

# GEN Z AND THEIR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATION

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## ABSTRACT

*One defining characteristic of Generation-Z—those who are currently collectively under the age of 25, is their concern for social justice. They fight for themselves, their friends, their classmates, and others they see treated unfairly, whether due to issues of gender, sexuality, race, pay, or environmental. Yet a major social justice concern for Gen Z and youth in general is limited participation or lack of access to processes that affect their lives. This paper argues that meaningful participation of young people is vital because, 1) Young people have always been key players in God’s mission; 2) Youth participation is a human right; 3) Historically youth have been key actors of social and political changes; 4) Their participation enhances order and stability in society; 5) Their participation enhances provision and protection rights; and 6) Their participation prevents and/or reduces their dropping out of the church.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Youth participation is a basic concept in the circle of human rights practitioners and advocates. In the social sciences, theories and *praxis* in the domain of youth participation are generally anchored in two international frameworks—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirm the right of youth to participate in family, social and political life. Mary C. Kohler viewed youth participation as “the involvement of young people in responsible, challenging action that meets a genuine need, with young people having the opportunity for planning and decision-making that affect others in an activity that has an impact on others (people or community), but definitely beyond the young people themselves” (Kohler 1983, 67).

## GEN Z AND THEIR RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION

One defining characteristic of Generation-Z—those who are currently collectively under the age of 25 (White 2017, 37), is their passion for social justice. Research from Sparks and Honey (2014) reveals that social entrepreneurship is one of Generation Z’s most popular career choices. Mary Meehan (2016) wrote in *Forbes* magazine about Gen Z (which she surnamed “Gen We”) noting these teens “are passionate about equality and justice of every kind. They fight for themselves, their friends, their classmates and others they see treated unfairly, whether due to issues of gender, sexuality, race, pay, or environmental.” Yet, a major social justice concern for Gen Z is limited participation or their exclusion from decision-making processes that affect their lives. Why is youth participation vital for society and the church?

This chapter argues that meaningful participation of young people is vital because: 1) Young people have always been key players in God’s mission; 2) Youth participation is a human right; 3) Historically they have been key actors of social and political changes; 4) Their participation enhances order and stability in society; 5) Their participation enhances provision and protection rights; and 6) Their participation prevents or reduces their dropping out of the church.

## YOUNG PEOPLE AS KEY PLAYERS IN GOD’S MISSION

Scripture points to God frequently picking those who are young, faithful, diligent, and obedient, as his chosen instruments to carry out the work related to redeeming fallen humanity. Old Testament provides prominent examples such as Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, Gideon, the little girl in Naaman’s house, Esther, David, and so on, (Gen 25:27-28; Gen 3:39-46; Judg 6, 1 Sam 3; 2 Kgs 5; Esth 1-10). There are clear indications that they all were teenagers when they were chosen by God for a specific ministry. God’s approval of youth participation transcends cultural barriers and the tradition of the Biblical time, as he chose young leaders in a context where leadership was generally reserved for elders, where respect for the aged was a cherished value, and the very fact one had grown old conferred merit (Berlin 2011).

Although the New Testament does not reveal the exact age of the twelve disciples, a significant number of pointers lead many to believe that they could have been 13-29 years of age. For example, the disciples often called Jesus *Rabbi* (Mat 23:7; 26:25; 26:49; Mark 9:5; 14:45, etc.).

The term applied to a Jewish teacher in Bible times, and after A.D. 70 became a technical expression for those ordained in the rabbinic movement (Keener 2014, 785). While no historical data is available on the required age to be a rabbi, the sociological context of the New Testament makes it hard to believe a master could be younger than his followers and garner their respect and obedience as Jesus did. Knowing that, according to Luke 3:23, Christ started His ministry at the age of thirty, the disciples were probably younger than thirty.

In the days of Christ's disciples, a young man was expected to marry around his late teens or early twenties (Collins and Harlow 2010, 530). Among the disciples, Peter is the only one the Gospels report to have a wife (Matt 8:14-15); Mark 1:29-30; Luke 4:38-39). There is a probability that many among the Twelve, except perhaps Peter, were younger than twenty.

A young man needed to be at least thirteen years of age to leave his house and follow a master (Collins and Harlow 2010, 563), because those younger than thirteen were still considered to be a child (Berlin 2011, 167). Furthermore, calling his disciples "little ones," (Matt 10:42; 11:25) would have been offensive in New Testament times if they were not younger than Christ.

Brothers James and John gave evidence of their youthfulness because Jesus called them to follow while they were fishing as apprentices under their father Zebedee (Matt 4:21-22). And their mother intervened on their behalf to Jesus, requesting that her boys be seated in places of honor in Christ's coming kingdom (Matt 20:20-21). This demonstration of their mother's care and protection hints at the youthful status and dependence of James and John.

#### YOUTH PARTICIPATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Youth participation is human rights issue. The most significant gain of the children's rights movement in recent history came in 1989 when the United Nations adopted the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Currently this remains the principal international framework for children's rights. The UNCRC can be divided into four broad categories of rights: 1) The right to survival; 2) The right to development; 3) The right to protection; and 4) The right to participation.

The right to survival is discussed in articles six and 27 of the UNCRC, recognizing the inherent right to life, health, and well-being that every country must ensure according

to its capacities. The same goes for the right to enjoy the best state of health possible, and the guarantee that children will have access to medical and education services.

The right to development is addressed in articles 28 and 29, which recommends that primary education should be compulsory and free for all. Measures are to be taken to encourage regular attendance at school and to reduce the dropout rate, especially among girls, and make sure education contributes to each child's personality, talent, and ability to the fullest.

The right to protection is articulated in articles 19 through 23, 30, 38, 39, discussing the commitment of States to ensure protection for all children, especially the disadvantaged ones.

Finally, the right to participation is discussed in articles 13 through 15, which encourage all states to guarantee the rights for children to express themselves, and freedom of thought. It also encourages freedom of conscience and religion, association, and peaceful assembly. In virtue of the principle of universality of human rights and the principle of non-discrimination of the UNCRC (Article 2), the above-mentioned rights should apply to all children regardless of their sex, age, race, religion or abilities.

#### YOUNG PEOPLE AS KEY ACTORS IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGES

Youth have been at the forefront of societal changes in many countries. It was young people initiated the movement that took place in 2011 in many Muslim Middle-East countries, called *Arab Spring*, which shook off decades of dictatorship under the rulership of despotic leaders. Haiti, my home country, is one example of political activism by young people. Organized students, mainly unions and similar associations, have been at the forefront of almost all social and political changes in the country. Historically, university students have been the most politically prominent; but, students at secondary and elementary level have also been very active. Student militancy is always joined by other kinds of less visible youth organizations and movements. When it comes to less formal organizations, one can observe a wide range of other associations, including music groups and even gangs and social bandits of various kinds. Both Jean Claude Duvalier and Jean Bertrand Aristide's dictatorial and anarcho-populist regimes respectively stumbled when student groups joined

by other informal youth associations decided to risk their lives and defy the oppressive authorities.<sup>1</sup>

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION ENHANCES ORDER AND STABILITY IN SOCIETY

Marginalized children and youth represent a threat to order and stability of a country. Numerous studies show that when young people are denied the prospect of effective participation, they often turn to criminality or militarism. Nanette Davis (1999) studied the “gang problem” in the United States and found that those in gangs represent a parallel “pseudo-community,” as they are the replica of the social, economic order of society. Gangs are very attractive to alienated youth, giving them a sense of belonging; but at the same time they have a “propensity to disruptive, antisocial or criminal behavior” (Davis 1999, 231). When young people’s energy is not mobilized for constructive actions and channeled into peace and development, unscrupulous adults easily exploited it for violence and destabilizing movements. Tangible examples are places like *Cite Soleil*, *Martissant*, and *Bel-Air* in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince/Haiti, which have become out-of-control zones. Cynical gang leaders in these places provide frustrated and uneducated youth with weapons and give them access to drugs, thus making of them a new class of malignant hordes of armed bandits with no other option other option than to steal, murder and destroy. It’s true in other countries as well. Marisa Ensor and Amanda Reinke noted that “youth’s marginalization from mainstream economic life, political acknowledgment, and civic responsibility represents a potential threat to peace and stability in South Sudan” (Ensor and Reinke 2014, 85).

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION ENHANCE PROVISION AND PROTECTION RIGHTS

Participation enhances children’s provision and protection rights. Lansdown acknowledged children’s participation not only “as a right in itself, as specifically expressed in Article 12 of the UNCRC, but also as a means by which all other children’s rights may be realized” (Ensor & Reinke 2014, 74). In South-Sudan Ensor and Reinke observed that protectionist approaches applied by international organizations—approaches that might be rigid and non-contextualized—could be counter-productive if they keep the children away from activities that would

contribute to their survival, their development and their socialization.

The same is true for young Haitians who have noble aspirations for their future and crave education and useful jobs. They have demonstrated their creativity in finding means of articulating their aspiration and engaging in constructive actions. Even during longstanding hardships and adversity, youth clubs and associations throughout the country unwaveringly have succeeded in carrying out innovative educational, cultural and economic projects.

### Youth Participation Helps Retain Them in the Church

Roger Dudley’s 10-year longitudinal study of youth retention in the Seventh-day Adventist Church addressed the pressing concern in North American Adventism regarding how to retain young members and keep them actively engaged. Dudley’s 2010 book, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church?* reported, “at least 40 percent to 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North-America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s” (Dudley 2010, 35).

Dudley identified four main reasons why young people leave the Adventist Church: Alienation, irrelevance, intolerance, and convenience. He found less than 25% of teens held a church office, or served on a congregational committee, or participated in outreach activities. To quote Dudley, “It’s one thing to be listed as still a member of the church. It’s quite another to be an *active, participating member*” (Dudley 2010, 35).

## TWO YOUTH MINISTRY MODELS PROMOTING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

*Accommodative Youth Ministry.* Gareth Crispin advocated a theology of accommodation that can help integrate youth and children in an intergenerational church—the same way Christ accommodates us in Christ. Based on 1 Corinthians 1:8-11, Crispin called those in the church, with authority and knowledge, to accommodate those without—which almost invariably entails youth and children. For Crispin, accommodation involves the inclusion of youth and children in all aspects of the church life. They may not be able to participate to certain ordinances, like communion service for example, due to their lack of familiarity with the form being used; however, “accommodation will imply including young people in the discussion about which forms are appropriate” (Crispin 2017, 19).

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Claude Duvalier, nick-named “Baby Doc,” reigned as president in Haiti from 1971 to 1986. His regime of terror was overthrown by a popular uprising. Jean Bertrand Aristide was President of Haiti in 1991, 1994-96, and 2001-04. During his last term he was also overthrown by a popular uprising.

*Adoptive Accommodative Youth Ministry.* Chap Clark wrote about Adoptive Youth Ministry and provided useful ways to integrate young people into the family of faith. His strategy includes five levels: outreach, welcoming, engaging, diverse relationships, and adoption. In the last level, which is the summit of the Adoptive Youth Ministry model, members gather as an inclusive community, and in whatever they do—worship, missions, and services both internally and externally—they experience the reality of a family. For example, when worshipping, they do not limit themselves to certain songs with a certain flavor because “gathering together is a comprehensive communal opportunity to collectively thank the Father who calls us his own” (Clark 2015, 20). Mark Cannister, in Clark’s edited book, stated that, “Transformation happens most deeply in the lives of teenagers when they are engaged in the broader life of the church and connected to a network of caring adults” (Cannister 2015, 136).

### SOME IDEAS TO ENHANCE YOUTH PARTICIPATION

*Understand and meet the social and spiritual needs of youth.* Genuine participation requires the action to benefit or transform the life of the participant (Vardin and Brooks 1979). This implies that the needs of the participant must be known and understood. Jon Middendorf identified three characteristics of millennial teens, which might also apply to Generation Z: A) Moral relativism: They “tend to believe that the source of moral value judgments lies inside of them;” B) Spiritual hunger: “They are starving for personal encounters with the living Christ who makes a difference today, in the real world;” C) They desire to belong: “Because our teens feel isolated from and wounded by the adult world around them, they deal with their problems by belonging” (Middendorf 2000, 31-38). Taking these characteristics into account, Middendorf argued that worship is a response to the millennial, postmodern mind-set—a worship inspired and fueled by the stories of God’s faithfulness and love. Such a worship is not a religious act, but is a relationship and a lifestyle. He described the role of the youth worker as: learn the story, tell the story, and invite participation in the story (Middendorf 2000, 53-56).

*Integrate postmodern values.* According to Tony Jones (2001, 31-37) youth-centered ministry in an urban context is more likely to be successful if it integrates postmodern values: experiential, spiritual, pluralistic, relative, altruistic, communal, creative, environmental, global, holistic

and authentic. Jones emphasized three major elements where postmodern values can be integrated: Community, evangelism, and recovering narrative. Community: “In this postmodern time, youth workers must recover the communal spirit of the Christian faith through worship, a reliance upon the Trinity, and other community-based activities” (Jones 2001, 80). Jones stated that “Salvation is a ‘we thing’ and not a ‘me thing.’ We accomplish God’s dream together. We exist to be a community” (Jones 2001, 108). Evangelism: “We ought first to evangelize experientially and teach the content of the faith later! After all, Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Follow-me!’; not, ‘Do you accept me as your personal Lord and Savior?’” (Jones 2001, 111). Recovering narrative: “Let’s teach our students whole books of the Bible instead of verses here and there. And let’s teach them the whole story of Scripture by *telling* them *stories*” (Jones 2001, 205).

*Let them belong without restriction.* For Mike King, it’s okay for young people to belong without a total commitment to Christ. He stated, “Allowing youth to belong in our communities without pressuring them results in an authentic decision to follow Jesus” (King 2006, 37).

*A focus on social justice.* Sharon Sutton’s study examined programs in America that seek to address issues affecting low-income and minority young people, ages 12 to 28. These young people live in oppressive urban conditions and often assume adult responsibilities while they are teens. The study showed that urban adolescents encounter multiple forms of oppression, which some respondents describe as “a situation or dynamic in which certain ways of beings (e.g., having certain identities) are privileged in society while others are marginalized” (Sutton 2006, 25). Young people need learning opportunities which enable them to understand, question, and seek to change oppressive social conditions such as racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and so on. Sutton recommended the application of socially critical pedagogies, which are methods of engaging youth in critical reflection and action, as well as activities that connect young people with their communities and, at the same time, provide them with meaningful opportunities for personal growth.

### CONCLUSION

The God of Scripture sets the example of calling faithful young people to participate in his redemptive mission. By creating an environment conducive for effective Gen Z participation, church leaders follow in the steps of Jesus, who called twelve young people to discipleship and then

sent to be the light of the world. Keeping young people out of processes that affect their lives is a form of social injustice because international human rights frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) guarantee the rights of teenagers (below 18 years of age) to participate freely in the life of their communities. Youth participation is beneficial for society because their alienation is a cause of political destabilization, including gang formation and criminal behavior in many contexts. In the Adventist Church, Roger Dudley's findings showed that alienating youth pushes them out of the church. Young people who comprise Gen Z are more likely to participate

and remain engaged when there is a strong focus on social issues. Church leaders need to think seriously about this and act upon it.

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