
Principles For Relational Young Adult Ministry

Lisa M. Hope

**Adventist Christian Fellowship Director
Georgia-Cumberland Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Advent House Chaplain/Director
University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

Abstract

Young adults are conspicuously missing from the majority of Seventh-day Adventist churches. Finding effective means of ministry for the millennial generation is essential for the health and growth of Adventist young adults in the 21st Century. While each young adult is unique, there are general relational principles that are imperative to build the relationships and establish the community this generation seeks: finding a social prop, mastering small talk, asking questions, curiosity, vulnerability. The church must move forward, choosing to err on the side of love, acceptance, and mercy to be relevant to young adults today.

Introduction

One of the most popular topics of discussion within the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is ministry to young people—how to effectively reach the millennial generation that is conspicuously absent from the majority of churches. This discussion actually extends well beyond the Adventist denomination into the Protestant and evangelical Christian world in general; however, the focus of this paper will be on Adventist young adults and specific relational principles the Seventh-day Adventist Church can incorporate into ministry to the millennial generation.

Why are youth and young adults leaving church? What will it take to get them to return or, better yet, not leave in the first place? What is the meaning of the transition from a modern to post-modern world-view? How do the various generational needs and characteristics play into the solution for reaching the most young people for God?

The questions are many and effective answers are not quick to come by. Challenges come from older generations attempting to answer the questions for younger generations. Times, culture, society, ways of relating, and communication styles are changing rapidly. Fifty years ago an Adventist church could reasonably expect most of the children, youth, and young adults to grow up in the church and remain in the church throughout adulthood. This is not true in 2008. The older and younger generations are relating to each other differently. There is confusion, frustration, hurt feelings,

judgment, and miscommunication. Two very different languages have emerged. The question that is often on the table, although not well articulated, is which language will be the official language of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the 21st century? Will the younger generations learn the language of their elders or vice versa? Or, will there slowly be greater and greater separation between the groups until a new denomination is formed? Is it possible to bridge this gap that exists, or should the church resign to “irreconcilable differences” and sign the divorce papers?

The statistics are clear and sobering. An estimated 40-50 percent of Seventh-day Adventists are leaving the church by their mid-twenties. This is likely a conservative estimate (Dudley, 2000). Many young adults report dissatisfaction with religion and church as they have known it. They leave their parents’ church as they seek community elsewhere.

While there are a number of emerging ministries focused on reaching young adults, there does not appear to be many clearly defined, replicable models. Something that might work in the Northwest does not seem to make any impact in the South. A success story for one church is a failure for the next. Is it even possible to identify a particular model for effective young adult ministry, or should each church be left to grasp straws in the dark, hoping and praying that they just might grab the one with the right answer?

The post-modern world is one with more choices than any time in history. This has become the reality for

this generation. Walk into any grocery store and where there used to be one type of cracker, there are now twelve or more. College students have more choices for majors than any preceding generation. Many universities even have programs where students can design their own major if they cannot find one that fits their needs. Cell phones, iPods, laptops, video games all come in almost unlimited variety. Everywhere young adults turn, there is a plethora of choices. Everywhere, that is, except church.

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church is going to be relevant in the lives of this generation, choices must be put on the table. It is not realistic to believe there is a

“Everywhere young adults turn, there is a plethora of choices. Everywhere, that is, except church.”

simple, one-size-fits-all answer. The leaders of the church must be willing to explore a variety of ministry options, be willing to empower young adults to develop ministries that have never been done before, and accept

that allowing failure might be one of the best solutions in attempting to reach success.

The remainder of this paper will focus on one model of ministry to young adults. This is not intended to be a solution, but it is intended to add to the conversation with hopes of sparking ideas for other ministries throughout the church. The principles upon which this particular model of ministry is built are transferable to other models, however, and may be applicable in other settings.

A Model for Relational Ministry

Advent House is a Seventh-day Adventist Student Center on the campus of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). In the late 1970s, local church members, Beverly and Harold Duckett, opened their downtown office building Friday nights to meet with Adventist students who attended UTK. After a few years, the Duckett's concern for students' safety while walking back to campus after dark facilitated a search for something closer to campus.

Purchased in 1980, Advent House has been home to Adventist Christian Fellowship (ACF) for almost 30 years. This ministry operates on the principles of community, relationships, and intentional error. In serving the millennial generation, if mistakes are to be made, they need to intentionally be made on the side of love, acceptance, and mercy rather than judgment. In light of this, the mission of Advent House is to:

1. Extend the ministry presence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the campus of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

2. Provide a comfortable and supportive gathering place for students
3. Provide low cost housing and leadership opportunities for house residents
4. Support the Adventist Christian Fellowship at the University of Tennessee mission statement which is to facilitate an atmosphere of belonging, believing, and becoming for all students, each student maturing in his/her faith, ministering to the needs of others, being involved in mission, and exploring leadership opportunities.

Advent House intentionally seeks to be a place of relationships and community. In ministering in the midst of a post-modern world, community is not an option. Jimmy Long (2004), in his book, *Emerging Hope: A Strategy for Reaching Postmodern Generations*, writes about the shift from individualism to community that is a by-product of the larger cultural shift from modernity to post-modernity. “They [Generation X and the Millennial generation] have a yearning for spirituality over against reason alone.... I cannot overemphasize the necessity for community as the foundation for any faithful ministry to these emerging generations” (p. 55).

Conversations are another imperative aspect of the ministry of Advent House. Traditionally, evangelism within the realm of Adventism has focused on bringing individuals to a decision to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church once they have intellectually embraced the doctrinal beliefs and practices of the church. To approach the average student at a public university with the goal to convince them to believe a particular way or to embrace what is considered to be “the truth,” will immediately put up walls and end conversations. This generation seeks “compromise, not confrontation, and are repelled by any group arrogantly claiming to have all the answers” (Long, 2004, p. 33). This is true not only of young adults who are outside of the church, but also of those who have grown up within the Adventist system. The current generations of youth and young adults are the “ultimate ‘conversation generations.’ They want to discuss, debate, and question everything” (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, p. 33). Christians are often perceived as wanting to provide answers and win arguments. This approach is ineffective in reaching out to the world of post-modern young adults. In addition, Dan Kimball (2007) points out that the culture of America is increasingly post-Christian. The values and influences that largely impact young adults do not align with traditional Christianity as they did thirty-plus years ago. This influence is affecting Adventist young people growing up in the church. They are questioning the traditions and even doctrines of the church, wondering how any of it impacts their lives in a practical way.

Kinnaman and Lyons (2007), as well as Kimball (2007), address the difficult reality that those outside the church perceive Christians in a negative light. When it comes to the millennial generation, there are also negative perceptions and sometimes a sense of being embarrassed of the church because the behavior of so many Christians is, in fact, unChristian. This has resulted in an extension or expansion of the gap that exists between God and humans. Originally, the gap was created by sin. The goal of evangelism has been to connect people with Jesus, who bridges that gap. Christianity and the Christian subculture (or for the purposes of this paper, Adventism and the Adventist subculture) have created an additional gap for many young people. This is the gap that must first be addressed and bridged in the lives of many young adults (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Kimball, 2007).

So, what is the appropriate response? How can the average Adventist church member reach out to a young adult they know? While each young adult will have unique needs and wants differing from peers, there are overarching principles that resonate with the millennial generation as a whole. These principles are finding a social prop, mastering small talk, asking questions, curiosity, and vulnerability. Utilizing these principles will open doors to build relationships—the foundation of young adult ministry. These five principles are not exhaustive. They could be renamed, expanded, and the focus modified. There is overlap between the principles, and yet there is value in taking an individual look at each one and their interaction.

Five Principles

Finding a Social Prop

Walking into a new environment can be intimidating, especially if there are new people. An attractive, informal physical space can set the tone for young adult gatherings. Comfort and homelike qualities are inviting to this generation. Food is also an excellent icebreaker. Combining an informal environment with food and fellowship can create an atmosphere where relationships happen naturally. The number one rule of ministry at Advent House is food. This is especially important in the lives of college students. Students are often away from home for the first time. They do not have a lot of money. A free, home-cooked meal breaks down barriers with little to no effort, especially when they are involved in the meal preparation.

The book of Acts highlights the focus of the early church. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42, NIV). Apparently the “breaking of bread” is important enough to be included in this list summarizing

the early church’s activities. Listed between teaching and prayer, two aspects of ministry that anyone would put at the top of a ministry priority list, eating together appears to be of equal value.

The attitude of the people greeting is important as well. It is typically within the first few minutes that impressions are made, and a young adult will decide to return or not. This leads into the importance of the next principle: mastering small talk.

Mastering Small Talk

A willingness to engage in small talk is important in building relationships with young adults. In ministry, it is possible to feel like conversations about insignificant issues or the mundane details of someone’s life, are a “necessary evil” to get to the real matters of the heart. In a sense, there is a certain measure of truth to this; however, the perception of small talk being either “necessary” or “evil” invariably comes through in a conversation. Young adults are incredibly perceptive. If they feel like the listener is simply “doing them a favor” by listening, they will likely stop talking.

“Young adults want to know that they are cared for as a person before they will open up on a deeper level.”

Young adults want to know that they are cared for as a person before they will open up on a deeper level. There are many conversations that begin with a focus on the latest movie or Hollywood gossip and transition to spiritual topics without any overt effort. If given the space to open up, young adults are hungry for spiritual conversations.

Asking Questions

Hand-in-hand with small talk comes the skill of asking questions. Good questions open up conversations and create a space for interaction. Learning to ask open-ended questions without an agenda is important. God is a master questioner. From the very beginning, God reached out to fallen humanity with questions. “Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? What is this that you have done?” (Genesis 3:9, 11, 13, NIV). Jesus followed this model in his ministry. “After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46, NIV, emphasis mine). “Who do people say the Son of Man is?... But what about you? Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:13, 15, NIV).

Interestingly enough, the most effective way to answer the questions of young adults is with questions. Most ministry leaders are taught to give answers, not ask questions,

so this can be a significant paradigm shift. Recently, the Advent House board members attended a workshop to learn about post-modernism and how to connect more effectively with college students. The idea of answering a question with a question created a dissonance for many of them. One board member commented, “I grew up getting answers, and I have learned to give answers. Isn’t that why people ask questions—to get answers?” The response from a 25-year-old graduate student revealed much about the heart of young adults: “I ask the question not for an answer but for the conversation.”

Young adults are longing for conversation. Again, this is the conversation generation. Questions lead to conversation. Questions, at least, that do not come with pre-packaged, fill-in-the-blank answers. When young adults ask a question, they are evaluating the response. In the back of their mind they are taking note of how the conversation goes. “Is this a safe place to ask questions? Am I going to be given the same answers I have grown up with? Is there room for varying perspectives? Is there room for my perspective even though it is different than the church’s? Will I be shut down or encouraged to open up?”

Still perplexed, the Advent House board member asked the grad student, “Don’t you ever want answers?” Again, the reply held rich information about this generation: “If it is safe to ask you questions, and you don’t immediately provide me with answers, when I am ready for the answer, I will come back.” Young adults are interested in answers—in their time and in a way that does not come across as judgmental. An important concept to keep in mind is that the right questions can lead to answers that young adults will come to by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Give young adults the room to reason, think, process, and even struggle through tough questions. In essence, this is opening doors for the Holy Spirit to speak into their hearts and minds and souls and lead them to eternal truths. When they come to these answers “on their own,” a huge step has been taken beyond indoctrination.

Curiosity

One of the fastest ways to allow a relationship to stagnate or diminish in quality is to assume there is nothing left to learn about the other persons. In contrast, a very effective way to maintain a healthy relationship is to foster a sense a curiosity about them. There is little that makes

people feel more valued as when someone takes a genuine interest in them.

Adventists often have an agenda of getting to know someone in order to bring them to church. A major perception people outside the church have of Christians, according to Kinnaman and Lyons (2007), is that Christians are insincere and “rather than being genuinely interested in people for their friendship... seem like spiritual headhunters” (p. 69). Sadly enough, the research also shows that many traditional evangelistic methods actually create more negative responses than positive. A real, life-changing experience with Jesus has too often been missed because Christians “cheapen the message of Jesus to church membership or denominational loyalty” (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, p. 79).

“Christians are often judgmental and critical, quickly pointing out the speck in another’s eye, when a plank remains in their own (Matthew 7:4).”

Genuine curiosity is a way to combat the negative perceptions that young adults have of the church. It says, “You are valuable, not because you believe like me or belong to the same organizational structure, but simply because you are a child of God.” Viewing young adults from God’s perspective can help make this transition a reality. Too often young

adults are viewed as “fallen away” or “prodigals,” and older church members forget that they are all children of God, whether they appear to be acknowledging that relationship in their lives or not. “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7, NIV).

Vulnerability

Christians are often judgmental and critical, quickly pointing out the speck in another’s eye, when a plank remains in their own (Matthew 7:4). This behavior is possibly more of a turn-off to young adults than anything else. Young adults do not expect people in the church to be perfect. They do not expect church leaders to get it all right. They do want people to be real and honest. Being vulnerable is foundational in establishing transformational relationships.

Peter Scazzero (2006), in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, identifies “covering over brokenness, weakness, and failure” as one of the top ten symptoms of emotionally unhealthy spirituality. “By failing to let others be themselves before God and move at their own pace, we inevitably project onto them our own discomfort with their choice to live life differently than we do” (p. 37). Living life with a genuine vulnerability before God and others is something that is attractive to young adults. It is the “conspicuous actions” of

leaders that will “serve as a catalyst to transform young adult attrition statistics into retention trends” (Martin, 2008, p. 8).

Choosing Future Errors

There are a lot of unknowns in approaching ministry to the millennial generation. The church is bound to make mistakes along the way. Mistakes have been made all along the way. Part of the answer to moving forward involves being intentional about what kind of mistakes are made from this point. In the past, mistakes have tended to fall on the side of judgment and rule-making. Young adults need room on the other side of the pendulum—the side of love and acceptance. James says to believers, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:12, 13, NIV). Peter, also, exhorts the church, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8, NIV).

Ty Gibson (1997), in his book, *Abandon Ship?* points out the reality that “there will be many people in heaven who didn’t have all the right doctrines but had the right spirit. But there will be no one in heaven who had all the right doctrines but cherished the wrong spirit” (p. 105). It is imperative to move forward from this point with the right spirit. This may mean loving and accepting young adults even as they walk out the back door. Loving and accepting them even if they decide to never re-enter, rather than in an effort get them to re-enter.

Young adults today do not have a loyalty to the organization of the church. “Company loyalty” is an ideal of the past. Loyalty now lies in values and relationships. Nathan, a 23-year-old electrical engineer, says this about his loyalty: “I don’t feel committed to the church as an organization. I’m committed to values. I feel like the church is not living by the values it was founded on. We’ve gone from values to rules and now my generation wants to get back to the values.” When asked what has kept him connected to the Adventist church, 21-year-old Casey replies without hesitation: “Friends. I consider myself agnostic at this point in time. I don’t really consider myself Adventist, but when I go to church, I go to the Adventist church because of the people I know.”

There are arguments that relationships are not enough. At this point in the church’s history, however, information and intellectual beliefs have not been enough. Perhaps there is room for the pendulum to swing “too far” in the other direction and allow relationships to catch up with the informational side of the church.

God longs to establish intimate relationships with humanity. He longs to build the relationships with each

person on a basis of unconditional love and acceptance. Change is a natural result of experiencing that kind of love and acceptance. One cannot help but be changed in the presence of God. If the church is truly to be a manifestation of God’s love to those in the world, perhaps it is this love that will be the most powerful change-agent. Not just talking, teaching, or preaching about love, but truly living it out in practical ways.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a history of pouring incredible energy into teaching a specific set of beliefs. These beliefs are typically identified as “The Truth” that the world needs to know, specifically the end-time truth. As time as we know it on this planet draws to a close, it is imperative for the church to consider again what the message of the final hours needs to be. Ellen White writes, “The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love” (White, 1941, p. 415).

This generation’s potential to love is astounding. Millennials in and around the church want to see God’s love revealed—both in the church and to the world. One 24-year-old describes it this way:

I think a lot of people aren’t leaving the church because of what the church is, but because of what it isn’t. More particularly, I think that there are a lot of young people (myself included) that would stick with churches if they were actually enabling us to live radically as Jesus-followers. I think the thing for me is realizing the great disconnect between the way Jesus calls a body of believers to live in this world and the reality of the church being very distant from the realities of my life and the lives of many like me.

May the church hear the words of young adults as a call to be engaged in small talk, asking questions, being curious, and living vulnerably.

Conclusion

There are still many questions that need to be acknowledged and wrestled with. Young adults are leaving the church, yes. Many, however, are still inside with their hands on the doorknob, waiting to see what will happen and how they will be treated. The millennial generation values authenticity. If the church preaches one set of values and lives by a contradicting set, this generation will not engage. This time in history is a chance for change and revival. The change and revival can and needs to begin in the hearts of every member, regardless of age.

“If we err, let it be on the side of mercy rather than on the side of condemnation and harsh dealing” (Gibson, 1997, quoting Ellen White, p. 107-08). The steps proposed

in this paper are steps in the right direction—the direction of relationships. Deep, authentic, intentional relationships, where God is honored, others are honored, and lives are transformed by love, acceptance, and mercy.

References

- Dudley, Roger. (2000). *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories from a 10-year Study*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.
- Gibson, Ty. (1997). *Abandon Ship?: One Man's Struggle to Discover God's Special Purpose for His Church*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press.
- Kimball, Dan. (2007). *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Kinnaman, David., and Gabe Lyons. (2007). *unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Long, Jimmy. (2004). *Emerging Hope: A Strategy for Reaching Postmodern Generations*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Martin, A. Allan. (2008). Reaching Out: Making a Difference with Young Adults. *Ministry*, (July):5-9..
- Scazzero, Peter. (2006). *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- White, Ellen. (1941). *Christ's Object Lessons*. Hagerstown, MD: Review Herald.