
Adventist Identity Crisis: In the Leaders or the Led?

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Abstract

Recent church attendance statistics indicate a high percentage of the millennial generation is exiting their local faith communities—either openly rejecting the values or silently slipping away. In addition to these two types of departure lies a third group not included in the statistics that appear faithful through attendance but in reality are disconnected. Should we combine these three categories our only success is retention with engagement. Which begs the answer to this question: Retention and engagement with what? Our once proclaimed uniform Adventist identity is crumbling by globalization. Today within two streets of each other you can experience practically opposite style churches – all justified under the new banner of culture. By honestly evaluating our theology we should be able to change the models in place that produce our current confused Adventist identity. Could we establish a flexible identity in a corporate image? Does the millennial generation leave because they choose or are forced? It is time to create a new leadership culture that embraces a more balanced Seventh-day Adventist Identity.

Introduction

Aston Martin car makers recently produced a new model called the DBS, with a price tag \$50,000 above its sister DB9. BBC Top Gear reviewers acclaimed that at first glance the cars look like identical twins, bar their car badge. However, upon closer examination one could notice that every little detail in the new DBS is better if by a small or large amount than her sister DB9. The question to be answered was if those changes were worth the extra \$50,000. To Aston Martin and their customers the answer would and should be yes.

It is this attention to detail that has made Aston Martin attain a reasonable lead at times in high-end touring race cars. It is this lack of attention to detail in our faith community that has made us complacent with our status quo. Are we truly honest and open in our evaluation? Do we push the constructive criticisms aside as malicious thoughts to be ignored? Why do we improperly use our remnant theology as an example of why our numbers are low and the millennial generation is leaving through the back door? Why are the Adventist communities that are generating growth or success sometimes branded as marveling after the beast in Revelation or with hidden political agendas? Is

our current leadership culture pessimistic in nature? Are we naturally inclined to accept failure? Do we give too much credit to the dark side? Have we given up and accepted the Laodicea “lukewarm” description as our reality?

If we were to honestly evaluate our local community of faith and be faithful to the data gathered, we would be faced with only one result – change is inevitable. The reason we do not change is simply because we only pretend to evaluate our faith.

Face the Crisis

Five years ago a youth pastor met with eleven churches in a district with passionate members who were dissatisfied with ticking over. Through a simple evaluation process, tracing their history and efforts, they concluded that should nothing else change all eleven churches would have to close down within 10-20 years. It was because of this reality with a new model of youth leadership development that a dying community agreed to radical change. Five years on now, they have a new growing community of unchurched individuals connecting and discovering. Even if they had not been part of drawing new people into a saving relationship

with Jesus the fact that they were willing to change and try something new has to be commended in itself.

Some wait for change and others seek it. The leaders in any industry are those who can dream of the future. Not always getting it right but willing to dream. I love the Seventh-day Adventist faith community too much to simply sit down and watch it float on by. My mind-set belongs to an emerging generation that has appeared in times of transition – deeply seeking authentic revival. In this dearth of active faith and routine Christian action, we seek dialogue.

Eight years ago a young ministerial couple started a youth journal called the *Y Files* (granted the name was a spin off from the X-Files yet with kosher material). It was to eventually become the *HUB Youth Journal* currently in publication. At its onset, they had created the following mantra on the back cover.

...because we have ideas but we're ignored, because we're crying and no one listens, because our passion doesn't count and our energy is suspicious, because sometimes we're lost and sometime we just want to be found, because we make mistakes, because we're young and "inexperienced," because we just have to push the boundaries, because we question tradition, long for meaning, and want the truth, because we're dying for a challenge but no one will give us a break, because we need a revolution, but we're told to negotiate, because we're brilliant and we've got guts and we're unique and God loves us and we can do things that one else can do NO MATTER HOW OLD THEY ARE....

For all these reasons, and in spite of our faults, Christ is our Savior.

The response at the time from leadership was mixed reviews of acceptance and wise counsel and an offer of therapy. But the desired effect (which was a cry for someone to engage their generation into a conversation) was missing.

They are not satisfied with the status quo. They are not satisfied that we have dialogued. They are not interested in words without action. I wonder if we can find a flexible Adventist identity in a corporate Adventist Church? Globalization and the information highway have created a new world for our faith community to travel in. No longer do we rely on others for data; we now experience it ourselves and find that the items that use to hold us together have lost some of their bonding strength. So much so that our Adventist identity is in crisis. We provide elementary answers to complex issues. We ignore and suppress the questions that cause us doubt and hope that repetition and volume will contain and quench the quest for truth. We allow our cynicism to become our faith and spend

more time in speculation than in the Word itself. All this has lead to a clash in our Adventist identity so that today these words of a renown retired minister ring true. “When I joined the church it meant something. Today the difference between our church and other Christians and even the great-unwashed multitude is often hardly distinguishable. All we have is our message—nothing more—but what a message and how relevant, but we water it down or put it in the fridge, and no one is challenged or inspired to respond to it” (Anonymous, personal communication, July 2, 2008).

To this challenge I suggest that this simple position paper is only a small part of the possible solution toward a higher rate of retention in our church. I am aware that physical attendance is not the premier indicator of living faith. And I am equally aware that non-attendance is not the best symbol of faith searching. Yet for the sake of simplicity in a complex subject and as a term of reference for success, the successful state would be observed as weekly attendance and engagement in their local faith community. It is time for change.

Why They Leave

I suggest, in a similar fashion to the game Clue, that the millennial generation is leaving through the back door in broadly three ways – as described in the gospel of Luke chapter 15. They either gently wander away or they remain disconnected or they openly reject the core values.

Wandering away is by far one of the most common paths and one that is not necessarily intentional but rather gradual. It runs from those who simply move to a new faith community and find that they don't have anything in common really with anyone, through to those who start to sleep in Saturday morning and soon forget their connection and weekly renewal. As one young adult explains: “I honestly just found myself in a new city and the church was so **** boring. I tried it for a few weeks, and no one cared. It's hard to break into the cliques. I found it easier to listen to religious music Saturday morning....now I am just busy and need a new type of rest –get it? I have new mates who care, and they mean the life to me....I'd do anything for them and they would do anything for me....I do miss the ole Church....” (Anonymous, personal communication, July 3, 2008).

There are those who are in the faith community who attend and yet are quite disconnected with its movement. They were once most passionate and now seek alternative ways to express that passion. They see the inconsistency and wish to change it but quit after a while. As expressed by this young adult: “For my own part I've never felt comfortable being part of a community I see as dogmatic, unreflective, and without a mission relevant to the challenges of modern

society. I also feel that at the heart of Adventism is a form of cultural imperialism. This was made all the more clear in a recent example when I learned of the guidelines the GC issues for church pension fund investment. It specifically states that you cannot invest in breweries (which is understandable although unsympathetic to a 3000-year-old European coping mechanism). What upsets me is that there is no clause forbidding investment in weapons manufactures, which is surely the more reprehensible. I feel this is because Americans are blind to their own cultural norms (i.e. the right to bear arms) and simply can't see that for a church to have a vested interest in instruments of death is unacceptable. What possible comment on war or peace could such an institution dare to make when called upon? How can a church which identifies itself with the three angels compromise their capacity to advocate for peace? As somebody who is concerned with the legitimacy of the Christian voice and the impact of moral choices with genuine worldly impacts (surely more important than what day you go to church) I've reached a point where I no longer consider myself Adventist. I don't see this as a tragedy but a new beginning and an opportunity to peruse Christian truth without having to apologize for the idiosyncrasies of Adventism" (Anonymous, personal communication, July 14, 2008).

Then there are those who openly leap out and will not be part of the faith community. Their story comes from pain and at core a disagreement with key values. As this exchange indicates: "My exit was a bit less 'slipping out the back door' and a bit more--'leave out through the front door, slam it on the way out, and give the door the finger.' The Adventist Church does not work for me on so many levels but most importantly: 1. I'm gay. 2. I don't really believe in the concept of sin. My leaving has been good for me--yet not entirely without pain. I have likened the Adventist Church to 'an abusive family member' --not necessarily abusive to everyone in the family but abusive to me (e.g., gay folks are sinners versus a slightly more 'enlightened' view). Have I lost you yet? I know this may be somewhat 'woo woo' and 'out there,' but hopefully you will bear with me. Allow me to finally get to the POINT of this long arduous letter (everything up to this point has simply been context). In short--I've left. I'm not coming back, but I still feel benevolently toward the church.... I suspect that the reason so many of us leave the church (other than the fact that the church tends to educate us--critically thinking can be a dangerous thing) is that it is SO easy to leave. We simply chose to go and go....I hope this is helpful. I am proud that I was raised an Adventist. I'm just as proud that I've left. I think the church has a place in this world, and I think more people should be in it. I know--a

rather confusing dichotomy--but that is where I am at" (SS, personal communication, July 3, 2008).

How Do We Re-Engage?

How do we re-engage and refresh our Adventist Identity so that those who are searching find the church a safe place to do so? Those who are anxious for meaning find causes worth believing in and know that the Kingdom of God calls you to action. And those who are discovering their purpose know that the church has direction, which it is able to share with clarity. How do we shake off the shackles that allow us to be free with each other? (Yaconelli, 2002, p. 27).

To carry out ministry within the millennial maze requires us to not simply focus on new programs or a clever order of service or more PowerPoint with BOSE surround sound and reclining chairs. The call to renewal lies in, according to McLaren (2000), "a new systems approach to program--an approach that anticipates change" (p. 42). Ministry needs to seek, crave, and desire the flexibility to change if and when needed. We should welcome and expect healthy change.

Theology

To handle change well means that we have to be grounded, and for too long we have not addressed the Theology of Youth and Young Adult Ministry. As asked by Dean (2001), "What are your theological rocks? Which of your beliefs about God matter the most to you? Do you have a theological conviction that serves as the hub of your beliefs and practices?" (p. 15). If you were to take at least five areas such as Salvation, Second Coming, Sanctuary, Sabbath, and Service and review your understanding of each would you agree that a different interpretation would lead to alternative ministry options? Our understanding of the nature of Christ affects our view of salvation. Our view of salvation in turns affects our view of grace and forgiveness. Which has implications for when we fail and how we handle that in the church. Injustice from inconsistency while upholding the banner is beyond belief. How many times will you forgive and accept before you ask someone to leave? Should we ask someone to leave? Upholding standards without God-like mercy is rooted in our theological understanding. Which of course ideally would mean the whole church examining itself, but we probably should go for one department at a time.

A youth pastor shared this encounter with me: "I recall still to this day that we had just cooked up a meal for the youth group involving cauldrons of pasta and sauce with secret ingredients, that I swore to never share. It was as we had ended that Friday night that he came in head bowed down and explained why he was leaving church. All my

tears and prayers and energy could not hold him back, but my resolution as a leader and belief that God never lets go meant I would stay connected. Ten years on he still does not come to church, but this summer when he reached his all-time low, there was one person he could call and knew that we would pray together even though we are separated by thousands of miles, and that I would urge the same message and blessing on his life to return to a deeper walk with God. Then one morning I received an e-mail from him that let me know God still lives, and all is not lost. I share this not to slap myself on my shoulder as I have too many wounds, and my heart has been broken too many times from those who have left, and I have failed but to let you know that with this young man forgiveness is his highest wall....and when he knows that he has failed, he still remembers what leaders before me have told him as well, God always welcomes you home.”

Our theology of forgiveness is arms wide open. There is no evaluation period; there is simply come home and let me effectively throw a robe on you and give you the ring of the kingdom. For those curious, the analogy comes from Luke 15, and I am sure the ring does not qualify as jewelry.

Our current youth leadership development model is lacking! We need to train leaders that the millennial generation deserves to have lead them. Better yet anticipate generation Z and train for that as well. We need dialogue about our faith and its implications. As Ward (1997) states our “... theology of youth ministry...seeks to demonstrate how our understanding of God shapes the practice of youth ministry” (p. 25).

Our theology affects our practice, and our practice affects our conversation, which is the essence of growth, understanding, and discovery.

Youth Leadership Development

Whether you are a Volunteer Youth Leader or employed Youth Professional, at some point you face the reality that you have to develop yourself and those you lead. Youth ministry involves dealing continually with dramatic changes. Caring for 0-30 year-olds, assisting them on their journey, is a demanding task, calling endlessly upon your energy, time, and love. Like anything else, to be truly effective you need good training and education. Our struggle is that we have added onto our youth ministry instead of re-thinking it. The ideal youth leader at any level is someone who understands all six worlds: Adventurers, Pathfinders, Juniors, Teens, Youth, and Young Adult. They need to specialize in any one area but able to grasp and handle each at a competent level. This flexibility is critical to the needs of a faith community as it allows expression and connection through multiple pathways. To adopt only one approach is

to miss the millennial generations connection points. We need to create a leadership program as Folmsbee (2007) suggests that will have those we lead experience “a faith they can take with them for the rest of their journey” (p. 41).

Mission

Re-focusing on our theology not only shapes our identity, but it will also shape our church. Our faith needs to have teeth to it. It needs to live and affect those we cram together with in the subway station or the bus ride home. Hunter (2008) suggests that “by engaging in holistic reconciliation, by teaching the full story of Scripture and a Kingdom-orientated world-view, and by actively engaging in social justice, we have the opportunity to give young people a voice for something even bigger than wiping out global poverty--the advancement of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. We enable them better to proclaim (in word and deed) the hope that comes in knowing that the culmination of that Kingdom will one day arrive...” (p. 98).

The mantra of the General Conference Youth Department is Salvation and Service. When Hurricane Gustav hit the southern shores of the USA, it took one appeal in a Thursday morning chapel to mobilize 50 students to raise funds and leave seven hours later for an all-night journey to serve. The millennial generation wants a faith that is active. What if we looked at our local church that we attend week by week and studied the community it exists in. How many of us would feel that we truly serve them? Sticking tracts through the door or selling books is fine in itself, but how many next door people know that Jesus makes a difference in our lives.

In the last town I lived in, I used to buy my car tires from one particular garage. With low profile tires and my friendly driving pattern, I visited the garage frequently. One day I plucked up the courage to invite “Bob” to come to our Café Church. He brought his wife, and it appeared they had a good time. It was only a year later when I was selling my car that he happened to come up the street, drunk from his visit in the local pub, and effectively invited himself into my house. It was then through our two-hour conversation that these words still echo in me: “How come you never invited me again?” Our mission is to live faith that is bold and free. Our mission is to see like Jesus did. Living faith generates living faith in others. It helps us to re-engage; it brings more people into a saving relationship with Jesus.

Conclusion

Within Seventh-day Adventist youth ministry, all youth professionals hold some passages close to them. Often spoken and quoted are the famous words from Ellen White regarding an army of youth workers. We tend to forget two

subtle facts. The first is that she suggests we need our youth to be “trained,” and the second is that she wrote it in the book *Education*, implying this is part of our educational mantra.

Now is the time to re-visit our youth leadership development model. Now is the time to ask ourselves, What is the role of the youth leader and youth pastor? Now is the time to put our funds into leadership. Now is the time for conference Youth and Young Adult Directors to offer the finest training to their youth leaders. Now is the time to anticipate change and prepare to move us forward. If we evaluate honestly, we will have to listen. If we listen, we will have to re-focus. If we re-focus, we will have change. The least we can do to help the millennial generation is to offer them leaders who have a balanced identity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. An identity that is open to dialogue founded on our theology.

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