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# Growing up in Adventism: A Sharing of Some Personal Concerns and Suggestions for Reaching Young People

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## Abstract

*In this paper I apply the revolving door model and some of the data from Valuegenesis 2 to my personal experiences and observations. I provide suggestions to reclaim Adventist young people in conversation with Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart's work Seeking a Sanctuary, in which they explore the "Revolving Door" model of Adventist faith development and experience. I particularly emphasize the need to accept young people where they are instead of trying to correct their theological views before we develop relationships with them.*

## Introduction

**G**rowing up in Adventism is a unique experience. The worldview instilled in our young people as they navigate the Seventh-day Adventist educational system and weekly church gatherings shapes the way they see everything. While some may proudly support many of the features in this process, we still are losing youth in significant numbers in American Adventism and throughout modern Western society.

Parallel to this phenomenon is the speedy increase of Adventist self-awareness through studies conducted concerning the church. It has been one of the main goals of Adventist administrators, pastors, professors, and even students to investigate why we are failing to retain many of our youth. The thorough analysis of those who were involved with Valuegenesis 1 and 2 has provided more than enough evidence that reveals areas where youth are beginning to break away from church beliefs and practices.

Another significant study is the sociological survey of Seventh-day Adventism conducted by Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart. These authors proposed a model of faith experience in the church I will refer to later in this

paper (Bull & Lockhart, 2007). I believe this model needs to become a significant part of our considerations in understanding our youth. It also has tremendous potential in helping us discern how we reach second and third generation Adventists.

The purpose of this paper is to present my own experiences in the Church and why I have stayed. I will discuss this in relation to the revolving door model found within Seeking a Sanctuary and apply the model to my own experience. I will then make use of the Valuegenesis 2 (hereafter referred to as VG2) research to reflect on my personal observation and experience and apply it to some VG2 data selections. I also intend to provide some practical suggestions for how to reach the younger generation with the factors of the revolving door and VG2 in mind. I believe my personal experience will give some real-world insight on some of the issues youth are dealing with and provide suggestions on what we can do to reach them and welcome them into Christ's kingdom.

## The Revolving Door

Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart proposed a model of Adventist Church recruitment, retention, and regression. They called their model "The Revolving Door Model" (Bull & Lockhart, 2007). The revolving door

model identifies three major stages that represent the transitions Adventist believers encounter in their faith experience. Members of the first stage are referred to as *aspirers* because they aim to meet the ideals of Adventist standards and theology. The second group of believers is labeled *affirmers* because they are generally strong proponents of Adventism and are apologetic (that is, eager to defend) regarding their faith and theology. The third stage is comprised exclusively of individuals who are second-generation believers and beyond. They are called the *transformers*. This third group is the focus for this paper.

As the name indicates, this third group wants to transform the church. They have had a lifelong history with the church and know all of its faults and shortcomings. They have never truly been *in the world* or experienced a life without God playing a central part in their lives and worldview, whether or not they have made their faith their own. Because of this, they never see the stark contrast there is between a life without God's loving guidance and a church community where God's love is made central. In other words, they have been protected and sheltered.

This has significant sociological and theological implications that are a major part of contemporary discussions among youth ministry practitioners and theologians. These cannot be summarized adequately here. Instead, it can be briefly stated that how we reach someone who has grown up in the church is by no means the same process we go through to reach potential converts from outside of the church. One characteristic commonly found among transformers is that they perceive the church negatively, recognizing its faults in a way that frequently leads them to reject the church. Every individual I have met who has left the church did so because of a negative experience that is often in connection with social interactions with church members. This is opposed to the common perception that those who leave the church do so because they disagree with our theology; I do not believe this is the case in most instances.

I would propose that this is both good news and bad news. They are generally satisfied with much of Adventist doctrine, but their social experience leaves much to be desired. Somewhere along the way, they had a bad experience and they consequently perceived the entire church in a negative manner. The result? They

went somewhere else that is, in reality, just as fault-filled as Adventism but without the painful history.

For instance, one of my peers at college decided to attend church one day. She was known for dressing in a manner akin to the *rocker girl* image that is so common among young people. Though she had indeed "dressed up," one church member decided that some elements of her clothing were inappropriate for church and let her know of his opinion rather sternly. The real problem was that they had two different standards of what sort of clothing is appropriate for church. This church member attempted to impose his views on her while she clearly did not share his opinion. After this and similar occurrences she left Adventism altogether and decided not to return to the Adventist college we had attended together. It wasn't that the church as a whole had hurt her. Rather, it was an unfortunate series of conflicts she had with a few church people that caused her to reject the church itself. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that she felt rejected for unjustified reasons. More broadly, she saw some imperfections in a church member and, through this experience, decided to search for belonging elsewhere. Are we receptive to her feelings?

One of the greatest needs among our youth today is to gain an understanding that God's people are imperfect and subject to conflict. We are part of God's family and must seek ways to ensure conflicts are resolved or ensure that our young people aren't so shaken after a negative experience. In short, we need to make sure our young people understand how things truly are rather than try to idealize the dynamics of human relationships. What's the best way to do this? Accept them and treat them as if they are family so that when problems do inevitably arise, they will be able to withstand it without simply walking away.

## Valuegenesis 1 & 2

As I was reading about Valuegenesis 2 (Gillespie, Donahue, Boyatt, & Gane, 2004) this past summer I felt like I was reading a statistical account of my own life experience. All of the beliefs described as being "on the fringes" for my generation are the very ones all of my fellow students and friends were either unfamiliar with, or ones they had decided to not incorporate into their own lives.

For instance, the statistics for those who read Ellen White's writings are terribly low at 5% (Gillespie,

Donahue, Boyatt, & Gane, 2004). There was a time in my high school years when I became intensely interested in reading Ellen White. I grew up in a home where Ellen White was discussed and valued, especially since I came from a local church that heavily emphasized her writings. As such, I inherently regarded her as a true prophet and I read her writings. However, my friends and peers either did not have the same strong support for Ellen White's writings or they weren't interested in them. They found it strange that I would want to read these writings. Furthermore, out of a class of 20 students, I was the only one who thought of her positively, which matches the claim that only 5% of Adventist youth regularly read her writings. To my surprise, they frequently even made fun of me for reading her books, which I openly did in the mornings. My friends even distanced themselves from me over this morning habit. We are all well beyond this youthful behavior now and much of this could be attributed to our immaturity at the time. Nonetheless, to have received that kind of social response over simply reading Ellen White's writings is a matter of concern for both theological and social reasons, as well as indicative of some problems we are facing as a church.

This one specific example illustrates a problem that exists for several doctrines. The investigative judgment, the heavenly sanctuary, the remnant church, and the gift of prophecy entail the big four doctrines at stake in the Adventist church. In addition to this, there is a profound lack of awareness among youth of what Adventists believe (Dudley, 2007). This is evident in the VG2 study as well as in my personal experience.

For instance, in academy I had a Bible class on the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation in which a teacher caused many students confusion on these subjects. Unfortunately neither the teacher nor most of the students had significant knowledge about Adventist beliefs based on these prophetic Bible books. My girlfriend Frida (now my wife) and I watched in horror one day as my Bible teacher explained that the abyss discussed in Revelation 9 would be a literal hole that opens in the earth as a sign before Jesus' return. He further explained that people would not know what it was but would be attracted to it in a magnetic way, some of them even falling into it. He described the pit as endless, so people would fall forever if they dared to get too close to it. In a class of 20 students, 18 were horrified and fearful the rest of the week. Frida and I knew that this was not our church's position, but our attempts to correct our well-meaning teacher's mistake by talking to fellow students didn't completely

remove the underlying paranoia. I found out later that my teacher had quickly scanned a website on the subject in preparation for this Bible lesson. In short, doctrinal unawareness is a dangerous thing and certainly misled a significant number of my friends. If they had simply more aware of what Adventists believe, this crisis could have been averted. It scares me to even speculate on how this influenced their loyalties to the church.

I would make the claim that acceptance and inclusion of young people through real relationships makes accepting Adventist theology much easier for them (Rice, 2002). Sometimes I believe we take the opposite approach in that we try to correct their theology and then develop a relationship with them. I would argue that the Biblical model meets people's needs before emphasizing correct theology. In fact, a significant part of VG2 research places an emphasis on how welcoming and appealing young people find Adventist schools and churches to be (Gillespie, Donahue, Boyatt, & Gane, 2004).

## Suggestions

I make no assertions that I have exhausted the application of the revolving door and VG2 research to my own life or to Adventism in general. Nonetheless, I hope that this brief reflection and story-sharing has been helpful, despite the fact that much more work has to be done regarding this topic. The following suggestions have grown out of this analysis and are based on my observations and the consulted resources.

*Relationships come first.* I can't emphasize enough my own felt need to be a part of people's lives. I believe everybody feels similarly and that this holds true for our religious community as well. Youth are seeking a safe place where they can feel accepted (Gillespie, Donahue, Boyatt, & Gane, 2004). I believe that if you value the youth, they will value you and the church you represent.

*Inclusion is everything.* In addition to having personal relationships, I think inclusion is everything. It is a terrible and isolating feeling to sense one is left out of anything. Therefore, don't pick favorites, love everyone equally, and interact with everyone fairly. If you're going to try to involve youth, don't choose one or two special candidates to be in your exclusive mentoring circle. Instead, try to mentor everyone as they are willing (Brown, 2008).

*Be "real."* I once had a pastor tell me how one of the greatest things he appreciates about his generation

(generation X) is their openness and honesty, even when things are imperfect and messy. I resonate with that value. Young people do not need a leader who pretends to be perfect but, rather, they need someone who is like them: broken by sin and in need of a Savior. They also need people who are willing to have honest conversations with them and who can empathize with what they are going through (Brown, 2008). Focus on what really matters, not so much the correctness and beauty of Adventist theology but just the fact that you care for them. Again, people usually leave Adventism for relational/social reasons, not theological tensions.

*Meet youth where they are.* The way we view the world is very different, and the things we value in religion and in general also differ than any other generation's experience. Instead of expecting young people to see things from an adult perspective, first seek to understand their point of view. Once they have been heard, they may feel drawn to hear and understand and even desire more mature perspectives. Youth want to ask questions, and they need the freedom to question and even reject Adventist beliefs. Any other approach will come off as imposing and will make Adventism all that much harder for them to accept.

*Let young people demonstrate their faith.* In addition to having genuine relationships with them, we must allow young people the chance to express their own faith. This can happen in one-to-one encounters, group activities, and even testimonies. Give young people the chance to take ownership of their faith and to show it in their lives. Do not impose values on them. Instead, help them to identify the relationship between their beliefs and actions. Encourage them to select and prioritize their values. This is the way to coach them as they develop their personal set of beliefs and values from the years and investment of input from parents, teachers, and other mentors.

*Affirm that young people know what they believe.* Once a genuine relationship has been established we, as ministers and teachers, can proceed affirm our theology, which ultimately drives our ministries. Again, the second biggest issue beyond relationships is unfamiliarity with Adventist doctrine. Keeping young people aware of what Adventists believe saves them from biblical confusion and provides them with the tools and confidence to share their faith with others.

## Conclusion

I believe strongly that, in order to reach 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Adventists, we need to understand their experience as lifelong Adventists. Other important considerations include making them feel included and developing valuable relationships with them. If this is done, it greatly simplifies the task of helping them accept Adventist theology. We must make good use of the data found in the VG2 study and look towards more current research as well. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit we can succeed at retaining many young people that otherwise would slip away.

As a final appeal, let us also allow youth the chance to express themselves. I believe that if we do so, we will see a new generation of Adventists that take true ownership of their faith and move the church forward in theological and relational directions we can only imagine now. Perhaps the message young people are trying to give us is similar to a statement one fireman gave Tom Brokaw just before running into a burning building to save a distressed family: "Mr. Brokaw, watch my generation now, just watch us" (Gillespie, Donahue, Boyatt, & Gane, 2004). Mentor our youth, love them, and teach them the faith. As our God is relational, may we emphasize the value of their personhood in every young person that we encounter.

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