

Mixed bag of youth organizations in Baptist churches

February 8, 2022

A few years ago, Jocelyn Whalen wanted to involve her adolescent son and daughter in youth organizations reflecting her family's values.



American Heritage Girls claims 52,000 girls and adult members in all 50 states. (American Heritage Girls Facebook Page)

From a homeschooling group, she learned about [American Heritage Girls](#) and [Trail Life USA](#)—organizations formed to provide explicitly Christian alternatives to the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, which are faith-based but nonsectarian.

Whalen became a leader in the American Heritage Girls troop at Calvary Hills Baptist Church in San Antonio, where her family worships.

“American Heritage Girls is founded on Christ and on Christian values,” Whalen said. “It’s aligned with our beliefs. ... At a time when there are competing voices talking into girls’ lives, it offers Christian influence.”

American Heritage Girls claims 52,000 girls and adult members in all 50 states, and Trail Life reports 36,000 members in more than 850 troops around the country.

No monopoly for denominational missions programs

Many of the troops have found homes in conservative nondenominational congregations. They also are making inroads into some Baptist congregations—territory once occupied primarily by missions-oriented [Royal Ambassadors and Challengers](#) programs for boys and [Girls in Action](#) and [Acteens](#) programs for young women.

Calvary Hills Baptist Church formerly offered GA and RA programs but discontinued them when it was unable to enlist enough leaders to sustain them, said Sharrich Scott, missions leader at the church.

American Heritage Girls—and later Trail Life—became an effective outreach into the community as it attracted children and parents beyond Calvary Hills' membership, Scott said.

Those parents have been willing to take leadership roles in the organization, and their children have developed leadership skills, she added.

“I have seen them grow,” she said, pointing to the willingness of students not only to volunteer, but also lead service projects such as food drives. “They are learning how to be leaders.”

‘A safe place to learn and grow’

A group of parents in suburban Cincinnati, Ohio, founded American

Heritage Girls in 1995 when they became dissatisfied with Girl Scouts. Just prior to that point, the Girl Scout National Council voted to interpret the “serve God” pledge in the Girl Scout Promise broadly enough to accommodate girls from families who identify as “spiritual but not religious.”

Trail Life USA formed in 2013 after the Boy Scouts of America changed its membership policy to allow openly gay leaders and youth of any sexual orientation. Trail Life bills itself as “the largest Christ-centered, boy-focused, scout-type organization in the country.”

Like Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, both American Heritage Girls and Trail Life focus on character development and leadership in a troop setting. Youth earn badges and work their way through rank advancement.

“It’s a safe space to learn and grow,” Whalen said, specifically describing her daughter’s experience with American Heritage Girls. “Girls can discover their talents and passions, learning from their mistakes.”

Flexibility key to thriving missions programs

Leaders of age-level missions organizations such as RAs and GAs are quick to note those programs not only offer many of the same components, but also provide a strong emphasis on missions education and missions action.



Savion Lee, a Rice University graduate who grew up in First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, credits Royal Ambassadors with opening his heart and mind to God's calling on his life. (TBM Photo)

Neither Texas Baptist Men nor Woman's Missionary Union of Texas track the specific number of churches with RA, Challenger, GA or Acteen chapters, and total membership figures for the age-level missions organizations are not readily available.

However, the TBM-sponsored annual Missions Mania event offers one measure of church involvement in RAs and Challengers. At best, participation was flat in the five years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. TBM reports 43 churches participated in 2015 and 2016. Participation dipped to 33 in 2017 and 2018 before rebounding somewhat in 2019 with 37 churches at the event.

Even so, the RA and Challenger programs remain strong in some congregations—not only small rural churches, but also larger congregations such as First Baptist Church in Midland and First Baptist Church in Allen, said John Hall, TBM communications director.

The common denominator among thriving programs is flexibility, he noted.

“Across the state, leaders with Royal Ambassadors and Challengers groups are seeing where the young people in their community are and are engaging them with the gospel,” Hall said.

“Sometimes that means going hiking or camping. Other times, it means having pizza together each week. The methods vary. But whatever the approach, boys and young men are learning how they have a role to play in God’s kingdom and are living out that calling.”

Willing to adapt and try innovative approaches

GA and Acteens leaders generally point to similar trends—loyal support in some congregations, but generally, the programs have plateaued or declined.



Acteens from Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland cook lunch at church to raise funds for a mission trip. (Courtesy Photo)

However, age-level missions organizations continue to thrive in some churches—particularly those that have been willing to adapt and try innovative approaches.

[Freeman Heights Baptist Church](#) in Garland continues to offer flourishing age-level missions programs and to raise up new leaders both for its own congregation and for Christian service in general.

In the past two and a half decades, Freeman Heights has produced eight National Acteens Panelists and three state-level Acteens Panelists.

“We don’t have a lot of resources. We’re a very blue-collar church,” said longtime GA and Acteens leader Mary Lou Sinclair.

If the church lacks financial resources, it makes up the difference in creativity and flexibility.

The church’s GA and RA programs meet each week on Wednesday evening for 45 minutes to an hour while parents are involved in a time of prayer and Bible study.

‘We meet them where they are’

Acteens, on the other hand, meet every other week for two to three hours at varied times—sometimes Friday, sometimes Saturday and other times Sunday, depending on school-related commitments and extracurricular activities. Sinclair contacts the Acteens through social media, and they reach a consensus on a day and time to meet that fits their busy schedules.



Acteens from Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland lead a summer program at The ROC. (Courtesy Photo)

“There’s really not a time each week, other than Sunday morning, when we have the whole family together at church,” Sinclair said. “It’s still OK for GAs to meet each week on Wednesday, but that doesn’t work with teenagers. We work with their schedules.”

The teenagers enjoy having a longer time together—sharing a meal, working together on a mission project, building relationships and learning about their part in God’s mission together, she noted.

“We meet them where they are,” she said.

Acteens at Freeman Heights engage in missions action through a variety of projects at [The ROC](#)—The Re-Creation Outreach Center—in West Garland.

Freeman Heights launched the community center, which now also receives support from several other area churches under the umbrella of Metro Family Ministries. The ROC offers varied after-school programs for children and youth, a pregnancy center, a food pantry, clothes closet and the monthly Neighborhood Table free community dinner.

Acteens are involved in various ministries at The ROC throughout the

school year, as well as working as volunteers in summer programs offered there.

Provide opportunities to assume leadership

Marisol Sandoval grew up in the GA and Acteens programs at Freeman Heights, achieving Top Teen status with national WMU her senior year in high school. Sandoval now is an office manager and administration assistant at Texas WMU. She also serves as an adult leader with Acteens at her home church after learning firsthand how age-level missions programs can change lives.



Marisol Sandoval of Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland is a former Top Teen who grew up as a member of Mary Lou Sinclair's Acteens. Sandoval now serves alongside her mentor as an Acteens leader. (Video screen shot by Pam Henderson)

"I came to know Jesus through GA camp," she said. "And as a GA camper, I saw the Acteens on staff and said to myself, 'I want to be like that.'"

"Mary Lou made it a priority to take Acteens to any and every WMU event possible. She helped us learn, 'You are a part of something bigger.'"

Sinclair gave Sandoval opportunities to begin accepting leadership roles early, and she continues to work collaboratively with her now.

“It’s what Mary Lou has done for a lot of us. She sees what we can be and helps nurture that, giving us a loving push and encouraging us,” Sandoval said.

Instead of “aging out” of Acteens, young women at Freeman Heights have become involved in age-level missions programs as leaders—either at their home church or elsewhere, she noted.

Sandoval considers Sinclair her “friend and mentor,” and she wants to invest in the lives of young Acteens the way Sinclair invested in hers.

“We build relationships by taking them out to eat or to visit at a coffee shop. It’s the relationships that keep them coming,” Sandoval said.

Both Sinclair and Sandoval emphasized the need for adult leaders to be flexible and be willing to devote the necessary time to developing deep relationships with the Acteens.

“You have to be creative,” Sinclair said. “Be willing to step out of the box.”

Piloting a community missions group model

One outside-the-box approach some Texas Baptists are taking to engage children in missions education is a [community missions group](#) model—an approach piloted in Tarrant Baptist Association.

“Our Tarrant team has been exploring the future and looking at avenues for creativity and newly opened doors for ministry,” said Derinda Williams, associational GA/Children in Action consultant.

While it continues to encourage churches to start age-level missions programs, Tarrant Baptist Association also is “developing community

missions groups that will reach kids inside and outside the church as God makes it effective in the hearts of his kids,” Williams said.

The Mansfield/South Arlington community mission discipleship group launched in 2019 with leaders drawn from several area churches and a goal of developing a “Christ-centered missional presence in a community that isn’t attached to a specific congregation.”

Williams and her team selected missions curriculum, established a calendar of weekly meetings during the school year, planned monthly missions projects in the community and provided a camp in the summer.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the associational [GA community group](#) to transition last year from in-person meetings to online weekly gatherings, drive-through projects and a virtual summer day camp that featured daily Bible lessons, a craft project and fun activities.



Mansfield/South
Arlington community
mission discipleship
group hopes to involve
children from their area

in a missions camp in July.

“We actually grew when we were online,” Williams said, noting in-person meetings resumed last fall. “We kept every girl involved.”

Williams believes the community missions groups also could work for Royal Ambassadors and Acteens. She particularly sees the community-based groups as an option for smaller congregations that may not have enough adult leaders to operate programs on their own but could collaborate with sister churches.

As an associational consultant, Williams noted some church leaders want to incorporate missions projects and missions education into existing programs for children and students in the congregations.

She applauds the desire to make missions a component of other church programs. However, rather than try to tack a missions lesson or missions project onto other programs, she tries to help churches find ways to adapt age-level missions resources in creative ways.

“Why not use the curriculum and programs with missions as their focus that already exist?” she asked.