

6-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Stojanovic, Andrew (2023) "The "Parental" Push: A "Parenting" Approach to Young Adult Ministry," *Journal of Adventist Youth and Young Adult Ministries*: Vol. 1, Article 9.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jayyam/vol1/iss1/9/>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jayyam/vol1/iss1/9>

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THE “PARENTAL” PUSH

A “Parenting” Approach to Young Adult Ministry

Andrew Stojanovic, MDiv

ABSTRACT

Discipling young adults to become spiritually mature, capable, and confident leaders in the church requires intentionality. It does not take place naturally, no matter how attractive the setting may be. This is especially important due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on young people in our church. This intentionality must be exercised by spiritual parents within the church, and only if they have an investment in and personal relationship with the young adults themselves. Giving young adults a “parental” push to get seriously involved in the life of the church asks them do something they might find uncomfortable, at least initially. But the reward often shows itself much later, with appreciation long after the first step. If the church is to have more confident and capable leaders in the future it must develop a culture where going out of one’s comfort zone is not something to be shunned, but rather something to embrace.

INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING TO an article by the *New York Post*, which surveyed a thousand Americans and asked them about life’s most stressful events, they found these ten the most stressful (SWNS 2020):

1. Moving
2. Going through a breakup/divorce
3. Getting married
4. Having children
5. Starting your first job ever
6. Entering into a new career/industry
7. Sending a child to college
8. Starting college
9. Dating someone new
10. Getting a pet

With the exception of number seven, many if not all of these are what young adults, ages 18-30, will deal with during this phase of their lives (Sheehy 1996, 10, 59; and Simpson 2018). It is quite extraordinary to think that the decisions they make during these years, more or less, set them up for the rest of their lives. The choice of a life partner and vocation, coupled with increasing financial responsibilities, as most are going into debt for the first time in their lives, definitely gives one the sense that life is real. And it should not be a surprise to us that during this period the youth transform from what we might call “older kids” to what we hope are “fully capable and mature men and women.”

Over the past two years, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has certainly complicated this phase of life, to say the least. With the introduction of masking, social distancing, and the shutdown of social places to meet—such

as restaurants and health clubs—it has become difficult to make new friends, form lasting friendships, and find that special someone with whom you want to spend the rest of your life. The church itself has had a dramatic change in its social milieu and has certainly been affected by this pandemic. On one side you have the elderly, especially those who have co-morbidities and are at high risk, who have stayed at home and joined services online to keep themselves safe. On the other side you have young people who stayed away because they didn't want to pass the virus to someone who might die from it, even though their own chances of death were extremely low. Both sides were doing their best to mitigate the spread of the virus, but inadvertently it created an environment in which cross-generational ministry and a general sense of getting involved in church life have become extremely challenging (Martin 2021).

Perhaps the greatest issue that I have faced during the pandemic is that many young people have questioned the need for attending church in person, now that their local church has gone virtual. If one can worship God by singing, praying, giving online, and hearing a sermon from the comfort of one's own home during the pandemic why not do that indefinitely? With so many young people dropping out of the church before COVID-19, time will tell whether going virtual will escalate or diminish this phenomenon (Rainer Research 2009; General Conference 2019; and Martin 2020).

Experience has shown me that many young adults are generally shy, nervous, lacking confidence and experience, and many times are simply unwilling to get involved in church life. What can leaders do to help them grow into confident, experienced, courageous, and willing leaders in our church? The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the multiple reasons young people are leaving the church, but rather to propose one, among many, possible solutions to decrease the phenomenon of reduced church involvement. Hopefully this paper will raise questions and facilitate discussion in areas that are not often discussed in young adult ministry.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is always wise to have the end in mind before beginning. The question every church must ask itself at one point or another, and the earlier the better, is this: "What is the ultimate goal of young adult ministry?" In my experience, when I ask young adult leaders this question I hear about

how they want more young people to attend their church, how they want to create a place where young people can get together and make lasting friendships, grow in their knowledge of Christ, and help with the ministry of the church. I rarely hear young adult leaders mention that the reason they do young adult ministry is to mentor church leaders in the church such as elders, deacons, Sabbath school teachers, and more (Martin 2020). Evidence suggests that young people who are involved in church leadership are more likely to have a stronger and more lasting faith than those who are uninvolved (Powell, Griffin, and Crawford 2011, 142).

Some might overlook mentoring because they assume young people are not ready. Perhaps we sense they are not capable or committed enough to fulfill such great positions in the church (Harris and Harris 2008, 26-45). This could not be further from the truth. Young people at this stage in their lives want to prove themselves, find themselves, and discover their place in life. At a time of life when young people are engaging in the workforce, learning trades, and pursuing degrees, with all of these endeavors requiring them to make strong commitments of time, energy, intellect, and money, it seems puzzling that they are so underutilized in the church (Martin 2019). It appears some churches have it backward; they believe young people will become an asset to the church after they complete their education and get a job when in reality getting involved and engaging in church, particularly leadership, prepares them for greater service in the world.

A large majority of our Adventist pioneers, such as Ellen White, James White, J. N. Andrews, J. N. Loughborough, Uriah Smith, and more, were teens in 1844. Much of the work of organizing, preaching, writing pamphlets, and more took place when they were in their twenties, and by the time the General Conference was established in 1863, they were only in their thirties. Times certainly have changed. Today we live in a culture where adolescence is prolonged by multiple factors. Some of these include the pressure to obtain higher education, lower earning power, a lack of security in the workforce, lack of adult mentorship. The entertainment industry encourages a "media-driven peer culture" which isolates them from adult relationships. Furthermore, media such as TV, the internet, magazine, music, and more delay or defuse identity formation due to the sheer variety and volume compared to previous decades. The intensity and frequency of these bombardments also challenge today's young people

(Mahan, Warren and White 2008, 14-19; and Gane 1997, 22-24). The reality is that young people today live in a consumer's paradise that has developed an attitude of apathy toward life.

Because we find ourselves living in such a consumer saturated environment, it becomes easy to think of doing young adult ministry with a similar orientation. Perhaps unconsciously we ask ourselves how we can make our environment more attractive so young people will want to come and buy what we are selling, although we are not actually selling anything. The concept of trying to meet "felt needs" can easily fall into the trap of catering to the spiritually immature. I want to clarify that I am not saying the question of how to make our environment more attractive is invalid, or of little significance. There is no doubt in my mind that the environment plays a major role not only in attracting but also keeping young people engaged in church life. The question that I do wish to pose is this: "Even if we were to have the perfect environment in which young adult ministry could thrive, would young adults *naturally* grow into spiritually mature, capable, and dedicated church members?"

Another way to approach this issue is to raise some additional questions. Do young adults know what they need in terms of spiritual growth and maturity? They may have some sense of what they need, but I know of no one who is aware of everything that they need. Rahn and Linhart mentioned that for one to become spiritually mature requires two things, "(1) A knowledge of Biblical truth received from instruction," and (2) "A recognition that this same Biblical truth coheres with reality, which comes through learned (life) experience." (Rahn and Linhart 2000, 35). Generally, many young people are willing to receive instruction concerning Biblical themes, but few are willing to place themselves in uncomfortable situations which will allow God to work and show himself to them in more than just theoretical knowledge. And yet this second step is essential if one is to grow in maturity. There is also the possibility that they may feel the need for something which may actually impede their spiritual growth. What do we do then? There is a difference between needs that are felt and needs that are not. Is there any place within the discipleship development of young adults for these unfelt needs? This issue gets further complicated when a young person resists responding to personal growth someone else perceives as pertinent to them.

This should come as no surprise, because often what it takes to grow in maturity and capability is for us to step out of our comfort zone, and who enjoys that, at least initially? The Bible contains many stories of reluctant leaders who didn't want to be pushed outside of their comfort zones. And yet without such a push, one cannot grow (Case 1987, 52-61). It is when we challenge ourselves that we grow the most. And there is no more challenging aspect of church ministry than to lead at church (Schultz and Schultz 1991, 18-24). I want to be sure to clarify that what I mean "to lead" at church does not mean you have to be overseer of a major ministry of the church. If one is actively engaged in the life of the church—contributing in some way to a ministry or the service of the church—then that person is a leader in some way. Examples of such leading include giving an offering appeal, helping with a children's Sabbath School, serving as an usher, and there are many more. Robert Kegan put it this way,

"People grow best when they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge; the rest is commentary. Environments that are weighted too heavily in the direction of challenge are toxic. They promote defensiveness and construction. Those weighted too heavily toward support are ultimately boring; they produce devitalization... [T]he balance of challenge and support leads to vital engagement." (Kegan 1994, 42)

Good mentor-leaders delegate duties, but must also extend an element of trust in those individuals to give their unique signature on the task they have been asked to do. This notion is reflected in the concept of "keychain" leadership. Leaders literally or figuratively hold a number of keys. Effective older leaders need to hand over these keys to younger leaders and entrust and empower them to use them well also (Powell, Mulder and Griffin 2016, 53, 50-80). True leaders do not have slaves working for them, but rather help facilitate a group of leaders toward a common goal.

Those involved in leadership have heard common excuses from those who refuse to lead, such as,

1. I don't have time

Often what this excuse is really trying to say is that "I don't have time for this." But I do have time for "everything else that I want to do." King David was too busy to go to war, but not too busy to commit adultery, and then orchestrate an assassination.

2. I don't want to be blamed if I fail

Sometimes this can be a fear of failure itself. But I believe this is a fear of the social embarrassment/flak that one might receive if one makes a mistake. After Jonah preached to Nineveh he was more concerned with his reputation than the lives which were saved. In today's digital age, your mistake could be live-streamed or posted on various social media platforms for generations to watch. Who wants this kind of pressure?

3. I don't want to end up doing everything

If the people I ask to help me with a project say "No" then I will have to do it all by myself. When one volunteers to lead they take on more responsibility. Often this can lead to burnout, and the cycle perpetuates itself. Assisting young people to find others to help them can ease this concern and also instituting a policy of "If you find you cannot meet a certain expectation, ask someone for help or find someone to replace you."

4. I'm not capable enough, I don't have the skills, this is not my gift

Similar to (1) above, this is more of a priority issue. Most skills that one needs to organize/lead a ministry can be learned if it is accompanied by desire. And every young adult leader ought to seek ways in which they can plant and foster a desire in young adults to become more involved in church life. It might be a matter of trying several different things to ascertain one's spiritual gifts in the process of service.

5. I'm too nervous to speak upfront

While we can all be sympathetic to this one, if we are honest we still have our moments of nerves even after years of leading/speaking. Having nerves is actually a great sign that shows one is taking the task seriously and wants to do a good job. Practice and familiarity can help lessen nerves, but rarely do they ever go away. Moses didn't consider himself to be a good speaker.

6. I'm too young

Often what lies behind this excuse is the belief that one will not be taken seriously because of one's age, i.e. the ideas one holds and shares will not be

valued. This should never be true in any church, and if it is, it needs to be corrected. Maturity is what is important, not age.

I wish I could say I had never used these excuses myself when I was younger. Fortunately for me, my parents didn't find them persuasive or even correct. Wise parents have the foresight to know what their child needs even when their child is unaware of or resistant to that need. And they also have the emotional endurance to take the kicking, screaming, and tears that often accompany placing a youth outside of their comfort zone, knowing that one day the child will understand and will hopefully appreciate what the parents have done. What my parents did for me was to foster an environment in which making mistakes was okay, but doing nothing was not. A leader has the responsibility to help young adults in their church grow through hardships rather than protect them from all hardships (Powell and Clark 2011, 62). That parental/mentor push is an essential part of discipling young adults and must be part of the DNA of young adult ministry. This parental push takes *intentionality* and must take place within the context of a relationship. Could it be that in spending too much time focusing on how to make young people comfortable in the church we are, inadvertently and unintentionally, thwarting their spiritual potential?

It is important that as church leaders we present the taking of responsibility in as attractive a manner as possible to our young people. Attached to responsibility provides purpose and meaning—things young people today especially crave. Many want meaning in their lives, but few are willing to take up the roles that will give it to them. All they need is a kind but intentional push!

CASE STUDY: BERRIEN SPRINGS VILLAGE CHURCH YOUNG ADULTS

Approximately five years ago I joined the staff at the Berrien Springs Village SDA church. One of my passions was to start a young adult ministry, which did not exist at that time. This church is geographically quite close to Andrews University, so there was potential to draw young adults and start a group. In this section I will share a little about how the Village Young Adults were organized and particularly what effect the COVID pandemic had on our group.

Initially our group was small—about four or five attended the first semester. I predominately invested my time in making Sabbath School an interesting and engaging

experience. As the group slowly began to grow I looked for ways to involve students to help with the church service, either with music or by having them fill a platform role like reading Scripture or calling for the offering. I asked the group for volunteers and got the typical answer from young adults: absolute silence for what seemed an eternity but was likely only 20-30 seconds. I quickly abandoned this approach and started asking people personally and directly to get involved in specific things. I would then outline for them exactly what they would be doing, what would be required of them, offer my help if they wanted it, and do all I could to help ease any concerns they might have. This approach was soon coined “voluntelling” by one of the young adults, and it has stuck ever since.

Voluntelling, as the name suggests, lies somewhere between volunteering for something and being told you will do something, in a friendly way. Voluntelling someone for something does not mean they cannot say “no” but what it does mean is if they don’t say “no” then it’s a “yes.” I found my success rate for getting young adults involved in the church increased dramatically when I asked them one-to-one. When I asked someone who was very nervous to speak up front to lead in something like the Scripture reading, I’d let them know that I wouldn’t be asking them if I didn’t know they would do a great job, and that I would get them the reading as soon as possible so that they could practice it as many times as they wished. I was able to get a number of young people up front in the church who had previously never been in such a position.

I often said to the group, “If you cannot share your faith and pray in a group that shares your worldview and similar interests, loves you, and are your friends, then what are the chances you would share your faith with a stranger? This is the time to try new things and make as many mistakes as needed, to build your confidence and ability to share Jesus.” Getting involved in church now, even if it is a small step, is what will eventually make one a leader in the church in the near future. It’s not as though we wake up one morning and look at our calendar and decide, “I’m old enough to be an elder now.”

As the group continued to grow I did not have the time to manage everything that I thought the group needed. So I voluntold a few people to make up a leadership team for our young adult group. The leadership team meets once at the beginning of each semester to discuss what is working well in our group and where we can improve, as well as to

schedule and begin planning any special events throughout the semester. After this initial meeting the rest of the communication with the team was all done via group emails and texts, and the use of Google docs, or any other agreed-upon form of communication.

Currently our leadership team is comprised of four positions: Communications Coordinator, Social Coordinator, Outreach Coordinator, and Sabbath School Coordinator. The social element of the group is incredibly important for this stage of life. Many are on the lookout for potential life partners, but even more so, many are deciding if being a follower of Christ is really worthwhile in the long run. The notion that to be a follower of Christ means that one is destined to live a boring, sad, and unfulfilled life is an absolute lie from the devil. It is vital that young people see and experience a multiplicity of ways to have fun without compromising their faith. As Wayne Rice stated, “There’s nothing wrong with having fun for fun’s sake.” (Rice 2010, 99).

Many of these positions are held by more than one person, for several important reasons. First, many hands make for lighter work. Since most of our leadership team is comprised of students, they often don’t have the time to do it all by themselves, so working in a group is less daunting. Second, working in pairs and smaller groups helps teach valuable lessons in communication, planning, and working together. It fosters respect for each other, and it serves to generate wider excitement and “buy-in” to planned events. When something gets planned by two or three people they usually feed on the ideas, goals, and excitement of each other and then spread that to their friends. Third, it creates a natural mentor-mentee relationship between young adults by connecting those who have more confidence and ability with those who still lack it. This point is very important for the longevity of any group, but especially in our group as we have such a large turnover of young adults in a university town. I am constantly reminding the leadership team to actively build new relationships with other young adults and ask people to get involved. I prompt them to be intentional in looking for potential replacements from the moment they join the leadership team. An ideal situation would be to have juniors and seniors mentoring freshmen and sophomores.

Exactly what each of these coordinators is responsible for is not necessarily important, as this will change from group to group, and ultimately be determined from the

needs of the group. What is important, however, is the overall involvement of each individual member of the group. I do not expect that everyone in the group will be able to do everything in the church, but I do expect that everyone can and will do something in the church. I create multiple schedules at the beginning of the semester, a Sabbath School teachers' schedule, a pick up/drop off schedule because some students don't have vehicles, and a welcome and announcements schedule for our Sabbath School. I also do my best to connect young adults from our group to other ministries that need help—ministries such as the younger division Sabbath School classes, summer VBS programs, the deacon team, doing joint visitations with church elders, being part of the music team for church, helping with church potlucks (pre-COVID), and more. As a result, I estimate that over 90% of our currently 30-40 young adults are actively part of the church services and ministries each quarter.

The COVID pandemic has certainly had an impact on our group. Early on our church closed, and when it opened again a large portion of members watched services online. As more and more young adults returned, we masked up and practiced social distancing by allowing only four to a table—about half of what we previously practiced. Thankfully we had a room that was able to accommodate our need to spread out more, otherwise it would have been detrimental. Because of COVID-19 we stopped having potlucks and games nights since these were done indoors and in smaller spaces. Instead we moved our socials to outdoor activities—walks on the beach, hiking around campus, canoeing, bonfire nights when the weather cooled down, then ice-skating and tubing during the winter.

Before the pandemic, part of our outreach ministry was to go to a nearby retirement center, Timber Ridge, and do a special Sabbath program for the residents each month. For obvious reasons this was no longer an option. However, one of our young adults mentioned that because so many elderly people were watching the services online, the shut-ins list for the church must have obviously grown. They suggested that we prepare some food packages and place a card inside from the church and go visit them. If they were home and desired to visit, we could go in and visit with them; if not, we could visit at the door or just leave the package at the door. We have continued this young adult's great idea for two semesters now and plan to continue.

CONCLUSION

The primary issue that this paper has sought to address is that it takes *intentionality* to disciple young adults to become spiritually mature, capable, and confident leaders in the church. It does not take place *naturally*, no matter how attractive the setting may be. This intentionality must be exercised by spiritual parents within the church, and only then if they have an investment in and personal relationship with the young adults themselves. Giving young adults a parental push to get seriously involved in the life of the church is to ask them to do something they find uncomfortable, at least initially. But the reward is often seen much later, and appreciated long after the first step. If the church is to have more confident and capable leaders in the future it must develop a culture where going out of one's comfort zone is not something to be shunned, but rather something to embrace.

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