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Overview

Steve Case

Andrews University, steve@involveyouth.org

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OVERVIEW

Steve Case, PhD

DO YOU remember the COVID-19 pandemic? In some ways it seems so distant, even though we continue to feel its effects, including seasonal surges. When the Center for Youth Evangelism (CYE), along with the North American Division (NAD) Youth and Young Adult Ministries Department, re-started the 180° Symposium in the Spring of 2022, the obvious topic was “coming out of the pandemic.”

A year later, prognosticators pulled out their “looking glasses” to predict what would be “The Next BIG Thing”—what was going to happen next? Would we return to the way things were before the pandemic? Had things forever changed, with no chance of returning to the life we once knew? Was this a good thing, a bad thing, or just a thing?

The executive committee for the 180° Symposium provided a bit more specificity by naming three categories for predicting “The Next BIG Thing”: Elements that make Adventist ministry to young people unique; immigrant ministry and cultural challenges; and volunteer recruitment, training, and retention.

ELEMENTS THAT MAKE ADVENTIST MINISTRY TO YOUNG PEOPLE UNIQUE

Early Advent believers stood out as peculiar (1 Pet 2:9) because of their imminent belief in Christ’s soon return, even naming a specific date (October 22, 1844). When Christ didn’t return, other doctrines such as the Sabbath, the State of the Dead, the Sanctuary, and the Spirit of Prophecy, seemed unique compared to other Christians. When the book *Questions on Doctrine* was published in 1957, this came in response to the Evangelical accusation that Adventists were a cult and not truly Christian. The explanations led to a chance to clarification and Seventh-day Adventists became listed as truly Christian—similar to other Evangelicals. While this still alarms some who fear our peculiarity was forever lost, Adventist lifestyle issues became what demarcated us from other Christians. Adventists didn’t go to theaters, wear jewelry, break the Sabbath, eat unclean meats, dance, listen to (that Satanic) rock & roll music, or use alcohol, cigarettes, and non-prescription

drugs. Those were our beliefs even if our practices didn’t always match our beliefs.

By the end of the 20th century, North American Adventist Youth Ministry had gone the route of Evangelical Youth Ministry by segregating youth into a youth ministry that sought to better understand psycho-social development and help those who grew up in the church to maintain their participation. Instead of looking for differences, we looked for common ground. Some even felt free to use curriculum and resources from other denominations or non-denominational creators.

Coming out of the radical pause from the pandemic, would Adventist ministry to young people (youth, young adults, and even children) be more parochial or extend its breadth even wider so that Adventism’s uniqueness might be more difficult to identify or not even figure to be important? Of the 10 papers presented at the 180° Symposium in 2023, seven of them addressed the uniqueness of Adventist ministry to young people. While the doctrine of the Sabbath became central in one of the papers, it did so in a manner different than past appropriations of Biblical injunctions for getting the day of the week correct—the seventh day! None of the papers mentioned the second coming of Christ as an identifying emphasis for Adventist youth ministry. Even somewhat controversial topics like Last Generation Theology (see Reinder Bruinsma’s *In All Humility*) or lifestyle issues from the end of the 20th century (see Steve Case’s *Shall We Dance*) never received a comment. Pathfinders and Adventist Education, both significant influencers, garnered no attention. In fact, a number of the topics didn’t seem particularly unique to Seventh-day Adventism. Perhaps that will be the major takeaway from this subtopic of The Next BIG Thing.

IMMIGRANT MINISTRY AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES

The Adventist Church membership in North America has remained fairly stable over the past few decades, with attendance dropping. What few people have observed or

acknowledged is the demographic shift ethnically. Church growth has shifted from evangelistic meetings yielding baptisms to immigrant growth. While the membership total has remained steady, its composition has changed. In 2015, Pew Research Center identified Seventh-day Adventists as “among the most racially and ethnically diverse American religious groups (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/11/03/a-closer-look-at-seventh-day-adventists-in-america/>) with 37% White, 32% Black, 15% Hispanic, 8% Asian, and 8% another race or mixed race. The Adventist News Network reported on this within a week of the Pew Research Center posting, lauding Adventism’s mission to take the Gospel to the whole world, not being just an American Church, and becoming increasingly diverse (<https://adventist.news/news/adventists-named-most-racially-diverse-religious-group-in-us>).

What nobody seemed to report was the continuing segregation, church by church, based on ethnicity and language. The Seventh-day Adventist organizational structure in North America continues to have separate regional/Black conferences throughout most of the North American Division. This made sense when Black leaders and churches were ignored or stymied in the mid-20th century. However, since the president of the North American Church is Black, and several union presidents are Black, as well as conference presidents, it may be time to consider the complex process of reorganization. Racism as well as vast cultural differences still exists, but the structure set up 80 years ago might not be best suited for current realities. Consider the Northeastern Conference, the largest conference in the Atlantic Union. This regional/Black conference needs three languages when meeting conference-wide (English, Spanish, and French)—something some state/White conferences haven’t considered as they wrestle with whether or not to even include Spanish translation at conference or union gatherings.

First generation immigrant churches, with a mother language other than English have difficulty retaining their second generation, especially when their mother language that differs from English remains cemented as THE language for the worship service and leadership. The second generation leaves, and certainly the third generation—opting for an English-speaking church. This results in a loss of attendance at the immigrant church, which is able to continue its traditional ways provided new immigrants replenish the pews. Spanish language churches continue to grow. Immigration in North America fuels this. Having a gathering place and people with a taste of the mother country provide

stability for immigrants. Some churches provide space to Spanish-speaking immigrants, and then find a generation later that attendance of the Spanish-speaking attendees has swelled. Some churches have changed meeting locations with the Spanish-speaking congregation meeting in the main sanctuary while the host church retreats to the fellowship hall or youth chapel.

Only two papers were written on the topic of immigrant ministry and cultural challenges. They can open the conversation about this usually unspoken reality. One deals with the Black church, but doesn’t limit it to just the United States. The other gives a Korean insight. No paper was written from a Hispanic perspective, even though there could easily be greater variance—think of comparing Cuban immigrants with Mexican immigrants, or Chilean immigrants compared to Guatemalan immigrants. This could easily be a topic for an entire 180° Symposium in the future.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND RETENTION

Youth Ministry relies primarily on volunteer leaders rather than paid staff. And yet there remains an incredible chasm in some conferences between youth leaders in churches and their conference youth departments. Conference youth directors know the churches in their conference have a Youth Sabbath School, but may not know who the person or persons are who do the youth ministry week after week. Conference youth directors know this information for Pathfinders because of the coordinator structure, but not for Youth Sabbath School or other youth ministry activities. Rarely do pastors have regular communication with conference youth directors, or vice versa.

Conference youth directors often spend their time with summer camp and Pathfinders, with little or no time left for the local church. Local church youth leaders usually have no idea a conference youth director could be a resource for them. There might be a conference-wide youth rally or mission trip, but the conference youth director rarely connects with volunteers who do youth ministry in a local church because of time limitations. If a conference youth director were to provide training for local church youth leaders, who would they notify? A general email to pastors may go unheeded. If nobody shows up for a training session, the conference youth director may conclude time could be better spent doing other things. Many conference youth directors don’t provide training for local church youth leaders.

The fact that only one paper dealt with this topic gives further indication that volunteer recruitment, training, and retention don't register for ministry to young people in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The NAD Youth and Young Adult Ministries Department stands out in bold contrast to this, pouring resources into this since 2017 when the 180° Symposium identified Youth Sabbath School as the orphan in youth ministry. Union youth directors have given their support with a “thumbs up” and mentioned it to their respective conference youth directors, but the breakdown continues to be between the conference and the local church. This solitary paper identifies what's currently available for youth ministry volunteer leadership recruitment, training, and retention.

SUMMARY

None of those who wrote for the 180° Symposium in 2023 claimed to have the prophetic gift of predicting the future. The three subtopics could be considered on their own merits for an entire 180° Symposium in the future. What you find here can be helpful as we paused to look back (180°), and then pivoted after the symposium (180° degrees again). We now continue to move forward with our claim as the people of God—from every nation, tribe, kindred, and people—who voluntarily choose to follow Jesus and serve young people in our churches and communities.

