons under its influence. From this perspective, the role of Adventism in the community of Laventille will be discussed.

The History of the Laventille Community

Laventille or East Dry River as it is commonly called “is the mountainous or hilly area which is located in the south-eastern region of the capital city of Port of Spain, Trinidad.”⁶ The St. Ann’s River or East Dry River, which flows in a southerly direction, is located at the foot of these hills. During the period of enslavement cotton, coffee and cocoa estates and mills were found there. However, because of its mountainous terrain much emphasis was not placed on the development of these estates. Therefore, sugar production in Laventille commenced only in the early 19th century but was not sustained for very long there as the elite tended to shift such cultivation to west Port of Spain, away from the city, to avoid association with the poorer groups in that area, which at this point was already in the majority. They deemed the area as unsuitable for residential occupation because of the health hazards posed by its close proximity to the swamps. Notwithstanding, its towering hills also served as a vantage point from which to launch military attacks and to this end, one of the two forts erected after the British captured Trinidad from the Spaniards in 1797, Fort Picton was erected in Laventille.

⁶ Selwyn Ryan, *Behind the Bridge*, St. Augustine: (I.S.E.R, UWI, 1997), 33.

Its strategic location on the fringes of Port of Spain opened the area to an influx of migrants in the post-emancipation period (after 1838). While the general historiography on enslavement concur that there was not a wholesale exodus from the plantation but a general move away from fixed, reliable labour, Trinidad's situation differed. According to Selwyn Ryan, a local social scientist, there was a "literal exodus from the estates to the town."⁷ Between 1842 and 1851, the population of the town increased from 11, 698 to 17, 563. This influx of people from the rural areas as well as other Caribbean islands resulted in major problems such as overcrowding and the attendant poor sanitary conditions. Historian, Bridget Brereton noted that, "often six or more adults were crowded together into unventilated rooms of 8 or 10 square feet."⁸ By the 1860s conditions worsened as scores of immigrants entered the town, thereby augmenting the pressures already placed on the inadequate housing facilities there. Unable to find rooms in the barrack-style houses in Port of Spain, most of the new comers squatted on whatever land was available in Laventille. Unemployment therefore became a serious concern after 1880 as jobs were not available in sufficient quantity to cater for the influx. Able-bodied men roamed the streets in a futile search for employment. Some persons were between jobs; others gave up the search and settled for living from the occasional work while others turned to prostitution and petty crime. Such conditions augmented the already atrocious conditions under which people lived. Goodenough, writing in 1976 cited that,

Beyond the old town the rugged and dry limestone topography of the Laventille Hills hampered the spread of communication networks, infrastructural improvement schemes and the provision of adequate amenities. The physical condition of the low status or working suburbs was only improved at the beginning of this century when they became a menace to the health of the rest of the town, and even then, the worst areas of East Dry River were omitted.⁹

⁷ Ibid,39.

⁸ Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962*, New Hampshire: (Heinemann, 1981),132.

⁹ Cited in, Selwyn Ryan, *Behind the Bridge*, 41.

These circumstances facilitated the development of a lower class culture which became a major subject of newspaper commentaries from the nineteenth century to present.

Practices associated with lower class culture which is generally related with Africanism, became criminalized. Thus, worshiping in the Shango religion which is a derivative of the Oreisha faith of West Africa was made illegal by the authorities. In his book, *the Wine of Astonishment*, Earl Lovelace described how the people of Laventille were frequently harassed by the Police for practicing their religion. Many were arrested and brutalized by officers of the law. Commenting on the conditions of the working class, Brereton indicated that, “the harsh conditions of the lower-class life inevitably bred crimes and the courts usually proceeded on the assumption that a black or Indian laborer was guilty unless he could prove himself innocent.”¹⁰ To this end, the Canboulay Celebrations which occurred annually to celebrate the emancipation of the enslaved were banned; and in 1888, the masses insistence on these celebrations resulted in what became known as the Canboulay riots. Thus, persons from the Laventille were frequently the target of the law. The steel pan, the only musical instrument to be developed in the 19th century, emerged from the hills of Laventille, and is now the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago. Due to its association with the lower class culture, steelpan yards were quite often targeted by police officers and the instrument eventually became tabooed. Only in the 1970s, when large companies initiated sponsorship of steelpan competitions did the instrument gain limited respectability. Thus, from the onset, the residents of Laventille have been stigmatized and maligned. The systematic culture of poverty which developed there left its occupants without a voice and for many, without a will. As described by Jerry Besson, “the very old houses, the shacks, the noisy yards,

¹⁰ Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962*, New Hampshire: (Heinemann, 1981),132.

the diseased quarries, the winding lanes” became an eye sore for those who must pass the unfortunate sight on their way to Port of Spain.

The conditions of the people of Laventille have deteriorated significantly despite some infrastructural changes. They continue to exist at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, old social ills persist and new ones have since emerged. The community is notorious for drug trafficking, gang warfare and an abundance of gun related activities. Unwilling to take responsibility for the historical tragedy which gave birth to slum areas such as Laventille, the political, social and legal machinery combined, shifted the responsibility to the occupants of the hill. As such, persons from the area were forced to wear the labels of idle, trouble makers, hooligans, violent, dishonest and a host of other socially degenerating appellations.

Notwithstanding the existence of other depressed communities in Trinidad and Tobago, Laventille remains the most suppressed. In general, its occupants continue in the cycle of poverty seemingly unable to break from the strongholds of Trinidad’s capitalist society. For the most part, the “dependent attitudes” of Laventillians usually bear the brunt of the responsibility for the conditions there. Such surmising prompted a study by Selwyn Ryan in 1997. His findings which were published in the book, *Behind the Bridge*, cited the historical development as being most liable. Persons from the areas encounter discrimination daily. Despite one’s qualification, an address in Laventille usually raises a red flag when seeking employment. Students from the area are seldom placed in the prestigious secondary schools outside the area after their eleven plus examination. These and other circumstances merge to stifle the development of the individual and community. Hence, for the average Laventillian,

arising from the ghetto generally remains unattainable. Consequently, there is a pervasive feeling of hopelessness among the youth. As such, for the most part, those successful persons who are originally from the Laventille community climbed the rungs of the social ladder through the assistance of some external stimuli, usually some religious affiliated organization.

Life Histories of Selected Laventillians

The Laventille Seventh Day Adventist church is located on Church Street in Laventille. It is in close proximity to, Parsley Street, which has become one of the 'hot spots' for crime in the neighborhoods. Established in the 1966 the church has become a beacon of hope to many, not merely for members of its congregation but also the surrounding villages; creating the possibility for self actualization. From its inception persons who joined the church with minimal means have been able to rise from the drudgery of life in Laventille. The list of persons from Laventille who have achieved social mobility primarily through their associations with the SDA church is not only long, but also very impressive. By far the largest constituents of this list are persons from extremely unfortunate circumstances who would have had different fortunes had it not been for their affiliation with the church. A close examination of the lives of these individuals have revealed that though living under similar conditions to their neighbors, in general those persons associated with the Laventille church have experienced different fortunes from their community peers. What is also very interesting is that while the success rate is also good for churches in other socially deprived community, none is as resounding as that of the one on Church Street. In fact, clear advancement in economic and social mobility among the membership is evident.

Several life histories attest to the nature of mobility among the members of Laventille Seventh Day Adventist Church. The story of Kihera Wallace is one which depicts the experience of a number of persons from that congregation having been able to emerge to social prominence against the odds. Born in the area known as “John John”, Kihera grew as a typical child on the hill; lacking the basic necessities for success. Nurtured in an extended family, she frequently attended the Laventille Seventh Day Adventist Church with her grandmother. However, over the passing of time her entire family ceased church attendance. Notwithstanding, her involvement in Adventurers and Pathfinders clubs as well as the music ministry increased her interest in attending church. Encouraged by her peers at church and motivated by the adults there, she aimed for success. Despite the challenges of attending secondary school, most days not knowing where her transport or her next meal would come from, she persevered. She recalled working two days per week while at secondary school to assist in the desperate economic situation at home. Unlike her neighbours, Kihera did not drop out of school nor become pregnant; but gained success at the Ordinary and Advanced levels of her secondary examinations and subsequently pursued a degree in social work at the University of the West Indies. Today, Miss Wallace is a manager of a probation department as a social worker practicing in England. Her success has assisted in lifting some of her immediate family members out of the deprivation in which they lived. Frequent remittances to her family allowed her grandmother to quit her ironing job. Additionally, Kihera has been able to assist her last sibling to attend university while at the same time supporting her cousin through secondary school. In this way, some members of that family have been lifted from the depths of poverty. Kihera has cited several elements of the church (to be discussed later) as the reasons for her resounding success.

In a similar manner Kevin Jackman commonly called KJ, also born in “John John” emerged through the squalor of the area to become an SDA Pastor. His circumstances were very similar to those of the first informant. Also nurtured in an extended parent family, KJ struggled to attend school many days, very often drinking only water for lunch; yet from the encouragement he received from church members, he determined to become a success. As a young man growing in an area where it was typical to join gangs, sell/abuse drugs or become involve in other illicit activities, KJ opted to pursue his education and lead other young persons to Christ. In fact his most visible male role models, those with whom he lived, stole and used illegal drugs, often spending days on the streets to indulge their habits. Despite the many vicissitudes, he attended university and is a one of the Conference’s youngest District Pastors today. When asked about the differences in his outcome when compared to his neighbors, he cited not only the support of his family but even more so the encouragement and support which he received from church members.

Other life histories include Alexander Hill and Rosanne Cummings. The first was raised in a nuclear but destitute family within close proximity to the church. Not having any Adventist connections he started church attendance through Vacation Bible School. Being encouraged by the fun-filled activities involved in the programmes, he continued attending Sabbath School and eventually joined the Clubs. Being excellent at singing and drama he quickly became a favorite at church both locally and nationally. Notwithstanding his father’s death while writing his Ordinary level exams, Alexander pursued his education. Today he is pursuing his PhD degree on a scholarship.

These examples are characteristic of current typical life stories of the majority of the successes emerging from Laventille Adventist church. Since a large number of cases of these types exist in the church, it stands to reason that there are elements unique to that congregation which fosters that type of success. All of the informants interviewed pointed to one element or another in the congregation which accounts for the high success rate of its membership.

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE CHURCH FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENHANCEMENT

The Strong Support System

All informants indicated that the Laventille congregation has traditionally been a ‘nanny community’- one in which elders nurture their children. While such tendencies are not unique to there, interestingly, in that church the senior/older members as well as the adults feverishly seek after the welfare of the young. The conflicts which usually surround the generation gap are noticeably absent from Laventille church as both young and old engage in social activities together. According to Aura Henry, Communication Director of the South Caribbean Conference of Seventh Day Adventist and a member of Laventille SDA Church, the very old members would be found in camps, church socials, concerts, uniform parades and the likes.¹¹ In fact, if certain key senior folks were not sure to attend an event, young persons also absented themselves. At all the club fairs-Adventurers, Pathfinders and Master Guide, the senior members from that congregation can be found. Informants noted that at any parade in which young persons from the church are involved, whether by way of marching or playing in the drum corps, the aged are usually seen walking or dancing alongside the bands. Moreover, the affection and interests of the senior folk have also been made manifest in very tangible ways as some senior members’ come equipped with a host goodies such as sweetbread, cakes, ponies and other delights

¹¹ Aura Henry, *Personal Interview*, January 2010.

every Sabbath in anticipation that there might be persons who did not have a meal. Such support has engendered in the youth a sense of reverence for the aged in the congregation. It has fostered a feeling of belonging which many of the youth lack from their own families. The knowledge that they are cared for and encouraged has propelled them to follow their dreams. By the same token this type of relationship in which adults gained the trust of the youth, has facilitated the growth of open loving relationships where both adults and young feel free to share their concerns of various nature.

The effectiveness of the support system offered by the membership is partially due to its modeling at the leadership level. Church Elders also become actively involved in life of the young seeking after both their spiritual and intellectual well being. Informants have indicated that whenever a youth was absent from church for more than two Sabbaths, the elders sought them out. KJ recalled that the elders paid particular attention to his academic development, giving advice and encouragement where necessary. Recognizing his potential, elders grasped the opportunity to nurture by calling him to the eldership. Yet another informant testified that at the age of fourteen years, an elder identified his lack of direction and encouraged him to eventually join the Police Service; a decision which changed his life. Such relationships have been fostered over the years by the continued involvement of church leaders and membership alike in the social life of the youth. They are present at youth meeting, concerts and most social events. Furthermore, unlike other congregations in which the young are chastised for untimely pregnancies and other unsanctioned behaviors, the elders at the Laventille congregation, while not condoning the wrong, generally extend a helping hand to such individuals; giving them the assurances

that they are still loved.¹² As a result the attrition rate among the young is very low as they view the church as a loving and caring environment and serves as the motivating force behind their success.

This element is critical in congregations such as the one under study. The reality is, that a large percentage of the membership, is either from dysfunctional families or non-Adventist homes; lacking the sense of belonging and identity necessary for success. Selwyn Ryan noted that, in the Laventille community there is a noticeable absence of solidarity where the youth in particular feel a sense of displacement. Roy Mc Cree also concurred that there is,

the lack of a strong sense of identification with the community, ...the youths of Laventille more than any other grouping have the greatest amount of ambivalence over whether Laventillians care about each other or not...the fact that youths of Laventille can be so unconvinced vis a vis this issue of communal trust says a lot about the behavioural models or examples to which they are exposed and the fundamental character of social relations within the community.¹³

In this regard, the strong sense of love and familial relations displayed by the membership in general and the leaders in particular is significant for the motivation of its youth.

Mentorship Programme

This ethos led to the development of an unofficial mentorship programme in which adult members voluntarily attached themselves to youth and high risk families (families with high absentee rates). In this way, everyone is accounted for and their needs are met. By the same token, members are always on the alert for visitors or a new family that may frequent the church. For those members who deemed themselves unable to reach an individual for one reason or another, someone else is quickly assigned to the case. This level of networking has saved many, both young and old alike. It has served

¹² Twana Thomas, *Personal Interview*, February, 2010.

¹³ Roy Mc Cree, 'Security and Solidarity in Laventille', *Behind the Bridge*, 237.

as a means of intervention to provide assistance for persons in the church and community who were in dire need of food. Mrs. Aura Henry noted that because of the strategic location of the church, members from the community sporadically in the hope of acquiring assistance. Responses from a survey done in the villages surrounding the church showed that out of thirty persons, thirteen sees the church as beneficial for the distribution of hampers. When such cases are spotted, after meeting their needs, members take contact information and the cases are then referred to the Bible Worker. It has been a practice throughout the years for the church to adopt less fortunate members of or visitors to the congregation. One of the most notable cases is the story of the Casey family. Two little girls from Upper Leon Street, Laventille, commonly called the ‘Gambinos’; started attending Vacation Bible School at the age of seven and eight. They lived in an abandoned house, where they skipped over holes in the floor to move around in the house. Unemployed, the single mother was unable to supply the basic needs of her three children. While attending VBS two members became acquainted with the case and sought intervention. The church subsequently adopted the children and though they initially battled with lying and stealing, the girls have since been baptized.¹⁴ Their education was sponsored by the church and members continue to ensure that their basic needs are met. This very strong support base has consistently led to numerous success stories in the ghetto. Thus, the mentorship which is reflected at all levels of the church function for the upward mobility of members.

The late Lucille Rodriguez has been one of the pillars of support among the youth of the Laventille SDA Church. According to Twana Thomas, “Sis Rodriguez was the backbone of the youth, she taught self-worth and discipline, to thrive despite being from Laventille.”¹⁵ She nurtured numerous

¹⁴ Twana Thomas

¹⁵ Ibid

youth, many of whom are accomplished adults today. Having worked in the Adventurer Club, Sister Rodriguez developed an intimate relationship with the young, often hosting camps by her home for those who could not afford to go to regular camps. She admonished them to prove their worth and to disappoint their detractors who continue to label them as failures because of their surroundings. Urging them to work hard at the club level, the group eventually reigned as the best among the Adventures and Pathfinders in Trinidad and Tobago for years at a time. Their achievements at that level fostered their belief in their abilities and propelled them to dream beyond their expectations. As a result of the respect harboured for Lucille Rodriguez, the youth under her mentorship excelled as an indication of their gratitude. Among the successful persons whom she nurtured are Andrew Hunte, Kim Roberts, Stacey Braveboy, Twana Thomas and many others.

Educational Development

Along with the moral and emotional support, the church's strong emphasis on education also accounts for the voluminous successes in the material enhancement of the members. It was promoted as the only way to escape poverty. Since several children did not have the educational support base at home, a homework center was established by a few members of the church to assist the young children in preparation for their eleven plus exams.¹⁶ Moreover, the children of secondary school age were encouraged to form study groups and those members of the congregation who were educators assisted by providing books, past examination papers and support. These initiatives led to, not only the advancement of members but of persons in the community. Observing the talents possessed by the youth of the church and the financial constraints which inhibited their ability to harness those skills,

¹⁶ Joan Murphy, *Personal Interview*, 31st January, 2010.

some members developed a fund to assist such individuals. Dubbed the needy student fund, this facility provided sponsorship for several persons in the completion of secondary school and tertiary level programmes. The education thrust has been extended to Vacation Bible School from which a thriving preschool emerged in the early 1990s.

Through Vacation Bible School, members were able to successfully woo the young persons of the village into church attendance and a better way of life. Every year prior to VBS, members walk out in the community to invite persons to send their children.¹⁷ For the most part, this represents their first contact with the church. Sabbath school attendance is subsequently incorporated in the VBS programme and parents are subsequently invited to the graduation ceremony. While the spiritual components of the programmes were high, the structure was tailored to cater for the children of the area. Thus, the Laventille SDA VBS was more skills and education based than the average. This served as an incentive and subsequently led to several persons joining the church as a result. Many have testified that the ethos exposed to while attending those sessions have significantly changed their lives.

Having observed the impact of Vacation Bible School, on the children of the neighborhood, the church established a kindergarten school to cater for the ages between two and a half to five years old. From the very onset teachers developed a close relationship with parents and attendance to Sabbath school was incorporated into the core curriculum. On Sabbath mornings teachers visited the children's home and escorted them to church. Being cognizant of the socio-economic background of the children, the Sabbath School teachers prepared breakfast and in some instances provided lunch. In this way, the

¹⁷ Twana Thomas, *Personal Interview*, March 4th 2010

church has been able to successfully meet the needs of numerous families in the community. The results have been far reaching. To begin, many have accepted the Lord Jesus as their personal savior. This has proven to be the first step in the improvement of one's life chances. When persons from the area attend church they quickly realize that there is a systematic path for the attainment of social mobility. The nurturing they receive and the philosophies to which they are exposed serve as a catalyst for their eventual advancement. The values of the church have therefore fostered the social mobility of its members and by extension the Laventille community. While all Adventist churches have a functioning education department, very few achieve the success as that of Laventille church. These programmes have been effective not only for its members or in their evangelistic intent but they have also combined to function for the social good of the neighborhood in which it is located.

Involvement in Social Groups

At the Laventille Seventh Day Adventist Church, every effort is made towards harnessing the talent of the young and providing positive ways for the expression of their God given abilities. The church has invested their resources, monetary and otherwise to ensure the success of the choir. Thus, their youth chorale established approximately twenty years ago, has served as a nurturing ground for the youth of the congregation across the period. It has played a role in the development of the youth, giving them the opportunity to showcase their talents and by so doing instilling in them a sense of pride and purpose. Their creative talents for music as well as drama secured for them the spotlight not only among Adventist circles but in the national Christian community as a whole. Having outrivaled all other Seventh Day Adventist choirs and numerous other national ones engendered in the group a sense of pride and fulfillment knowing that good things also emerge from Laventille. This provided the impetus for many to seek educational advancement. To further develop the self concept of the choir members,

the leaders hosted numerous retreats in which members were admonished to excel despite the fact that their geographical location dictated failure.

Members of the choir provided a positive source of peer pressure for each other. When one achieved he/she ensured that others also attained.¹⁸ Ms.Thomas recalled that one of the most outstanding members of the group literally completed her university application form and ensured that she submitted it. An analysis of the Youth Choir across the period 2000-2010 has revealed that 90% of its membership has successfully completed university, while the remaining ten are involved in lucrative employment. Two members of the group are currently Fulbright scholars because of the sharing of information and opportunities among its members.

Attempting to preserve the young men from the negative influences of their surroundings, the adult males of the church organized a men's group in 2000 under the leadership of Steve Adams. It aimed at providing positive role models for young men by engaging them in activities that strengthened their self concept and empowered them to make intelligent choices. The group met once per week on Saturday nights where they discussed issues such as dating, being a good spouse, making positive career choices and so on. KJ has testified to the effectiveness of this group in grooming him as a Youngman.

Similarly, a women's group was formed in 2005 to assist the young women in their holistic development. The group exposed young girls to opportunities and activities that they would not have

¹⁸ Twana Thomas, *Personal Interview*, March, 2010.

otherwise been exposed to. Cognizant that most of the young ladies were unpolished, attempts at grooming included etiquette activities and motivational lectures on building their self esteems. These types of activities elevated them from the squalor of their surroundings and assisted in the installation of pride in their psyche.

Community Outreach

Emerging from the caring ethos and strong sense of responsibility to the community is an organization which epitomizes the work that the church has been doing since its inception in 1966. The germ for the Loveuntil Foundation was born among a group of members from the AY Society who shared the burdens for the members of the community. Initially, the idea was to engage in a community project whereby the basic needs of food, clothing and skills development could be met. According to an article carried by a local newspaper in 2005, “

The Loveuntil Foundation comprises people who have an appreciation and understanding of the heritage of the Laventille community and the fortitude of its people. All the members hail from the Laventille community. Although most of them have relocated to other parts of the country, their hearts have remained with Laventille. They have all risen to the challenge, holding respectable positions in society, all sharing a common purpose of giving something back to their community.

An opportunity subsequently arose for the church to purchase a parcel of land obliquely opposite the main building, which it did in 1998. After the sod turning ceremony in 2001, the church constructed the first level of the building and began a soup kitchen and a bakery in 2004. Hot meals were distributed fifty needy persons in the community twice per week from the kitchen.

With its mission statement being to enhance the quality of life and empower the people of the community in order to achieve a spiritual society, this arm of the church aimed at developing a holistic approach to the problems of the community. They proposed to offer facilities and programmes that catered for the individual from the cradle to the grave. With this in view, the preschool was shifted from the church to the foundation. Additionally, a full fledged homework center in which qualified members from the church volunteered their time, came on stream. Music classes which include steel pan and piano are also currently offered at the center. In its very first year of official existence in 2005, the government engaged in a collaborative effort with them in the S.H.A.R.E. (Social Help and Rehabilitation Effort) programme. The programme commenced in 1993, however, realizing the Foundation's effectiveness in community enhancement the government offered to run the programme through the foundation in 2005 in the Laventille area for a period of six months. This partnership involved the donation of funds from the government for a six month period primarily for the distribution of food baskets and the establishment of skills enhancement initiatives to make recipients self sufficient. After the expiration of that contract the foundation kept the hamper distribution system and currently over 400 hampers are distributed monthly. Clothes are also given. Several skills programme are run to equip residents to be able to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The foundation offers classes in dress-making, basket weaving, sewing, tailoring, and plumbing. They plan to offer classes in computer literacy "once we get funding to source the computers."¹⁹

In line with the holistic vision of the foundation and its desire to enhance the quality of life of residents in the neighbourhood, the center acts as a facilitator for anger management lectures as well as

¹⁹ Marsha Mokool, "For the love of Laventille NGO gives hope to a community and its people", *The Trinidad Guardian*, Sept. 29th 2005.

talks on parenting and nutrition. A mobile health clinic is also operated out of the centre where free medical and dental checkups are done. They have trained personnel who conduct workshops to the youth of the area on the negativities of gambling, drug abuse and evils of gang membership. They focus in the development of a healthy self concept and in so doing assist high risk youth in dealing with the genesis of their problems and thereby equip them with the tools to make positive choices. The effectiveness of the programme has been so far reaching that the administrations of several troubled secondary schools in the Morvant/Laventille area have asked the Foundation to conduct the life-skills workshop in their various schools.

In 2009 the Ministry of National Security has awarded a contract to the Foundation for a 'Citizen Security Programme' in the 'never dirty' area in Morvant. This locality is notorious for gang warfare and a host of criminal activities. Warfare between two rival gangs literally has resulted in the daily massacre of young men of the 'never dirty' area. The situation is so severe that the life expectancy for the young men of the area is twenty-five. Being aware of the success of the Foundation the government embarked in a contractual arrangement with them to implement strategies to reach the people of that community. Foundation members working with that special project first gained the trust of the villagers by caring for the needy. On a weekly basis they clean the yards of the senior citizens, wash their clothes and take them to the market. After the community's confidence is won, several anger management and life skill workshops will be conducted. Moreover, the Ministry Of National Security also sends fire victims and other needy persons to the foundation for assistance.

Several support groups aimed at enhancing the quality of life of the people of Laventille are attached to the foundation. Friends Forever is the arm of the Foundation which seeks to assist drug addicts in the rehabilitation process. They provide moral, spiritual and emotional support for each other. Alarmed by the 90% relapse rate among rehabs in Trinidad and Tobago, the Foundation established the R.E.A.D.I (Recovery and Discovery) Centre in the rural district of Matura. The center operates on a six months cycle; the first stream began with eleven persons from the Laventille area; those who finished the cycle, a total of eight, got baptized and have remained clean to date. Yet another group, Courage Unlimited Please (CUP), a group initiated by Pastor Clive Dottin to discourage gang membership, is also doing work in the community. It is this arm of the Foundation which is involved in the project to reduce gang activities in 'never dirty'. There is also the Heart to Heart Ministry another arm of the pathfinder club. This group works with victims of domestic violence, AIDS and incest. A hotline was created to facilitate the work being done with this group. Since then, it has been extended to facilitate calls relating to awareness of criminal activities. It is currently a national hotline in which there are paid counselors available seven days per week.

Other activities of the foundation include the establishment of a senior citizen's home and a home for underprivileged children. The home for the age is still a work in progress but of December 2009 a children's home was acquired in the Tacaragua area which currently house twelve children. Reporting in 2005, the Chairman of the Loveuntil Foundation, Mr. Brian Jones noted that,

We have already started to make a difference in peoples' lives by uplifting them from a perception of helplessness and hopelessness, he lamented that Laventille residents had had to contend with stereotypical images of poverty, crime and drugs, which have stigmatized the community for decades. For generations, Laventille has been labelled a breeding ground for criminals and a graveyard for broken dreams. I know we can empower the people in this

community by renewing their faith and giving them an opportunity to make their dreams come true.²⁰

Conclusion

By and large the Laventille Seventh Day Adventist church has played a significant role in assisting individuals and families to climb out from the drudgery of the ghetto over the years. Through the nurturing of the youth and the engendering of tangible support, many have become socially mobile. The Seventh Day Adventist Church through its emphasis on education has been a vehicle for social mobility from its inception, however, the case of the Laventille chapter of the church is unique in the degree of success it has achieved towards this end despite the negative labels attached to the area. Seldom is positive attention given to the community. However, amidst the crime and violence, the Laventille SDA Church continues to reach out to residents offering them a chance for a better quality of life. A microscopic view of the changes in life chances of the members of the Laventille Church from its inception to present demonstrates the churches role in the enhancement of the quality of life of the people of Laventille by providing the raw material necessary for a move upward. With the exception of a few, the vast majority of individuals and families from the Laventille area which joined the church in an economically deprived state have since been elevated to better fortunes. This fact is most evident over the past ten to fifteen years among the young population of the church. Through the emphasis placed on the development of the youth, the church has secure for itself a solid future; Bull and Lockhart have indicated that, “Adventists who are better-off, college educated, or in professional-managerial jobs, are all more fully assimilated within the church.”²¹ By and large the Laventille SDA Church continues

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, 351.

to minister to the needs of their membership and the community and in so doing providing for them the opportunity for a better quality of life.