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ONLINE PROJECTS FOR ADVENTIST YOUTH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The article explores and presents the first online projects that were organized by young people who are members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ukraine. It was found that the initiators of the launch of the projects were the believing youth themselves, who, faced with the problem of the lack of weekly offline communication in churches, resorted to alternative methods of interaction. Online communication was developed in a youth style and focused on the interests and problems of young people, such as finding a life partner, learning to organize their time, complications in the development of spiritual life, etc. During 2020, more than a dozen online projects were carried out, including "12 days of fasting and prayer", "MK-1: 35", "The Power to Win", "Pray for..." (a project focused on the effective search for a life partner), as well as the updated project “12 days of fasting and prayer”, during which young people learned to get rid of “sinful hooks”. It was established that in 2020 more than 10 thousand young people, and not only Adventists, took part in these various online projects from all over Ukraine. In the questionnaires that were carried out after the projects by young people, it was indicated that the online form of communication helped many to focus more on spiritual issues and to pull themselves together.

Keywords: online projects, pandemic, youth, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Introduction

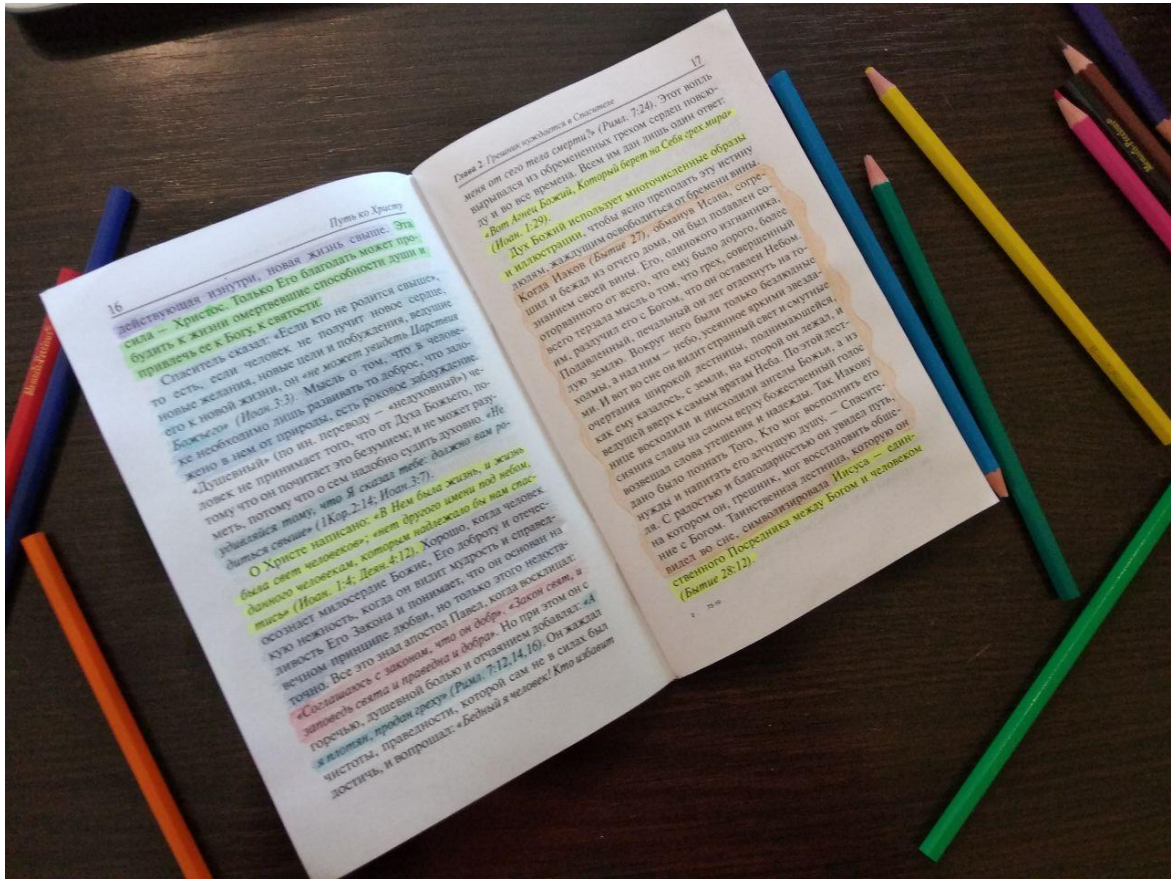
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the greatest discomfort to young people who are members of Protestant churches in Ukraine. Due to the prolonged stop of bus transport, the cancellation of many flights, the closure of borders, and the closure of entertainment centers, young believers who had been accustomed to communication from childhood were suddenly cut off from each other. All camp meetings of Protestant churches that were planned for youth

for the summer of 2020 were canceled due to the spread of the pandemic in Ukraine. In these circumstances, Protestant youth, including Adventist youth, plunged into the virtual online world. At first, the quarantine restrictions and the inability to hold joint meetings disappointed Adventist youth, but after two months of quarantine, the habit of communication developed by upbringing took over. The desire for constant social contact and communication with each other, and the search for new acquaintances and experiences, pushed the Adventist youth to search for new alternative ways of communicating under conditions of quarantine.

The Main Results of the Study

The first answer to this problem was a project called "12 Days of Fasting and Prayer" proposed by one of the regional Adventist youth leaders in Ukraine. Within the framework of this project, Igor Timko set the goal of teaching youth self-organization and maintaining a daily routine in conditions of online learning. The second goal was to build new goals and objectives under quarantine conditions, start playing sports, develop good habits, keep up with curricula, etc. The online project called "12 Days of Fasting and Prayer" among Adventist youth was launched in April 2020. In the ad, the organizers indicated that instead of watching pornographic videos, movies, TV shows, engaging in improper lifestyles, disturbed sleep patterns, hours of surfing on Instagram, and spending many hours on social networks, you will learn to implement good habits. Habits such as reading books, waking up early, exercising, limiting time watching TV shows, walking in nature, and reading the Bible.

To do this, 12 days in a row it was necessary to wake up every day at 6 am and read one chapter of Ellen White's book *The Way to Christ*. During the reading of the chapter, it was necessary to emphasize the ideas of the book in different colors. For example, in yellow - about God; orange -- something new; red – a ban; blue – a law or principle; green -- a promise. This underlining technique motivated young people to deeply comprehend the material they read in the book. Before reading the book, it was necessary to go to a Zoom meeting for 20 minutes to hear instructions from various pastors from all over Ukraine or a youth leader in Ukraine, Yevgeniy Alekhin, as well as get an assignment for the day.



Picture. 1 The technique of underlining the book being read

The project participants were divided into pairs and supported each other in mastering and practicing good habits throughout the day through communication on the phone or social networks. Also, an obligatory task for every day from the organizers was photographing a blossoming flower or a bud of a tree. The idea was that by observing the growth of plants, one would also learn to see and feel the changes in one's life. Besides, throughout each day, the project participants communicated in a common telegram group, sending different motivational quotes, personal reflections, and photos of nature.

In the evening at 20.00, there was a mandatory meeting on Zoom, where everyone could share their experience, get to know each other better, and tell what they managed to learn in a day, and what was given with difficulty. It is interesting to note that the bad habits that each young person identified in his life they called "hooks". And the main task was to learn to overcome these hooks in 12 days to improve the quality of life in quarantine.

According to one participant of the project, Katerina Balaban, the project 12 Days of Fasting and Prayer brought great joy, because "we understood each other and learned to support each other at a distance, and I especially liked that we could communicate again." It was a

constant tradition at the end of every online meeting to take screenshots of everyone smiling and showing hearts. The 12 Days of Fasting and Prayer project was repeated many times throughout the spring of 2020. He was joined by youth not only from the SDA Church but also by secular youth and young people from other Protestant churches.

One of the project participants, Adventist Mariia Ovchar (18 years old), during an interview, said that when she first went through this project, her life changed dramatically. Subsequently, she expressed a desire to become the organizer of such a project and hold it for her friends and acquaintances. The new project was designed for 20 to 40 participants. She created a group on a social network and launched an advertisement for the project. As a result, 23 people expressed a desire to join. The project called "MK 1:35" took place from 15 to 27 May 2020. The idea to name the project MK-1: 35 came to Vasily Bursuk after reading the verse of the Gospel of Mark 1:35, where the following words are written: "And in the morning, getting up very early, Jesus went out and retired to a deserted place, and there he prayed." After 12 days of joint evening and morning meetings, Adventist youth did not want to interrupt the communication project and invited the organizer Maria Ovchar to launch another project for a month. Therefore, the next project with the same name-- MK 1:35-- was launched on June 7 and lasted 30 days. During the survey, the youth voiced the reason for extending the project under conditions of quarantine restrictions with the following words: "we wanted to continue to communicate and motivate each other, as well as to develop together." The main book they read together during the month-long project was *Dare to Ask for More* by Melody Mason. Every morning and evening 80 participants from all regions of Ukraine read and discussed the contents of this book together. Also, various Christian managers, TV presenters, and famous personalities in the Protestant environment of Ukraine joined these meetings every evening at 20.00 and shared motivational stories from their lives with young people.

Maria Ovchar announced the following goals of the MK 1:35 project in the advertisement and at the first meeting: 1. Improve the organization of personal morning communication with God in prayer. 2. Improve the process of interaction with people around you, including with your partner on the project. 3. Determination of the scope of church ministry, with a prerequisite that it would bring moral pleasure and be useful to the church and society. 4. Carefully read Melody Mason's book *Dare to Ask for More* in one month.

At MK 1:35 there were 80 participants of different ages from different regions of Ukraine, as well as from Russia, Germany, and the USA. Of these, 80% are between 14 and 25 years old and 20% are older people. The organizing core of the MK 1:35 project was the participants from the previous project 12 Days of Fasting and Prayer. In the first 15 days of the

MK 1:35 project, the participants had to develop a set of useful habits, such as gratitude (especially to relatives), consistency (organization of business for the day), reading the Bible, prayer, reading the book *Dare to Ask for More*, sports, healthy eating, going to bed on time (before 23.00), etc. Hands folded in prayer became the logo of the project, which symbolized its importance in people's lives and the introduction of good habits into the daily life of young people.



Figure 2. Logo of the project "MK 1:35"

This project ended on July 6, 2020. In 30 days, half of the people gave up and became only formal participants, but those who reached the end and implemented all the principles in their lives commented that they had experienced real changes. One woman in her 40s wrote a review about this marathon. She was divorced, had a difficult relationship with her daughter, attended church, but all the time she felt unhappy, having reached such a state that she no longer wanted to live. During the project, she managed to improve her family relationships, find a ministry in the church that she liked, and the strength to develop in her business by serving the community with her talents.

Interestingly, the big age difference did not interfere at all and, on the contrary, made communication more diverse. For older people, it was a great opportunity to join the youth circle, which contributed to their development and knowledge of new trends. And for teenagers it was useful to listen to more experienced ones, so as not to make mistakes in their lives that could be avoided. Two young girls, about 19 years old, wrote that the marathon helped them decide in life, become more self-confident, improve their daily routine, realize their value and uniqueness, and also find many new friends who understand them and are ready to support

them at any time. After the end, the most active participants won gifts - interesting books and sweets - which were sent to them by mail.

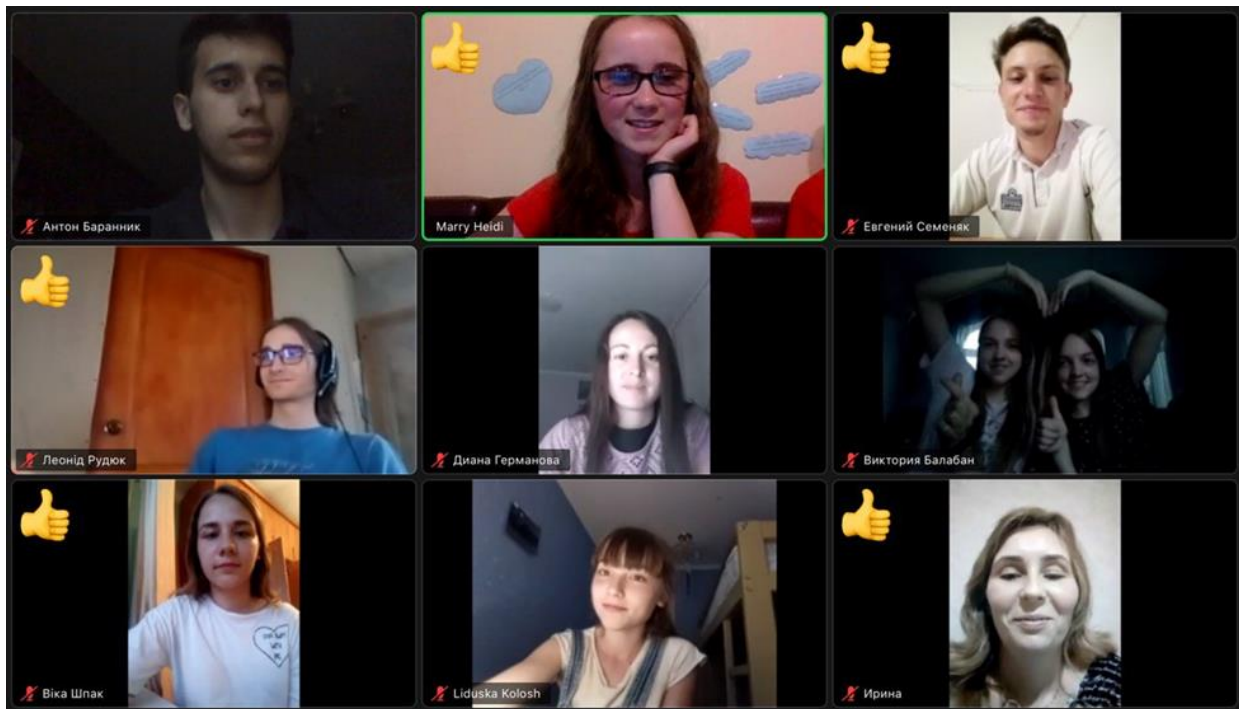


Figure 3. One of the evening meetings "MK 1:35"

After the end of the MK 1:35 project, full-fledged youth ministries were not resumed, and many who practiced good habits again wrote in the general chat and asked the organizers to continue online projects to maintain communication and develop a spiritual life. Therefore, on August 1, 2020, a project called "The Power to Win" was launched again, which was based on the book by Alejandro Bouillon. It was decided to launch the project in 12 days.

90 people took part in the Power to Win project. The main goal was to learn the principles of a winner by reading the aforementioned book and gain inner strength to manage your life and your time as efficiently as possible, emerge victorious from different situations, and also cultivate strong willpower. The main moral rule that young people have set as the goal of their learning is to "undergo the control of conscience" because when we watch a series, scroll through the Instagram feed, or do other unnecessary things, our subconscious mind at some point tells us to stop and do something more important. The only question is whether we will listen to the voice of conscience or continue to do what we did.

Every evening, young people shared their experiences and answered questions, after which they listened to the speaker (youth leader) for 20 minutes. In addition to the above, there

was a "feature of the day"-- a small practical task. For 12 days, each of the participants in the general chat shared information about themselves, their hobbies, favorite music, pets, favorite food, recipes, and much more. Also, Bible quizzes were an integral part of all projects. The youth read separate books of the Bible together, after which everyone could take the test in Telegram and thus test themselves. Based on the feedback from the participants, we can conclude that they liked the evening discussions the most. Here are the words of one girl: "It was very interesting, and the company of the guys was good: they are funny, smart, they will always support me. I enjoyed spending time with them".

After the end of the "The Power to Win" project from August 27 to September 7, 2020, the youth again launched the "12 Days of Fasting and Prayer" project, only in a new format. 40 participants were registered, each of whom set a goal: get rid of "hooks" - habits that pull to the bottom. With the beginning of the school year (September 1 in the countries of the former Soviet Union), young people began to meet in Zoom only on Saturday mornings and turned into a readers' club. Participants took turns presenting books they had recently read and asking questions about them, thus encouraging each other to read. This project has become a permanent one and is going strong to this day.

However, one of the most successful was the project called "Pray for ...". The topics of creating a happy family, relationships, and finding a life partner are relevant for many young people. The Pray for ... project was launched on January 21, 2021, and lasted 33 days. The main goals of the project were the following: to read and discuss together the book by Lydia Neukurs, *A Difficult Condition*--a book about family psychology; pray every day for your future or existing soul mate; normalize healthy self-esteem and, as a result, become an interesting, full-fledged, self-confident person.

Through advertising on Instagram and various Telegram groups, more than 240 members registered, mostly students and schoolchildren, but also some families and single people. Every day at 7 a.m., the project participants met in Zoom, sang psalms, read the three paragraphs of the book, received the assignment for the day, and prayed in twos. Everyday tasks were associated with self-development and self-knowledge because if you want to interest another person, you need to be interesting yourself and have your own business. One participant subsequently wrote a review: "Interestingly, the name of the project doesn't say that so many new things can be learned, but in many areas of my life I took useful principles for myself and applied them in practice, became more organized, and began to effectively use the acquired good habits every day."



Figure 4. Logo of the "Pray for ..." project

Once a week, the author of the book was connected to the youth project on the air. She answered the anonymous questions of the participants of the "Pray for ..." project, which they wrote in a special form during the week. Lydia Neukurs is a Christian psychologist and teacher at the Zaoksky Academy, and a good specialist in the field of raising children and keeping the family. She has developed an effective program for those people who are faced with the problems of family life but want to learn to understand and love each other to keep the family together.⁴ The participants later responded about her that despite her age, she was a very charismatic person, she answered all questions and offered a way out of different life situations.



Figure 5. Lydia Neykurs is a well-known Protestant psychologist in Ukraine

Also, twice a week, young people invited spouses from Christian families. They told the stories of their acquaintance, the problems they encountered before and after the wedding, and answered questions from the participants, as well as shared their own experiences in starting a family. Happy families were an example for those who did not yet have their own and instilled confidence in the possibility of building a strong Christian marriage.

After the end of the project, a short survey was conducted to summarize and identify errors. To the question "How did you get involved in this project?" 50% answered that they had taken part in previous youth projects, 15% saw the link in Telegram, 25% noted that they were recommended by a friend, and another 10% via Instagram.

To the question "Rate the project on a 10-point scale" 54% gave the maximum rating, 38% gave it a lower score and 8% rated it at 7 points. The work of the team was assessed by 61% at the maximum mark - 5 points, the remaining 39% were lower by a point. To the question "What were the expectations from the project?" most answered: find answers to their questions, have fun, chat, meet new people, etc.

Most of all, the respondents liked the friendly atmosphere, competent speakers, topics on self-development, the opportunity to hear the experiences of dating couples, quizzes that were held every week and were an additional incentive to study the Bible, talking with a random person in the morning, and much more.

Some participants were unhappy that sometimes the guests did not answer specifically the questions posed, that there were many tasks related to watching videos, little time for discussions, not enough tasks for personal Bible study. Some said it was a rather protracted project, it was already boring, it would have been better to stick to one topic all day rather than be scattered, and some wanted even more speakers and experiences.

To the question "What practical benefit did you get for yourself?" most of the respondents noted: a lot of friends and emotions, good habits for everyday life, good advice from experts, and getting up early. Also, one participant wrote that thanks to the marathon, she was supported during a difficult period of her life. Many respondents wrote that this project was one of the most highly organized, without any delays or interruptions, which helped to establish a regime and develop consistency.

Consequently, the "Pray for ..." project helped many young people understand themselves, approve clear principles for building relationships, get distracted during quarantine, meet many new people from different regions of Ukraine and learn how to invest time and effort in their development. All projects were based on books because even if the

participant did not attend meetings and complete assignments, the book he read will in any case leave a mark on his life.

From the survey, the following were found to be the main disadvantages of online projects: lack of personal contact with people; poor attendance 3/10 - if there are 100 people in a group, then at conferences, at best, up to 30; for discussions, the optimal number is 15-20 people, so that everyone has the opportunity to express their opinion, when there are more participants, then it becomes uninteresting - the youth noted in the survey; the need to organize projects for an audience of the same age, because sometimes young people are not interested in listening to the problems of adults or their long statements.

The youth noted the following main advantages of online projects: meeting new people from different parts of the country despite the quarantine; collective motivation for self-development and reading books; the friendly atmosphere of acceptance; outside support during difficult periods of life; establishing a clear schedule through morning and evening meetings; expanding horizons through communication with people of different ages.

Conclusions

Protestant youth, including Ukrainian Adventists, reacted in a peculiar way to the restrictions due to the pandemic in Ukraine. Motivated by the desire to interact, young people shifted the focus of their communication from offline to online. This movement was initiated by the young people themselves, who, unable to withstand the absence of the usual Protestant communication, created thematic online projects that partially satisfied their communication needs. In other words, the Protestant habit of interacting, developed in offline forms, pushed the young generation to self-organize and create alternative communication channels that focused on solving the problems of Protestant youth in the territory of Ukraine.