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FEATURED

# More than 1,000 Pathfinders signed up for baptism at Camporee. What went into those decisions?

By SUSAN MONAGHAN \* NEWS RECORD REPORTER smonaghan@gillette newsrecord.net  
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A pastor and a pathfinder embrace after being baptized during the baptism at the main stage during the International Pathfinder Camporee on Thursday in Gillette.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

The kids came out of the baptismal tank in water-logged Pathfinder uniforms, shaking and stiff-limbed, sometimes in twos and threes and, occasionally, by themselves.

In the space between the tank and the big cardboard wall guarding the changing tents, it was hard to tell where one party began and another ended, as in which kid belonged to which parent, or the difference between parents and the pastors charged with the night's baptisms.

In any case, it was a place for love: adults threw big towels around the freshly blessed, and when they cried there was somebody by their side — parents or siblings, or the co-baptized — to ground them.

While watching these kids move between the tank and the wall, it was clear that for a lot of them, the moments after immersion baptism produced a state of mind they could not or would not share. Grouped or solitary, it didn't matter, most stayed silent as they funneled down wooden planks into the exit doorway.



Pathfinders wait for their baptisms in the pool at the main stage during the International Pathfinder Camporee on Thursday in Gillette.

Pendleton Pathfinder pastor Stephen Farr said that he estimated about 1,200 Pathfinders were scheduled for baptism last week. Because the International Pathfinder Camporee ended a day early, due to weather concerns, Friday's baptisms started half an hour earlier than usual to accommodate the rest of the week's slate. By Saturday it wasn't clear how many baptisms had been performed in total.

Farr likened the Seventh-day Adventist Church's version of baptism to the death and resurrection of Jesus — performed with Christ, retroactively. This, he said, was well understood by the thousands of Camporee attendees.

“In their mind, what they're accepting is ... ‘I'm dying with Christ, going into the tomb, then I'm being resurrected with him,’” Farr said. “That's why (the crowd) is all cheering, they're literally seeing them reborn.”

Did the Pathfinders feel the Biblically-prescribed resonances Farr had talked about when being baptized? There was, in any case, a yearning for connection woven into the testimonials of the pre-baptized.

Some Pathfinders said that they'd been highly motivated to get baptized by a desire to strengthen a relationship — typically with their family or a church leader they were close to.



Pathfinders start to line up before the baptism at the main stage during the International Pathfinder Camporee on Thursday in Gillette.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

Hearing this, an outsider to the church might then be left with questions about the aftermath, which, for so many of those hundreds of sopping Pathfinders as they headed to the exit, looked like solemn happiness.

### **A way toward one another**

The young members of the San Diego Fil-Am Pathfinder Club were easy to spot in the crowd waiting to line up for baptisms Thursday evening. The girls' hair had been woven into twin French braids, and the boy of the group — Quione Corrales, 15 — was a head taller than everyone else.

Members of the club had spent the last year studying the Bible with their beloved senior pastor, 62-year-old Lim Liwang, and galvanizing youth pastor Rhidge Garcia, 27. Garcia was not much taller than his Pathfinders, and he smiled easily when Melkiana Rebolledo, 15, said that he was the reason she'd rededicated herself to the church last year.

Not 15 minutes later, most of the San Diego Fil-Am club members present had been baptized. Garcia stood beside Corrales, waiting in the wet line queued in front of the changing tent. Corrales was crying. He pushed his hair back from his forehead to articulate himself, fighting a tide of intense emotion.

"I just felt pure happiness. I've been having some doubts about getting baptized and it was so hard to solidify my faith," Corrales said. "I wasn't sure if I was ready to be baptized, but (Rhidge) was the one who convinced me now was the right time."



Quione Corrales cries as he embraces a staff member after being baptized during the baptism at the main stage during the International Pathfinder Camporee on Thursday in Gillette.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

Garcia's smile didn't drop for a second — his buoyancy was unshakable. In the moment it was easy to see how he'd been able to instill the confidence of renewed faith in these questioning teenagers.

"There have been some days (in ministry) that I've been bitter," Garcia said. "I feel like when we have moments like this ... I feel like we're tapping into the kingdom of God."

For some Pathfinders, baptism was a quieter victory. In the line for the changing tent on Tuesday evening, Leroy Mhondiwa, 17, was serenely happy in his dripping Pathfinder uniform. Leroy said that when he

was a little kid, his brother Kudzai, who's five years older, had made Pathfinders — and by extension, the faith — look irresistibly cool. “I was really jealous of him at the time, (Kudzai) had a really great group, but I was very happy for him,” Leroy said.



Pathfinders wait to be baptized in the pool during the baptism at the main stage during the International Pathfinder Camporee on Thursday in Gillette.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

Kudzai Mhondiwa, 23, discontinued with Pathfinders when he was a level three, or “Explorer,” and he was quick to point out that Leroy had made it all the way to the “Guide” class, the last level before adult-level Pathfinder training.

“I’m really, really proud of him, honestly, he showed me what I couldn’t do,” Kudzai said. “It’s like my dream has been lived through him.”

The implications here aren't difficult to put a finger to. For Leroy as much as Corrales, baptism wasn't just a display of commitment to their faith: it was an inroad to people in their lives they most revere. It's no wonder the aftermath — now that it's never to be repeated, never redone — solicits different reactions.

## **Choice and control**

To that point, no one behind the baptismal tank last week was claiming a person's family had nothing to do with the decision to be baptized.

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church prides itself on making the act of getting baptized a choice, many were transparent about the philosophical problem of determining how old, and how prepared, a person should be to make a lifelong commitment to God.

“Some of the parents here feel really strongly that you need to have cognitive ability to have the ability to make a lifetime choice,” said Dan Myers, 46. “You can be judgmental and say you have to be 18 to make your decision, and on the other end you can say, ‘I can baptize you right now,’ but there may be no follow through.”





A pastor prepares a Pathfinder to be baptized during the baptism at the main stage during the International Pathfinder Camporee on Thursday in Gillette.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

Sherry Clapp, a 72-year-old principal at Jefferson Christian Academy, said that she'd made the decision to be baptized when she was 10 — but at 18, despite her family being highly active in the church, she had a crisis of faith.

She was motivated to re-evaluate her relationship with the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, to re-personalize herself with it. The act of reclaiming her faith in young adulthood, she said, made it stronger.

“I think sometimes you feel like, ‘My parents brainwashed me,’” Clapp said. “And I think that’s normal for an 18-year-old to say, ‘What do I really believe? Or, ‘Is this just what my parents always taught me?’”

It’s hard not to picture Clapp’s Seventh-day Adventist family and husband as variables in her decision to rejoin the church. And yet to say that the people who stay in the faith they were born into were robbed of control seems to elide the fact that everyone, without exception, is born into circumstances they can’t control.

The kids who chose baptism in Gillette last week may not have had control over the circumstances that gave them that choice — within their own families or otherwise — but it could also be argued they were given choices those born outside of their faith would never have.



A pathfinder laughs as she walks out of the baptism pool after being baptized at the main stage during the International Pathfinder Camporee on Thursday in Gillette.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

Craig Carr, a Ministerial Director and one of the week's baptism coordinators, was directing kids up and down the wooden steps to the tank Thursday night when he said that this whole ceremony is just a swim, if the inner change that it signifies hasn't already happened.

"Baptism is one of the greatest symbols of your walk of faith," he said. "It's like being married with Christ, the baptism is kind of like a marriage."

And marriage means commitment. It's a series of choices years into a future you can't see. Whether that equates control is up to anyone's definition of how expansive control must be to count.

But the choice to offer a lifetime commitment to the people you love most is not given to everyone. It's going into the tomb with them, in the unclear water of a mass baptism or otherwise, and it's everything that comes after.

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Susan Monaghan