
Suffer The Little Children (And The Young Adults)

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Abstract

In addressing the problem of young adults leaving the church, Adventists tend to concentrate on changing the youth, while the real solution calls for changing the church to adapt its methods and worship to make the congregation attractive. This involves making church a place friendly for children and creating inter-generational worship. Separate ministry to young adults fails to integrate them into the congregational life.

More than half of all Adventists attending church in North America¹ are 58 years or older, according to a study by Ron Lawson (Graying, 2008). The implications for the larger church are frightening. To cite just one example, more than half of the General Conference budget comes from North America. In 20 years, if the median age of North American Adventists is anywhere near 78, the church will be in dire financial straits.

The Adventist church in North America is undergoing a demographic meltdown. At least half of the “Baby Boom” generation left the church years ago. Their children, the so-called “Generation X,” the youngest of whom are in their mid-20s, have continued the exodus. As they leave, these young adults and young marrieds take with them the children, born and unborn. The absence of these children has caused the closing of many schools in North America and threatens to close more. The next generation, the “Millennials,” show no indication that they will staunch the bleeding. So we find ourselves in the process of losing the majority of a third consecutive generation of Adventists. And we know precisely when the bulk of the losses take place.

A note I received from a Filipino pastor’s wife crystallizes the issue. “Dear Pastor Ed,” the note began,² “Thank you for sharing Jesus to reach out for our ‘young professionals.’ This age group in our church. . . is the concern of all parents in our congregation. The Adventurers, the Youth, and the high school are very visible in church, but our young adults – the ‘young professionals’ the way we call them – aren’t.”

Unless you live in a large Adventist center, that single negative word succinctly expresses how young adults attend, participate, and contribute to the church – they *aren’t*. Note that an active Adventurer club and youth ministry had no effect on the retention of the young adults of that church. A similar experience in many other churches confirms that though they offer many benefits, Pathfinder clubs and youth ministries do not ensure retention of young adults. That would appear to be a strong indictment of youth ministries. After all, as *Adventist Review* editor Bill Knott wrote in a 2003 editorial, “The goal of all genuine youth ministry is the promotion of Christian maturity and the *successful integration of children and youth as fully functioning members of the adult church*” [italics mine] (Knott, 2003). By that definition, our efforts for young adults are failing. But why?

Scripture speaks of integrating individuals into the church as a process of “grafting in.” Grafting involves the bud or branch to be grafted in, called the “scion,” and the established plant, called the “rootstock.” So far, nearly all of our efforts have been directed toward preparing the scion, in preparing the youth to join the existing congregations, while we have essentially avoided the thornier problem of renovating the rootstock – of inducing existing congregations to change. Our attempts at grafting young adults into the existing congregations have met with frustration precisely because we limit our efforts to preparing the young adults. The science of grafting tells us that no matter how well prepared the scion, the graft will not take unless the rootstock is prepared to receive it. Let me share an example.

At a camp meeting where I spoke at the “Young Adults” venue, I urged young adults not to let other people discourage them, to take leadership in providing for their needs and the needs of others of their generation. After one meeting, a frustrated mother came to me. Her daughter, she told me, not long after graduating from college, began attending a small church of largely elderly people. She put together a proposal, which she volunteered to lead, to reach out to other young adults in the community. But the church board replied, “We don’t want young people coming in and disturbing our services. We are an older congregation, and we are happy with our church the way it is.” The rootstock of that congregation simply refused to consider grafting in any scions, no matter how vigorous or well prepared.

This episode demonstrates that even earnest, devout, thoroughly grounded, and trained young adults run into this problem. Until and unless we address the problem of stagnating congregations resistant to change and unreceptive to seekers of any sort, young adult flight from the church will continue. And our inability to retain our own young people mirrors our difficulty in reaching the broader culture. In that regard, our children are somewhat like the miner’s dying canary—a warning that the environment harbors unseen dangers for everyone.

We have tried strategies that attempt to bypass the rootstock challenge, such as separate services for young adults in existing churches and young adult-oriented church plants, but these have met with limited success. As already noted, the separate services generally fail to pass the Knott test: “*The successful integration of children and youth as fully functioning members of the adult church.*” And there are other reasons to question the efficacy of an exclusive emphasis on youth ministries. For one thing, very few of our churches are large enough. As Ed Christian pointed out, we Adventists don’t do Mega-Church very well (Christian, 2003). And since a parallel youth service solution is, in effect, a Mega-Church style solution, it runs contrary to what we do well. Even if the Mega-Church idea worked for us, it still condemns small churches to extinction, and abandons vast areas of North America. A study by the Center for Creative Ministry revealed that ten years ago more than 1000 congregations in North America—according to the Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook (Yearbook, 2008), that would be approximately one out of every five—already have no teenagers or children (Graying, 2008).

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Finally, even where numbers and funding support a separate youth ministry, by its nature such a ministry perpetuates *separation*, not *integration*, thus failing the Knott test.

And as for the young adult-oriented church plants, a sisterhood of nonreceptive churches that make up a conference is no more hospitable to alternative approaches in church plants than they are to innovations in their own services. Not a few promising pastors have been lost this way, along with their congregations. Once again, the attempt to avoid addressing the central issue results in both failure and unnecessary casualties.

A major purpose of the “Seeds” summits and the church planting initiative was to avoid the difficult problem of attempting to change existing congregations. As the late A.C. McClure declared at the first Seeds conference, “It’s easier to birth babies than to raise the dead.” But the “dead” did not go so quietly. Within four years, the theme of an entire Seeds summit was “Church Revitalization.” Three years after that, existing congregations had consolidated their grip on the content of the Seeds conference, and church planting was on life support.

So, why should young adult ministries take on this daunting problem? Because, as Bill Knott wrote, “The goal of all genuine youth ministry is the promotion of Christian maturity and the *successful integration of children and youth as fully functioning members of the adult church.*” No one else has the mission, the purpose, or the warrant to do it, and it is central to our purpose. We cannot fulfill our calling unless we address this issue.

Avoiding the central issue of the non-receptivity of the existing congregational rootstock is essentially attempting to “graft in” young adults without actually “grafting them in.” Addressing the issue of the rootstock will be difficult. Failing to address it renders all other efforts futile.

In that same editorial, “We Gather, *Together*,” Knott made another good point about these separate and parallel ministries that Mega-Churches promote. “Age segmentation in worship, like many other things we have imported from our evangelical friends, *is proving a lasting blessing to almost no one*” [italics mine]. Besides failing to integrate children and youth into the congregation, “age segmentation in worship” causes other problems:

- It deprives the church of nearly half its number – and seven eighths of its passion. God save us from the day

when we are indifferent to the physical presence of other believers, especially younger ones.

- It relieves those planning adult services of their God-given responsibility to ensure that biblically sanctioned worship be simple, musical, delightful, and powerfully affecting.
- It inculcates consumerism and narcissism all along the age spectrum, communicating disdain for those styles of worship and groups of worshipers that do not “meet my needs.”
- It introduces a starkly political approach to the Body of Christ. “Rights,” “demands,” “constituencies,” and “agendas” multiply. Converts and discipleship do not. (Knott, 2003).

Taken together, his points describe a negative feedback loop. What he calls “age segmentation in worship,” “deprives the church of nearly half its number--and seven eighths of its passion.” The remaining group, reduced in size and fervor, “relieves those planning adult services of their God-given responsibility to ensure that . . . worship be simple, musical, delightful, and powerfully affecting.” Confronted with an increasingly narrow demographic, those planning worship target the services for that narrow audience. This increasingly homogenous group of worshipers almost inevitably come to regard themselves as typical of true believers, “After all,” they think, “we are here for God week after week. We must be the truly spiritual.” Implicit in their thoughts is the notion that “If we are God’s people, then what pleases us also pleases God,” when it comes to worship. And even more strongly they believe the converse: “what *displeases* us” – again, especially when it comes to worship — “*displeases* God.” Those responsible for preparing the worship services, naturally wanting to avoid both congregational and the accompanying implied divine displeasure, gravitate toward services that generate the least criticism.

Inevitably, a certain sameness creeps into the services. After all, the complaint, “It’s boring,” carries a lot less sting than, “That song (sermon, story, what ever) was blasphemous!” Or the classic, “Angels in heaven must be weeping because of today’s service.”

Which leaves us with an all-too-familiar picture. An aging group of worshipers listlessly — though some think of it as “reverently” – singing the same songs, praying the same prayers, and sometimes hearing similar sermons again and again, wondering why no one will join them, and often concluding it’s just a sign of the times we’re living in.

Which explains Knott’s contention that in such congregations, “*Converts and discipleship do not [multiply].*” This sums up the plight of the North American church today. We cannot convince our own children to remain

Adventists, nor can we effectively reach out to others in their age group, so our congregations inevitably age, and eventually die.

But suppose we reverse the underlying cause, that instead of separating age group into “children’s church,” “young adult service,” and “adult church,” suppose we bring everybody together. Instead of implicitly saying, “Worship is for the adults, so everyone else has to be quiet and watch,” we explicitly declare, “Worship is for all of us, and we will design it so that all can participate in a way that expresses their unique experience.” Imagine if parents and grandparents took it upon themselves to provide opportunities for children of all ages to freely express their love of God. Would it make a difference? Is it feasible?

The HomePage, a church plant which from the beginning intentionally integrated children and youth of all ages into its central services, answers both of those questions in the affirmative. But more than that. We believe that Adventism’s unique mission and purpose virtually mandate the inclusion of all generations, and we believe that strong support for that practice can be found in Scripture, theology, and psychology. Finally, we believe it is possible for other congregations to experience both spiritual and numerical growth by implementing some or all of the approaches we will describe.

The Adventist experience with church planting since 1996 warns us that approaches and strategies that may work well in other denominations do not automatically yield the same results for Adventists. It follows that changes in the Adventist church in North America must be supported by thoroughly Adventist approaches. The following section, part of a larger presentation with the same title, is a brief example of such an approach.

Elijah’s Run³

As Adventists, we believe we are the Elijah movement and with good reason. We “run before” the Messiah heralding his return. This identification of the Advent Movement with the Elijah Movement comes from our earliest days. Shortly after the disappointment on October 22, 1844, several Adventist writers expressed their conviction that the restoration of the biblical Sabbath was basically similar to the restoration of Israel’s worship under Elijah in a time of general apostasy. (La Rondelle, 1989)

With all the issues swirling around us, we may sometimes lose sight of just how central this “Elijah consciousness” is to our mission and identity. And, while we recognize a number of parallels between the Advent Movement and the Elijah Movement, we tend to lose sight of the word “run” in the word “forerunner.” Because, after everything else on that

fateful day at Mount Carmel, Elijah ran. The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he ran from Mt. Carmel to Jezreel.

The Bible does not give us the precise starting point, nor the precise ending point of Elijah's famous dash, but we know enough to say it was between 25 and 30 miles— in other words, roughly the same length as a marathon race.

I've never run a marathon, but I do know that if you start out running a marathon as a sprint, you will not finish the race. For whatever reason, that seems to have eluded many Adventists, who still see the task of the Elijah movement, the run from Mt. Carmel to Jezreel, from 1844 to the End, as a sprint. Each generation has treated the task of proclaiming the message of Jesus return as if it were a hundred yard dash. But by now it must be self-evident that Elijah's run never was a single-generation sprint, but a multi-generation relay.

Successful relay teams practice passing the baton more than anything else. For if a team fails to pass the baton, the race is over. Recent generations of Adventists, on the other hand, have tried a totally different approach. We have children and youth run their own separate races for 18 years or so. Then, we ask them to sit down and watch the "adults" run the race— even if some of the 'runners' need walkers.

If they wait long enough, they might be able to pry the baton from our cold, dead hands. If they grow bored and wander away in the meantime, that's proof they weren't interested in running anyway.

But if we're serious about our mission as the Elijah Movement, then like a successful relay

team, we need to begin to practice passing the baton and practice that more than anything else.

Passing the baton consists of two simple actions. The next runner must *be willing to receive* the baton, and the previous runner has to *let go*. In terms of the Elijah movement, this means that we older Adventists must live a faith that our children and grandchildren desire to emulate, that they *want to receive*. And then we must *let go*. Each runner runs his or her own race and runs it distinctively or not at all. The responsibility for both living a vibrant faith and letting go rests upon the parents in particular and the older generation in general.

This aligns the Elijah *movement* with the Elijah *message*. "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn

the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4: 5-6a).

Elijah needs to turn the hearts of the fathers— our hearts, the hearts of the older generation – to our own children because *our hearts have been turned somewhere else*. Fidelity to the Advent message, the Elijah movement, demands that it is time and past time that we focus again on the spiritual needs of the *next generation*.

Upon hearing the presentation, "Elijah's Run," many Adventists recognize their responsibility, and they ask, "How do we pass the baton? How do we make our faith interesting and desirable, and how do we let go, confident that the next generation will continue to run the race? Is there any group that, as successful relay teams do, concentrates on handing off the baton? The answer is yes. Despite persecution and numerous attempts to exterminate them, the Jews have successfully passed the baton for more than 100 generations. Adventists, by contrast, have been here fewer than 10 generations. Perhaps the Jews know something we don't.

An Example from Jewish Ritual

The Seder, or Passover service occupies a central role in the Jewish experience. And the entire service has been designed to pique the curiosity of children. Traditionally, the service begins with the question, "Why is this night different from every other night?" That question is to be asked by the youngest person present who is able to ask and answer the question. As one account describes it, "At this point, the Haggadah assumes, the child is overwhelmed with curiosity about the proceedings" (Rich, 2004). At one point, someone hides a piece of the unleavened bread, called the *afikomen*, which later the children search for. At the conclusion of the Seder, they pour a final cup of wine. Then the children rush to open the door, quickly returning to the final cup, hoping to see the slightest ripple on the surface of the liquid, indicating Elijah might be taking a sip. So, the defining ceremony of Judaism has roles for children intricately interwoven from beginning to end. Nor is Passover unique in this regard. Many central Jewish ceremonies actively engage children in much the same way as the Seder service.

Some may wonder whether God intended the Passover service to be interesting to children or whether those are simply later additions, of solely human origin. Let's take a look at the passage where God commanded Passover observance, Exodus 12:24-27: "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them,

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'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.' " Note the words, "and when your children ask." Apparently, God did intend the Passover celebration to pique children's curiosity, to stimulate them to ask about its purpose.

Can you imagine anyone describing an Adventist service as assuming that "the child is overwhelmed with curiosity about the proceedings?" In many churches, the few moments devoted to the "children's story" is the only portion of the worship service designed for children. And even then, we collect the children in a small area separate from their parents. We may devote that part of worship to the children, but we don't really share that portion with them. Generally speaking, the rest of the worship hour rarely devotes any attention to the needs and interests of children, and they return the favor.

Paradoxically, children find one important ceremony fascinating – *Communion*. And here the common practice has been to forbid children from having any part in it. More than that, the ceremony usually extends the worship hour and delays lunch. The contrast between the Seder service, which not only features a feast but carefully appeals to children at almost every step, and the Communion service, which delays lunch and commonly forbids children to participate could hardly be greater. Indeed, one of my daughters, when she was about 14 years old, began helping her uncle pick up the tiny glass cups used in the Communion, but a deacon stopped her, saying, "You leave those alone."

Some might say that child-friendly activities such as found in the Seder are permissible for a special occasion but not for worship. Bill Knott answers, "This is no call to burn the puppet stage or cancel next month's youth-led worship service. If these things be worthy of the name of worship, then they are suitable for all of us--in the sanctuary, the gym, or the Fellowship Hall--and we may all learn from them and grow by them" (Knott, 2003). *If these things be worthy... then they are suitable for all of us.* At HomePage we have found that they *are* worthy and that we *all do benefit from them, often in ways we could not have anticipated.*

Becoming As Little Children

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). And that may be more difficult– and more important– than we anticipate.

Some years ago, as an incentive for families to arrive early at Sabbath school, an innovative Sabbath school superintendent arranged for a skilled reader to share a chapter of an exciting mission story, such as "Singer on the Sand" or "Nyla and the White Crocodile" every Sabbath morning,

beginning at 9:15. It worked. Entire families came early and sat on the edge of their seats every week, listening to these wonderful stories. But one perennial church elder refused to go in during the story, making a point of sitting in his car in the parking lot until the story was over. When asked why he did that, he said, "I refuse to be treated like a Junior."⁴ Eventually, that elder generated enough heat to put an end to the practice. The pastor explained that some of the older members felt they were being treated like children. Unwilling to become as little children, they became childish.

At the HomePage, every week we have at least one "action song," such as "I'm in the Lord's Army." Although specifically targeted for the younger children, like every part of our service, all age groups are encouraged to join in, and usually everyone who is able does. We have found that worshiping with children helps us to understand Jesus' words better.

When grandma and grandpa avail themselves of the opportunity to actually *become like little children*, the generations bond with one another. This sends an unequivocal message to the children that we all participate in worship. And they receive it loud and clear. We know that, because when it comes time for some of the more "adult" parts of the service, the children don't know any better, and so they participate in those parts, too. Yes, sometimes they do it clumsily; sometimes they don't exactly understand what they're doing. But they do participate, and sometimes what they do brings all the older members a sense of wonder.

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Babes in Christ

Sometimes we forget that individuals of mature years may be infants or toddlers when it comes to the Christian walk. One week, only a few small children happened to be at the service, and when asked their choice for the action song, they seemed shy and unresponsive. But a twenty- something young man piped up, "How about, 'Father Abraham?'" The worship leader said to him what she said to any young child who volunteered a favorite song, "Would you like to come up here and help me to lead it?" So this six-foot-four former Marine led out with enthusiasm. Over a series of weeks, we noticed that he always participated in action songs with great enthusiasm. Eventually, we came to realize that these songs allowed him to relive a time when Sabbath school and church had been a happy time for him. Slowly but surely,

the healing began. We witnessed a young adult who had been estranged from the church being gradually grafted in.

Making the church child friendly, and encouraging adults to participate in the worship features primarily targeted at young children, gave him permission to become as a little child again and find healing. We cannot know how many young adults – and perhaps older ones, as well – might benefit from such an opportunity.⁵ But we now realize that making a church service child friendly also makes it welcoming to babes in Christ, to new Christians of many kinds, and in many stages of their faith development. Babes in Christ come in all sizes, shapes, and ages.

Parenting, Noise, and Distractions

A church which integrates children into every aspect of the service will have to be prepared for some noise and for some confusion. Children are human beings under construction. They are not complete and mature. They make mistakes. They forget where they are. And new parents and parents with multiple children also are in the process of learning how to be parents. They will make mistakes. All of these factors mean that a service with and for children will not be as neat and as quiet as some would like.

However, the noise and childcare challenges of young families can also be seen as opportunities — opportunities for both young adults and older adults to tactfully assist

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and model more effective approaches. A key to intergenerational worship is that adults participate *with* children, as well as children participating with adults. So a grandmother doing an action song with a young child,

or a young adult holding a toddler as they sing “This Little Light of Mine” are both opportunities to share across generational lines, help the child understand how to participate, model effective nurture for parents, and relieve parents of some of the burden of supervision all at the same time. Parents may become more skilled by “osmosis,” absorbing the examples without the friction of needless confrontation. The older adults participate with the children for the joy of it, and in the process model more effective parenting.

These are just a few of the reasons for integrating children and youth of all ages with the older members in one combined service.⁶ At this point you may be asking, “What does all this have to do with retaining young adults?” Two important things. First, in such a church, there is no “transition” period, as there would be when moving from

the young adult service to the just plain old adult service. At each stage of development, at every age, children, young people, and teens actively participate in worship, often volunteering for leadership roles. Second, the natural talents and ambitions of young adults give them a special role in the worship service.

The Crucial Role of Young Adults

Young adults play a crucial role in a child-friendly church. With older members serving as mentors and as role models in dealing with both the children and young adults, much of the burden of planning and leading services falls on young adults, especially those 17 – 23 years old. At an age where their abilities and competence are blossoming, and when they are eager to demonstrate both, their passion and enthusiasm give life and form to the services.⁷

As the professional and family responsibilities of these young adults increase, they welcome relinquishing some of the responsibility and work involved in leading the worship services to the slightly younger members. Since “passing the baton” takes place all the time, no trauma attends the shifting of responsibility and changing of roles. Young families enjoy a setting which welcomes children and provides for their needs. In this flexible environment, such transitions are seamless and largely unremarkable.

The relationship of these young adults to the older mentors in moving a church forward can be described as that of sails and ballast. The young adults are the sails, providing energy, imagination, enthusiasm, creativity, and drive to the church. The mentors are like ballast, providing stability, steadiness under stress, and the benefits of experience.

However, playing the role of ballast does not mean simply restraining the young people. When it comes to imagination and innovation, mentors’ default response should be “Yes.” Anything on the edge of ordinary practice should be allowed unless it is explicitly forbidden by Scripture. “When it doubt, try it out.” That is in contrast to most churches, where anything new or unusual is automatically vetoed – the default is “No” — unless someone can somehow demonstrate that this is endorsed directly by the Bible and/or Ellen White.⁸ No ship can move forward if the ballast continually overwhelms the sails.

Just as ballast in a sailboat keeps it from toppling over in high winds, mentors help keep younger adults on a steady course, protecting them from the criticism that will come from those who do not understand what they’re doing and helping them stay connected to the denomination when they may have many good reasons for wanting to leave.

In effect, this kind of church engages in “passing the baton” every week. As children grow, and their talents and interests become clearer, they automatically assume more

responsibility and actively take on significant roles. In this type of church “grafting in,” is a continuous and seamless process, a process so natural that children and young people attending for only the second time will actively participate and ask parents or friends to bring them again. Even when circumstances prevent attendance, they often think of the Home Page as “my church.”

The same ingredients that make a church child friendly also make it safe for young adults. The details of what such a church looks like and how it operates require more space than available here. But the basic outlines can be sketched. Any church that hopes to be successful with young adults must be relationship-based. In this case, relationship-based refers directly to the seven levels of relationship as outlined in two recent books from Pacific Press (Dickerson, 2007 and Paulien, 2008). As the previous examples have demonstrated, the church also needs to be intensely interactive. The typical “sit and soak” service holds no appeal for young adults and little value for any one.

Transitioning

Assuming, as this paper does, that some form of intergenerational worship is the ideal to which many congregations should move, the question remains, “How do we get from here to there?” There are three parts to the answer. (1) Educating administrators, pastors, and congregations. (2) Identifying and training “Wausau” churches and pastors⁹ and mentors. (3) “Grafting in” current young adults and instituting intergenerational worship.

The constraints of this paper regrettably necessitate that numerous things be only sketched in or glossed over. Contact the author for more detailed information. As indicated, the most important part of this proposal is the “why,” and so most of this paper has been devoted to that question. If the “why” is rejected, the “how” is irrelevant. So most of the “how” has been reserved for later elaboration.

The Key Role of Mentors

The Adventist denomination, being a human organization — and one which has not reorganized in more than a century — has many flaws and inefficiencies. Church plants started by and for younger congregations often recognize these flaws, but without a strong sense of Adventist identity, they may not see as clearly the reasons for belonging to the denomination. Experience has shown that unless someone in these congregations possesses a strong sense of Adventist identity, these companies may simply run away on their own mission. The baton will not be passed unless those who already have it are both present and are willing and prepared to entrust it to the new generation.

Mentors, older adults with a clear sense of their Adventist identity, an ability to listen without judging and to explain their faith authentically, while remaining flexible regarding methods, can serve a crucial role. A mentor’s experience and counsel can help anchor the young people in the denomination. And experience shows that young adults welcome the presence and gentle guidance of such mentors.

Step One: Education

Conference level (or higher). Pastors and administrators should receive training concerning the rationale, the purpose, and implementation and practice of intergenerational worship. Potential “Wausau” (Bossert, 2007) churches should be identified.

Step Two: Identifying “Wausau” Churches, Pastors, and Mentors

Not every church will be ready or willing to accept innovation. Potential candidate congregations should go through the “Wausau” process, with the additional steps to determine if intergenerational worship is the way for them to go. This process should include an explicit call to and invitation of Wausau churches and individuals ready for training as mentors. Financial and/or other incentives might be offered to congregations that recognize this need and volunteer to begin the process.

Once identified, the entire congregations should receive extensive training, with coaching and consultation for each of these groups and individuals made available on a continuing basis.

“Grafting In” and Instituting Intergenerational Worship

Once the “Wausau” church, pastor, and mentors¹⁰ in that church have been trained, they should receive help to design and conduct child friendly services. If the church has no young adult members or potential young adult members, it may be possible to recruit young adults from within the denomination. Also, a series of workshops and/or seminars for young adults and young parents can be held in that location to help attract young families to the congregation. Special services and the gatherings, such as a Christian Seder service in the spring or a Christmas party, which invite and welcome families with children may act as the initial contact.

A child-friendly church often attracts children from many sources. Grandparents who have moved away from the area, and whose adult children no longer attend, may bring their grandchildren when they visit. Once they discover what a child-friendly church can be like, children often eagerly request to be allowed to return. And once

members of all ages experience the unique joy of sharing worship with all the generations, worship truly becomes a celebration of the richness and goodness of God.

Conclusion

A church which welcomes and nurtures children will welcome people of all ages. In each of the synoptic Gospel accounts, the approach of the young adult we refer to as the “rich young ruler” is preceded by Jesus’ saying (as the King James Version puts it), “Suffer the little children.” And he goes on to say that the kingdom of heaven consists of people who become like little children. The fact that all three Synoptics connect the two episodes, coupled with the tentative approach the young man makes, and how Christ’s heart was moved with love for him, leads me to believe that Jesus’ acceptance of the children convinced the rich young ruler that he would be safe enough to ask his question. When we “Suffer the little children...” the young adults feel safe, too.

“The goal of all genuine youth ministry is the promotion of Christian maturity and the successful integration of children and youth as fully functioning members of the adult church.” If we who are charged with young adult ministry do not take up this challenge, who will? And if we do not take up this challenge, why are we in young adult ministry?

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Endnotes

1. The problem is not limited to North America, but others are writing that issue.
2. Much of the material in this paper comes from two book manuscripts currently under development: “Passing the Torch: How to Pass on a Faith Young Adults Want to Receive,” by Ed Dickerson, and “We Gather Together: Why and How to Include Children in Worship,” by Ed and Mavis Dickerson
3. The material in this section is adapted from a sermon by the author. A podcast is available at <http://www.madisoncampus.org/videopodcast.php>
4. As an elementary school teacher, and student of child development, the author agreed that the elder should not be treated like a junior. Behaviors such as his would be much more common in kindergarten.
5. Action songs have many benefits. One of them, which is outside the scope of this paper, has to do with learning styles. Howard Gardner of Harvard University has identified nine kinds of intelligence and nine ways of understanding and processing the information taken in from the world around us. At HomePage, we design our services to incorporate as many learning styles as we can each week.
6. A full treatment of the rationale for intergenerational worship will be in the previously mentioned book under development, “We Gather Together: Why and How to Include Children in Worship,” by Ed and Mavis Dickerson
7. This age range is not picked at random but based on experience. A little younger and they do not have the freedom and opportunity to do as much. A little older and marriage, career, and children take up more of their energy.
8. And sometimes not then. Consider biblical references to clapping hands and dancing as worship. See Psalms 149:3; 150:4.
9. “Wausau church,” refers to a church and pastor willing to face the need for change, such as described in “The Wausau Church Story,” by Bill Bossert in the August 9, 2007, Adventist Review. It can be read online at <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=1299>
10. Possibly retired Adventists who have received mentor training might volunteer to go for a time to serve as mentors and help raise up other mentors in a Wausau church.