
A Study of Youth Retention and the Challenge of Delayed Commitment in the Norwegian Union

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Abstract

A contributory factor in the increasing rates of young people going through the “back door” and out of our church is the extension of adolescence and the corresponding postponement of commitment. This paper will look at pluralism, the extension of adolescence, and the erosion of adulthood as some reasons why commitment is being delayed. Some fundamental questions will be addressed: Is there a need to focus on the age of commitment? What about rites of passage? Do we need some in the Adventist culture? This paper will, in conclusion, look at the experience of the Norwegian Union and the Absolute Nine Program which is a significant part of the Norwegian churches response to the problem of delay.

An Overview

Young people in Norway, Northern Europe, and, indeed, the rest of the western world are delaying many traditional forms of commitment. Average ages for getting married, having children, finishing study, getting a job, owning a house are all going up. There are of course some practical or economic reasons that contribute to some of these delays, but even where these economic or practical difficulties are overcome, young people are not exactly “chomping at the bit” to be able to enter into adulthood.

Adulthood is traditionally the end result of such commitments, which are signs that a person is reaching maturity and entering into a new phase of life. They are, in a sense, the rites of passage of the western world. Another rite of passage has all but disappeared in some communities – that of confirmation, a religious Christian ceremony which is meant as a celebration that a young person has accepted the faith, usually of the state church, and has made that faith his or her own. Today, in those countries where Confirmation still happens, for example Norway, it is about how much money they can gather in order to go and worship, as it were, before the altar of consumerism at the local mall. And so that “unbelievers” don’t miss out on this once in a lifetime opportunity for free money, you are now able to participate in humanistic confirmation and atheistic confirmation.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has not needed to show, in this way, the maturity of its young people as we have had “adult” baptism that has been allowed down to 9 or 10 years of age in some parts of the world. The author of this paper comes from a western European tradition and is working in Norway, where, as Valuegenesis has shown, the most popular age of baptism for Adventist young people is 14 years, followed by ages 16 and 15 (Valuegenesis Europe 2007). This is also shown by the statistics kept at the Norwegian Union which show that young people account for 65% of all baptisms in the Norwegian Union, (the vast majority of which are 14-16 years of age).

There are however, strong signs that baptism is not as popular as it once was for 14 year olds. In the five year period from 1988 to 1993, the Norwegian Union baptized an average of seven 14 year olds per year. Ten years later, from 1998 to 2003 the average was four. The decline is even more marked for 15 year olds where the average number baptized between 1988 and 1993 was twelve but from 1998 to 2003 it was just five. The teenage years are still the most popular years for being baptized, but the fact is that fewer are taking that step.

So, are young people rejecting the church? In my time as youth director, I have asked young people from time to time what is stopping them from making public their commitment to the church through baptism. The answer

invariably is that they think they will be baptized one day, but just not at the moment. It is a big step, they say, and, for various reasons, they do not feel ready to take it. This circumstantial evidence is borne out again by the European Valuegenesis survey which showed that of those young people who had not yet been baptized, the vast majority thought that they would be one day. A massive 94% of Norwegians questioned said that they felt fairly sure they would be Adventist in adult life, with 87% saying that they thought it was, of “some importance” to attend an Adventist church on a regular basis (Valuegenesis Europe 2007). This indicates that we are not experiencing a rejection of the church, but

a delay in commitment to the church.

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This would be good if this commitment did eventually happen. But the research indicates that the longer a young person postpones baptism, the more likely it is that baptism will never happen. In the past 20 years the Norwegian Union has baptized 36% of its young people

between the ages of 14 and 19. This figure drops to 5% as soon as they leave Junior High College and move into their twenties. There is some evidence from the Norwegian figures that 17 has, in the past 10 years, become the most popular age to be baptized (as opposed to 14 for the previous 10 years and for the 20 year period in its totality). Interestingly, this corresponds with a drop to 30% of the percentage of teenagers the Norwegian Union being baptized in the last 10 years, indicating that “delay of commitment” does not mean baptism at a later age. The overall trend is that the Norwegian Union is baptizing fewer teenagers and therefore losing them out of the back door of the church. There is no evidence whatsoever, at least in Norway, to suggest that the drop in teenage baptisms has led to an increase in baptism among young adults.

This tendency to delay can, therefore, be seen as a major reason that there is an increasing flow of young people out of the back door of the church and any solution to the problem must take into account the reasons for delay in commitment and baptism. This paper will look specifically at this issue and present a case study and analysis of the Absolute Nine Program. This program was developed in the Norwegian Union in order to try to encourage commitment to the Adventist church at an earlier age.

A Culture of Delay

Culture in 2008 is often described as pluralistic. Indeed, pluralism is often one of the first words used by those attempting to define the postmodernism of today. Pluralism is not, of course, an exclusively postmodern characteristic, finding its roots in the Renaissance and Reformation, helped on its way by industrialization, war, economics, globalization and the inevitable movement of people as a result of these phenomena.

Perhaps what makes today’s generation different is that, in addition to the factors named above, they are now rapidly confronted with a plethora of ideas, concepts and world views on the internet. As Jim Burns puts it, “The young people we work with today are different from those of any previous generation. They are more knowledgeable, have greater opportunities and are filled with greater potential than people of any other time in history. However they also deal with more stress, anxiety, and pressure than those of any previous generation. There world is a maze of continuing transformations.” (Burns, 2001)

It is no wonder, then, that young people want to keep their options open. Perhaps something better will come along. In terms of faith, with so many options available, they had better really understand what they are committing themselves to and check the alternatives. This has resulted, it seems, in a commitment delay at all levels. A church plant in Oslo consisting of mainly younger people, has found that they are unable to ask their students even to bring so much as a salad to church before 3 days prior to the event. This is simply because the young people are not entirely sure about whether they are coming to church until about 2 or 3 days before. It depends on the alternatives and what their friends are doing. You don’t want to miss out on something because you have committed to making a salad.

As has been widely documented the fast pace of change has led to a shift from spatial to temporal culture, from cultures defined by geography to cultures defined by generation. This of course makes it far less of an inevitability that a young person will follow in the footsteps of previous generations. As Valuegenesis has shown, parents are still very important to faith development, with Adventist young people in Norway citing mother as the number one influence on their faith (Valuegenesis Europe, 2007). Other surveys show that friends are playing an increasing role in the important decisions of life that a young person faces. In an extensive survey of Norwegian young people generally, Morten Holmqvist was able, to some extent, to document, this phenomena. In his analysis of the survey which was sponsored by most of the Christian denominations in Norway, he notes that young people are not in conflict with parents in the traditional sense, and that many have a

good relationship with them. What divides the generations now is not values, but history or time (Holmqvist, 2007). Holmqvist notes that what we have now is not so much a generation gap, but a communication gap. Young people are becoming the experts in so much and with 24 hour per day availability and exchange of information amongst friends, adults just can't keep up (Holmqvist 2007). There is no doubt that in ethical and lifestyle choices, friends have become more important for young people and in all probability this is a contributory factor in delaying commitment. It is no longer inevitable that one follows in the footsteps of one's parents.

Another reason for delay is the extension of adolescence. With the educational process taking longer, and the average age of marriage and childbearing increasing, it is natural that other decisions are also postponed, including that of baptism. Søren Østegaard, lecturer at the Baptist Scandinavian Academy for Leadership and Theology, has done considerable research in this area and presented some of his findings at a Trans-European Division youth leadership convention in 2007. He reported that adolescence in Scandinavia can begin as early as 9 years old ("betweenagers" or early adolescence is fast becoming a large ministry of its own) and can go up to a quite indefinite age. He said that adolescence is continuing more and more into adulthood.

It will be helpful to this discussion to review what adolescence is. Angela Taylor, British Chartered Psychologist, counselor and youth magistrate has included a helpful list of adolescence characteristics in her book, *Responding to Adolescents*. Her list is based on Geldard and Geldard's work and is as follows:

- Adjusting to physical changes in height, body, shape and strength.
- Adjusting to sexual changes and developing sexual identity.
- Making new peer relationships – both same-sex and opposite-sex.
- Being able to manage mood swings as well as emotional changes and feelings.
- Achieving independence from parents, emotionally and socially.
- Developing knowledge and skills to prepare for higher education, a job or a career and for (eventually) achieving economic independence.
- Developing socially responsible patterns of behavior.
- Developing own systems of values, attitudes and beliefs. (Taylor, 2003)

It is becoming more difficult to define the end of adolescence. There is a blurriness, now between adolescence and adulthood. The entrance to adulthood is not only being delayed, but also, as Østegaard suggests, being revisited

by adults who have been in the adult world for a time, but now find themselves back with their parents or depending upon somebody else financially, socially or emotionally because of divorce, job loss, retraining or other such factors (Østegaard, 2007). Hence it is natural that the last point on Taylor's list would also be affected – that of developing one's own systems of values, attitudes and beliefs.

A third factor in the delay of commitment in young people, is the erosion of adulthood. Jason Gardner, Youth Project Researcher at the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, explores this in his new book, *Mend the Gap* (2008) in which he makes the point that there is "precious little difference" between media portrayals of adult and adolescent life. He notes that if you "combine a heavy media focus on teen life with an adult obsession for either living or looking 'young,' ... it is no wonder many young people feel that the journey into adulthood 'becomes a difficult and dangerous balancing act'" (Gardner, 2008). The point is that many adults are no longer modeling adult life to young people, but are modeling, instead, a type of extended adolescence. With this kind of commitment free "adulthood" presented by large parts of the media, it is no wonder that many young people find it hard to "settle down", whether with a spouse, or a set of beliefs.

Gardner asks the important question of whether we do any better as a church in helping our adolescents to grow up.

"Teenagers and children do take their cue from "grown-up" role models – it's we who establish what it means to be adult. So

we have a problem in the church if the only adults our youth predominantly come into contact with are youth workers. This is especially true if we continue to carve out separate spaces for young people in our churches – the youth group, the youth service, the twenty something cell group – rather than allowing them to interact with adults" (Gardner 2008).

Gardner's point is a good one and leads us to look at what kind of role models our young people have in the church. What opportunities do we create where adults and young people are interacting together? And, what do we do to create positive transition periods for our young people? What are we doing to strengthen the picture of adulthood in our church? Maybe the journey we need to present, as an alternative to the confusing 'big brother' idea of what it

"What opportunities do we create where adults and young people are interacting together?"

means to be an adult, is that of a journey from dependence to interdependence (Gardner, 2008).

Gardner uses his critique of adulthood today, to talk about rites of passage, and cites both Jewish and Asian societies as having structured transitions and positive celebrations of progress toward greater responsibility and seniority in the community. Another popular theme in recent years and an attempt to address these issues of growing up is mentoring.

To understand the pluralism of our society, the relational nature of young people, the increased dependence they have on one another and the confusion which surrounds adulthood, may well offer some ideas of how we might stem the flow of young people toward the back door of the church. What follows in this paper is a short description and analysis of a concept called Absolute Nine, which is an attempt to address some of these issues. It is far from a perfect program and because it was borne out of a set of circumstances that arose, it is a concept in development, because those who started it did not have the time for extensive research. However, there are elements that are worthy of note as well as signs that it has contributed somewhat to the slowdown in young people delaying their commitment to the church and slipping out of the back door. It is, therefore, offered, not as a solution, but as a possible catalyst for further discussion on the issues mentioned above.

Absolute Nine: A Case Study

The Absolute Nine program is essentially an alternative to the state church confirmation program and is offered to all ninth graders in the Norwegian Union's eleven schools together with Adventist ninth graders at state schools. It is a project that presents the central tenets of the Christian faith as a viable and possible approach to life and challenges them directly, though not under pressure, to make the Christian belief system their own. The concept came about as a result of a need which, perhaps providentially, coincided with an opportunity that presented itself in 2001 and 2002.

The need was that the church in Norway was facing a relatively steep decline in membership. This was a result of an aging membership, on the one hand, and the loss of its young people on the other hand. A third factor, which is pointed out by Kjell Aune in his research and analysis of the Norwegian church, is the abolishing of departmental work at conference level which led to an increased distance between church leadership and young people and coincided with a marked drop in membership retention (Aune, 2003). The then Youth Department Director, Willy Aronsen, began looking for ways to address these issues.

At the same time the free churches in Norway began to complain to the government because the state church was allowed to take ninth graders out of school for Confirmation teaching while the free churches were not. This resulted in a change of the law and an opportunity for the Adventist church to make its own alternative Confirmation program. Willy Aronsen then got together with Nina Myrdal and Liv Fønnebo, two of the leading educationalists in the Norwegian Union, and the concept was born.

The program (appendix 1) begins on Monday and ends after breakfast on Friday, each 3rd week of September, and takes place in two locations so as to keep the group to a fairly intimate level. There are, therefore, about 60 ninth graders in each of the two locations together with between 16 and 20 adults. This is so that there is a ratio of about 1 adult to 4 young people. This high ratio of adults (mainly consisting of pastors and teachers) to young people enables them to not only learn about God's love and acceptance through teaching and worship, but also to experience it through close contact with an adult representative of the church during the group work and activity periods. The idea of incarnational youth ministry has therefore become an integral part of the concept.

Quality is a key ingredient that comes out of the incarnational model. If Jesus says that our young people are worth dying for, then that needs to be reflected in the quality of the teaching, the group work, the activities, the food, the discipline and the attitudes of the adults. The message is often in the "detail". For example, a group picture is taken and before the end of Absolute Nine every participant has a T-shirt with that picture on. Space is then made in the program for them to sign each other's T-shirts so that they have a real memento to take home with them. Another example of "detail" is that pictures are taken each day and are shown during breakfast the next morning. These "detail" things create a "wow" moment for the young people as they are unexpected. The level of participation from the adults who are eating, playing and worshipping with the young people also sends a message. The message is, "you matter to God and you matter to us – you are worth the effort".

The teaching employs group work in the mornings and presentation style in the evenings to try to reflect different learning styles. Group activities vary from day to day and use a variety of interactive learning strategies. This is to help the young people discover for themselves what the Bible is saying to them in their time. It has been essential for an adult group leader to lead a group of approximately 4 students, because the ability to think abstractly and reading levels in 14 year olds vary tremendously. A pamphlet has been produced, called Absolute Leader, which prepares the group leaders for the task.

Through the themes of “absolute freedom”, “absolute worth”, and “absolute plan,” the participants are given an overview of an Adventist Christian world view. So the student is invited to consider creation, freedom of choice and the consequences of that both personally and in the world before moving on to what Jesus has done for us on the cross and through his resurrection. They then look at God’s plan for us now and in the future. Another way of describing the themes are as answers to the questions: Where have we come from? Where are we now? Where are we going?

In between the teaching segments, the activity level is high, with something happening late morning, throughout the afternoon, and between the evening meeting and bedtime worship. The games include much running around and interaction with everyone involved, including the adults. Many of the games and activities take place outside, whatever the weather.

With that brief overview, the central question to try to analyze is whether the Absolute Nine Program in the five years it has been in action has done anything to encourage young people to stay in the church. The short answer to this question is that the early signs are positive. There has been an increase of 17% in baptisms among 14 year olds, 20% among 15 year olds, and 30% among 16 year olds. It is, however, early days and it is difficult to say with certainty

that Absolute Nine is responsible for these increases, especially because the figures in the Norwegian Union are so small that the addition of just one young person can make an impact on the percentages. Other factors may also be involved, such as an improved atmosphere at the Adventist Junior College or an increase in other youth activities. That said, the fact remains that more teenagers, especially 14-17 year olds, have been baptized in the five years that Absolute Nine has run than were baptized in the five years before the concept was put into action.

So what is it specifically that we can learn from Absolute Nine that could help to address the issue of the back door of the church? There is no doubt that the presence of a high ratio of committed adult role models has made a significant impact on the young people who attend. Through feedback and the evaluations that we have received each year this has been a factor that has been positively remarked upon by both the young people and their parents. In a society where there are few adult role models this is a factor that has been important for Absolute Nine.

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The high quality, high-energy program has also rated highly with young people consistently remarking that it exceeded their expectations. Groups have gone back to their schools and spoken of Absolute Nine in glowing terms. It is now looked forward to with anticipation by 12 and 13 year olds. Therefore, Absolute Nine may well be compared with a rite of passage. At 14 the church considers them old enough to go away for nearly a week to study the basics of the Christian faith and to consider making a commitment to that. It should be pointed out however that about 50% of those who attend our schools are non Adventists. This makes the idea of a rite of passage difficult to develop to its full potential. There is an ongoing discussion in the Norwegian Union about whether we could create more of a rite of passage through just targeting Adventists? On the other hand one can ask to what extent is it right

evangelistically or ethically to target certain groups and leave others out? This debate looks set to continue and will perhaps deprive Absolute Nine of its potential as a rite of passage for Adventist young people.

Perhaps the biggest impact that Absolute Nine has had is in terms of creating a social network for Adventist young people in Norway who are often isolated in what is still a relatively rural society, with its mountains and sparse population of just 4.5 million. Tyrifjord Junior College had been struggling with enrollment for many years. However, since the beginning of the Absolute Nine program enrollment at Tyrifjord has gone up quite dramatically. What seems to be happening is that young people are meeting each other from all over the country at Absolute Nine and then staying in contact. This has encouraged many more young people to choose to be reunited at the Junior College for the latter part of their school education.

Tyrifjord Junior College has fostered this opportunity in two ways. First, their staff have been present at Absolute Nine, so that the young people can get to know them and during the week Tyrifjord makes a presentation where the school is introduced and presented to the participants who are 1.5 years away from being able to attend. The second thing Tyrifjord has done is to create an Absolute Ten. This takes place over a weekend at Tyrifjord Junior College, creating a link with what the young people have experienced and a chance for a reunion that most of the young people just can’t resist. As a result enrollment at Tyrifjord has soared, which in terms of youth retention means that we

have close contact with our young people for a much longer period than was previously the case. It also means that the friendship networks built up by young people through the mid to late teen years are with other Adventist or at least Christian young people.

The Absolute Nine program has helped to stop the worsening of youth retention figures for the Norwegian Union. It is a program which is still under development with themes, methods, and target group all under discussion. Follow up is critical for improving retention further, as there is only so much that can take place in three and a half days. This is one of the biggest challenges for if we do not manage to get local congregations to build on what is started at Absolute Nine, we are losing out on the potential that is undoubtedly there. The lessons that have been learned from Absolute Nine are:

- That commitment is more difficult for young people today than perhaps ever before
- That adult role models and involvement in youth ministry is important
- Friendship is perhaps the most important element in a teenager's life and loyalty to friends rules supreme. Creating links with other Adventist kids increases the chances of retention.

It could be summed up by saying that young people need to belong and today's young people belong through relationships. The one commitment that is still intact in their lives is their commitment to the group, with friendships becoming ever more important to life decisions. Young people also need adults as role models who authentically live out the Christianity life, and who create an environment where friendship flourishes. With these things in place, there is a possibility of keeping our young people away from the back door. As Kjell Aune writes in his analysis of the Adventist church in Norway and its young people, "Almost half of the young people with an Adventist background who are not members of the Church, report the main reason for not joining the Church is that the life-principles of the Church are too rigid and legalistic. Many also report that they do not feel at home in the Church. Still more of these young people believe that the teachings of the Adventist Church for the most part are biblical. Most of these young people have kept their faith in God, and quite a few say there is a possibility for them to come back to the Church." (Aune, 2003)

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Valuegenesis Europe. The author of this paper was the country coordinator for the Norwegian Valuegenesis. Norway had the highest password answer ratio in the Trans-European Division, (234 out of 600).

Statistics from the Norwegian Union Records. These have provided invaluable information with regard to youth retention in the Norwegian Territory. The author wishes to acknowledge the work of Sidsel Dahl in providing these important statistics.

Appendix 1: Absolute Nine Program

A typical day at Absolute Nine looks like this:

0800	Getting up
0900	Breakfast with pictures from the previous day
1000	Introduction to the theme of the day – something practical
1015	Drama – The Day's Paul
1030	Group Work
1200	Activity outside
1300	Lunch
1400	Duties
1500	Activities
1800	The evening meal
1930	The evening meeting – a presentation from one of the pastors
2100	Outside activities in the dark
2200	Snacks
2230	Worship
2300	Bedtime

The program is full and it is expected that all the students participate in everything. It is therefore unnecessary at Absolute Nine to have MP3 players, gameboys etc. We discourage the making of cliques, encouraging instead an inclusive environment.