
Youth Ministry: It Starts Sooner Than You Think! A Youth Ministry Case Study Report

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Abstract

When does youth ministry really begin? It is a question we all need to ask to be effective in ministering to our youth. What really is youth ministry? These two questions come from a belief that there is a specific time frame and a particular way to minister to young people that is different from where they have come and where they are going. However, I would like to introduce a different idea. The idea that youth ministry really begins before childhood ends. It is a continuous mentoring and nurturing of children, helping them mature and grow in Christ from childhood to adolescence, and eventually adulthood. The idea of youth ministry as a continuum is depicted in the growth of a seed. The care given to a seed as it grows into a mature plant is not interrupted or delayed. Continual and constant care, without any discontinuance, given to the growth of this seed is what produces a beautiful plant which bears much fruit. If the care of this seed was interrupted or delayed, it would hinder the maturation of the seed, and later, the production of its fruit. As the young plant is watered and nourished, it grows into a beautiful and mature plant. As this plant continues to mature, it needs pruning to enable it to flourish. Just as we would not stop watering a seed as it grows into a plant, we cannot minister to children now and then minister to them as youth later. We need to provide constant and continuous mentorship with a clear intent. The care begins when they are children and continues as they mature into a man or woman of God, and just as the plant may need pruning, youth will need experiences that will allow them to mold their character and build their Christian identity. Youth Ministry – It Starts Sooner than You Think!

“When does youth ministry begin?” I asked this question of a number of professionals who work with youth, including youth pastors. At first, many did not seem to know how to answer the question. After changing my question to a more specific one, “At what age do you think youth ministry begins?” a few of them answered me by saying that they believe youth ministry begins with the “high school age” group, those who are 14 or 15 and up (9th-12th grade). Some others said that they believe youth ministry begins in the junior high school group, those who are 12 or 13 and up (7th or 8th grade). Still others say youth ministry begins when the children’s ministry ends. When asked when the children’s ministry ends, some said it ends after the primary division, (1st-4th grade / ages 6-9) and others would say that the children’s ministry ends after the junior division, (5th-8th grade / ages 10-14). However, when thinking about the question, “What

age do you think youth ministry begins?” you will discover that churches which offer youth ministry programs most often gear these programs to high school students and up. For example, when you go to youth camp meetings, the majority of the attendees at youth ministry camp meetings are high school students and up.

It is often the parents of teens who attend high school who seek help from youth ministry leaders because of some of the challenges they have with their teenage children. This is the time when parents feel that they are losing control over their teenage children and seek out advice and help from youth ministry professionals. As a result, youth ministry is often reactive to the needs and interests of the mid and late teens and up. Later, during the university years, many move away from home to a different area for higher learning, and often many experience difficulty finding and adjusting to a new church, as well as the absence of parental presence.

The Beginning of Youth Ministry Overlaps with the End of Children’s Ministry

There are five distinctive transitions in the life of a child/youth; preschool, elementary school, high school, college/university and post-university years/young adult. Often, during these transitory periods, these youth slip through the crack due to a lack of ministry available to them during those various stages of their transitional periods.

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There is no clear and distinctive guideline in terms of what ages are included in each of these ministries. When do the children’s ministry, youth ministry, and young adult ministry actually begin and end? This ambiguity tends to confuse youth ministry professionals who often begin their ministry too late to effectively minister to these young people.

This important reality reminds us that all these ministries, children, youth, campus, and young adult ministries should overlap with each other to effectively minister to all ages of youth and children, especially for those who are in these transitory periods.

The Continuum of Youth Ministry

It is my opinion that youth ministry does not have a distinctive starting point in terms of age, but it should overlap with the latter part of children’s ministry. Ministry to children as they become youth and then young adults is a ministry of progression rather than three distinct entities each surviving on its own. This observation is crucial in ensuring that none of the children who are entering into adolescence fall through the cracks because of a lack of ministries available to them. If ministry to children, youth, and young adults is seen as more of a progressive ministry rather than three distinct and separate ministries, there is less chance of possible “cracks” between ministries since they should all overlap and follow a continuum. This concept is portrayed in five stages of faith which I have discovered and developed in my experience of working with children, youth and young adults.

These are the five stages of faith development in its simplest form: Passive or Inactive, Reactive, Reflective, Active, and Proactive.

1. Passive (or Inactive) Faith Stage: Faith begins in a passive state where the child is indifferent and does what the parents do. At this stage, the parents have the most influence over them.

2. Reactive Faith Stage: During the reactive stage, a child will begin to display a simple faith. Two definitions of the word reactive in the Merriam-Webster’s dictionary are: “relating to” or “readily responsive to a stimulus.” These children will simply react to what they are told. For example, if their parents tell them they should go to church to be saved, they simply believe and follow their parent’s example.

3. Reflective Faith Stage: As they grow older into adolescence, they enter the “formal operational stage” where they are now capable of “abstract thinking,”¹ and where they begin to question the norms and habits they have acquired during their childhood such as going to church, giving offerings, keeping the Sabbath holy, etc. This is the reflective stage. As they enter into adolescence and puberty, and as their brain develops, they now have the ability to think reflectively, often resulting in making positive or negative choices that contribute to either the child becoming an active Christian or an inactive Christian.

4. Active Faith Stage: If young people make positive choices that would engage them in vibrant religious expression through involvement and service, they would enter into the stage of active faith. They play a major part in and demonstrate a willingness to engage in church activities.

5. Proactive Faith Stage: By providing discipleship which is composed of nurturing and mentoring by equipping them with the knowledge and experience of Christ’s selfless, self-sacrificial love and service, they would then enter into a proactive stage of faith, thereby responding to their Christianity in a self-motivating way. Consequently, at this stage, they exemplify on their own initiative through their own life, Christ’s character of humility and service. Often, youth who enter this proactive stage of faith change their course of life and live a life more focused on humility and service. Therefore, ministry geared toward youth cannot be effective if it is separate from the ministry geared toward children or young adults. The ministry which began in childhood should continue and develop throughout adolescence into young adulthood. In this way, instead of finding cracks between different ministries, the faith of children will follow a logical progression throughout adolescence and into young adulthood where their Christian faith and experience will be nurtured in a personal and practical way so that as they near adulthood, they will become stronger men and women of God. The success of this progressive ministry cannot be completely effective, however, without the presence of youth ministry professionals. This kind of ministry must be a ministry based on relationship and influence of a mentor by his or her engagement and presence. In their book, *The Youth Builder*, Jim Burns and Mike DeVries call this kind of ministry “incarnation ministry” (Burn and DeVries, 2001).

They state that by “building genuine relationships” with young people, “we will be considered friends and mentors” (Burn and DeVries, 2001).

If youth ministry professionals are constantly present in the lives and faith experiences of children, youth, and young adults, the ministry becomes strengthened and more effective. Children, youth, and young adults often learn from their mentors who provide constant ministry and care for them. This is the area where many churches have failed and have become less effective in reaching out to the Millennials and in making a difference in their lives.

Youth Ministry and Adolescence

According to the Department of Health & Human Services Center for Disease Control and Prevention, adolescence begins at the age of 12. According to their website, early adolescence is described as being from the ages of 12-14.² Often, early adolescence is viewed as a developmental stage where puberty begins when a child goes through many physical changes. Early adolescence is a time of not only physical, but also mental, emotional, and social changes.

According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services:

Early adolescence is a time of many physical, mental, emotional, and social changes. Hormones change as puberty begins. Boys grow facial and pubic hair and their voices deepen. Girls grow pubic hair and breasts, and start menstruating. They might be worried about these changes and how they are looked at by others. This will also be a time when your teenager might face peer pressure to use alcohol, tobacco products, and drugs, and to have sex. Other challenges can be eating disorders, depression, and family problems. At this age, teens make more of their own choices about friends, sports, studying, and school. They become more independent, with their own personality and interests.³

This is the time when puberty begins as described above. However, some others would suggest that now adolescence begins much sooner than 12 years of age.

According to the U. S. Department of Education, the period of early adolescence is from the ages 10-14.⁴ This means that our children are entering adolescence much sooner than many believe. Some suggest that puberty begins as early as 8 or 9 years of age.⁵ Early adolescence is a time when the teenager is seeking to be more independent in making decisions from parental instruction, and peer pressure is becoming equally, if not more, important as the early adolescents struggle to fit into their social circles. Early

adolescents want to be popular and be in the “in-crowd,” and they are frightened of the idea of being excluded and being among the outcasts in the “out-crowd.” This stage is where we find many early adolescents trying to do what their peers do in order to fit into their social groups, while seeking independence from their parents.

As stated, early adolescence is a period between 10-14 years of age according to the U.S. Department of Education. At this stage, they make more of their own choices about friends, sports/entertainments, what to wear, what to listen to, and what to do. They become more independent and less dependent on their parents. However, peer pressure plays a greater part in affecting the decisions of the early adolescent. Now, many adolescents are being influenced to make decisions from the information they gather from cyberspace or the internet. It is through these mediums that they often experience an information overload without really understanding whether that information is valid or true. Many times, the information they receive from cyberspace or from their peers does not reflect Christian values or principles thus confusing the minds of early adolescents. Many times, early adolescents find themselves in conflicting situations where their Christian values and norms are challenged, if not questioned. Early adolescence is probably the most difficult and challenging time for our children/youth to keep their faith.

Understanding the Millennials

Millennials, those who are “born in or after 1982” (Howe and Straus, 2000) to 2000 or 2001, who are also known as “Generation Y,” are now between the ages of 7 or 8 and 26 in 2008. They have emerged into the internet era. They are exposed to many secular influences and an internet culture that counters

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Christian values and lifestyle. They are easily exposed to web sites which contain materials that wrongly influence them and instill in them a false sense of their own identity. As we are living in a society where many people need two incomes to survive, cyberspace is becoming a place where they get their information and instructions, often from strangers and strange sites, instead of from their parents. The influence of the internet culture which is an integral part of the Millennials is one area which we should understand.

Millennials meet new friends online, discover new ideas online, gather information online, learn things online, download music and pictures online, and many other things are happening online. The powerful influence of the Mil-

lennials' culture often undermines Christian values and principles. It is like having a stranger in the family living room and the youth are listening to this person's uncensored views and ideas that may not be in harmony with their Christian beliefs and morality.

As the Millennials enter adolescence, the Christian identity which they inherited from their parents is being questioned and challenged. However, they lack adults who are present in providing nurture and mentorship in assisting them to reevaluate and rediscover their own Christian identity to make it as their own instead of one that they simply inherited from their parents or from other spiritual care providers during their childhood.

It is often the lack of spiritual resources (parental guidance, spiritual mentorship from adults including youth ministry professionals, faith experience opportunities, etc.) available to them plus overwhelming secular influence available to them from internet, media, and their peers that challenge these Millennials to stay focused. Those who did not get a chance to rediscover their own Christian identity by their active involvement in Christian experiences find themselves getting distracted and often slipping away from the religious arena.

Balancing between the Negative Parts of the Millennial Culture and Christian Culture

To counter the influence that may contradict parental guidance and spiritual guidance from religious figures, both the church and home should provide more opportunities to their children and youth for them to consider positive choices that would help them develop their own identity as Christians and to balance with the negative influence and choices available to them. If adults provide opportunities for them to make more positive choices that would allow them to learn more about who they are as Christians, they will feel more empowered and secure as Christians.

Adolescence is the period where children are starting to learn to make decisions independently on various choices and issues available to them. Unfortunately, many of those choices are often lifestyle issues that are negative to Christian lifestyle. Today's adolescents of the Millennial generation are exposed to at-risk factors: teen violence, substance abuse, breakdown of family relationships, racial discrimination/tension, etc. "Many social critics argue that today's youth face more serious and critical risks than any previous generation. Parents are convinced that their children face a major crisis. Most experts will agree that violence in schools, deteriorating family structure, substance abuse, alarming media images, and gang activity put teens at risk."⁶

Many Millennials who have difficulties in handling those at-risk factors are involved in drugs and alcohol abuse, promiscuous sexual activities, and at times criminal activities. However, many local churches don't provide adequate and timely intervention programs which would allow at-risk Millennials to seek help and counseling. Especially in the Adventist culture of intolerance to many of those secular lifestyle issues which are often labeled as "youth culture," many Adventists would rather avoid those "taboo topics" than to deal with them head-on.

Inadequacy and unavailability of resources to help the Millennials to become more mature and spiritually secure Christians in their emotional, social, and spiritual state may have contributed to losing many of them from their faith experience.

Positive Choices That Can Help and Empower Youth to Develop Their Own Christian Identity

Some positive choices that can help youth develop their Christian identity in a most effective way are: participating in mission projects, volunteering in church events/functions such as Vacation Bible Schools and worship services (youth days, children's ministries day, youth evangelistic series, children's evangelistic series, youth vespers, youth Bible study and small groups, and other service projects such as feeding the homeless and nursing home visits). However, among all these choices, in my own personal experience, to empower them to become missionaries for the Lord is the most effective and powerful way to build Christian identity in youth. Instilling the missionary spirit in them often generates a powerful response from them as they make the decision to follow Jesus for the rest of their lives.

During my past involvement with four short-term mission projects for high school ages and up, two short-term mission projects for teens 13 and up, and four junior missionary camps for teens (including early teens) as a spiritual care provider and mentor, I have personally observed that instilling in them the missionary spirit is one of the most effective ways to help them develop their own Christian identity. Christianity, especially Adventism, is a movement, and as we remind youth that Christian churches are a by-product of that mission movement, we allow them to see that they are to join this mission and to spread the Gospel in response to the Great Commission by Jesus. Joining the mission movement as a missionary is an empowering experience for the youth, especially for early teens whom many think are too young to be missionaries. We have to remember that as early adolescents, they are never too young to make many decisions in life that introduce secular and worldly point of views. Knowing that early adolescents

go through a major identity crisis suggests that they have the ability to think abstractly.

It must be the duty of parents and spiritual care providers to induce many positive choices for the youth, especially for early teens, to counter the negative effects from the negative choices they have to consider from the secular world. I have personally witnessed many youth and young adults giving their lives to the Lord in the process of becoming missionaries for Jesus and even changing the course of their future plans for Jesus and for His service. I have seen them become pastors, teachers, doctors, and other professionals who are committed to actively engage in missionary work in their own professions.

Training and empowering youth to become Jesus' missionaries often results in seeing them make lifelong commitments to remain as Christians to serve Him and others. I have seen many youth give their lives to the Lord and remain in Him as Christians.

Adolescents often go through an identity crisis as they try to figure out what is truth in a volatile mix of confusion between the norms which they have learned and lived in and the new ideas that challenge those norms. Youth who fail to rediscover or relearn their Christian identity, which they usually acquired from their parents or other adult spiritual care providers, seem to show less interest in church and Christian living and often distance themselves from them. Therefore, it is very important and crucial for the spiritual development of the youth that many positive choices be available to them so that they may be preoccupied with the positive choices rather than the negative choices they have to consider.

Therefore, by providing many positive choices and mentorship accompanied by a youth ministry presence, youth can be positively influenced to develop their faith and personal Christian experience so that they will be intentional in their own expressions of Christian service. Empowering them and instilling in them their Christian identity and missionary spirit during this time will equip and enable them to face difficult challenges and negative influences exerted on them by their peers and the secular culture that are prevalent in youth culture. These involvements allow them to actively express their faith. In the process, their faith experience is continually strengthened.

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Need for Strong and Well-Structured Children's Ministry Programs for Successful Youth Ministry

In light of the five faith development stages which I previously mentioned, light is shed upon the importance of a strong and structured children's ministry. Having an efficient children's ministry program will contribute to building a healthy foundation for youth ministry as children learn and also form habits that they will continue into their youth. There needs to be a children's ministry program that would provide proper spiritual care as they end their childhood and enter into adolescence. This is the point where youth ministry overlaps with children's ministry. Because youth ministry is a continuation of children's ministry, there must be a strong children's ministry in order to ensure that there is a greater chance for the youth ministry to succeed.

I am reminded of one of the most well known verses

in the Bible which many children and youth ministry professionals use. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”⁷ According to the biblical footnote in the New International Version Bible of Proverbs 22:6 the word “train”⁸ can also mean “start”⁹ signifying the importance of the first education of young children. This same verse in a different version states, “Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not

leave it.”¹⁰ This Bible verse seems to give a clear insight on how we could effectively make certain that “older” children/youth remain on the “right path.” The Scripture suggest that we have to minister to our children/youth sooner than later before they grow to be “older”. The Bible provides wisdom on how we could effectively retain our children/youth, most of whom are Millennials, and even the new uprising generation which is referred to as “generation Z” by Strauss and Howe.¹¹

According to George Barna, “Social scientists have known for years that the moral foundations of children are generally determined by the time the individual reaches age nine...By age nine, most children have their spiritual moorings in place” (Barna, 2003). These statements remind us of the importance of children's ministry and why we need a strong and well-structured children's ministry in order to have a strong foundation for youth ministry.

Barna states:

Anyone who wishes to have significant influence on the development of a person's moral and spiritual founda-

tions had better exert that influence while the person is still open-minded and impressionable—in other words, while the person is still young. By waiting until a person is in his or her late adolescent or teenage years, the nature of influential attempts must be significantly different, because the spiritual foundation has already been formed and integrated into the person's life. At that stage, spiritual influence requires a more complex process to dislodge what already exists prior to replacing it with a divergent perspective. Research data and personal experience inform us that it is far easier to have influence before the foundations are firm. The older a person gets, the more difficult it is for him or her to replace existing moral and spiritual pillars (Barna, 2003).

Ellen G. White also states that, “Too much importance cannot be placed on the early training of children. The lessons that the child learns during the first seven years of life have more to do with forming his character than all that it learns in future years” (White, 1954). We must understand that the foundation for spiritual growth for children/youth is laid when they are young. Therefore, to have a successful youth ministry and beyond, there must be a successful children's ministry.

A Case Study with Relative Success in Youth Ministry in the Local Church

When I was assigned to my present church a little over six years ago in September of 2002, one of the first things I observed was the fact that the children and youth ministries were struggling to be effective. I found many of the older Millennials, who were at that time between the ages of 19-23 feeling that their needs were not being met. In other words, the church was failing to provide relevant ministry for them. There was a lack of programs for these youth/young adults, and after the challenging first year in trying to get the older youth/young adults (19-23 years) to be more involved with the church, I found myself becoming very frustrated because not everyone was responding to us the way we would have wanted them to.

As a result, we decided to particularly focus on the older children between the ages of 8-10 and the early teens between the ages of 10-14. We thought that if we begin mentoring them early on, we may have a better chance of keeping them in the church rather than having to go out and reclaim them once they became less than enthusiastic in attending the church regularly. We have started many programs for the children and youth simply believing that whatever we do will be better for our children and youth/young adults than not doing anything.¹² We formed CYMAC (Children & Youth Ministries Advisory Committee) to gather

all human resources to ensure that there is better cooperation and coordination between the children's ministry and youth ministry personnel. Most importantly, CYMAC became the think-tank for the church as the church tried to brainstorm new ideas and solutions to deal with many predicaments, and I mean many predicaments and challenges we had with the children's and youth ministries.

After the first challenging year, we were intentional in nurturing the children/youth, in particular, those between the ages of 8 and 14 by providing relevant programs for them as a case study to see whether we would have a better chance of keeping the Millennials in the church as long as possible. After five years of intentional nurturing and mentoring, age-specific and service-oriented programs, constant presence, and continual relationship building, we are experiencing some relative success in both children's and youth ministries.

The following is a list of the sequential ministries/programs we offered to the children and youth of the church and also other significant events that took place over the past 6 years:

First Year of Ministry

September 2002 – December 2002

- Assessment of the church ministries and her financial state.
- Realized that there was a great need to organize and restructure the children's ministries due to a lack of children's Sabbath School teachers.
- Assessed that the church was getting older quite literally since 1951 when the church was officially organized.
- Assessed that the financial state of the church was weak and began to collect the lamb's offering after the children's story time to support the children's ministries. Since that decision, there has always been a sufficient fund to support all the children's ministries expenses.
- Attempted to reclaim the youth/young adults by organizing youth social events, including church lock-in.

January 2003–August 2003

- Emphasized the importance of “Unity in Diversity” to the church repeatedly as I observed some tension between the diverse groups in the church. The church is multiethnic and multicultural.
- New vision was cast to prioritize church ministries by the following order: 1. Children's Ministry; 2. Youth Ministry; 3. Seniors Ministry; 4. Young Adult Ministry; followed by other ministries.
- Organized CYMAC (Children and Youth Ministries Advisory Committee).

- Youth and young adults attended AMiCUS (Adventist Ministry to College and University Students) weekend retreat in March. First time the youth and young adults of the church ever attended such a retreat.

Second Year of Ministry

September 2003-December 2003

- Youth evangelistic series was held to reclaim and re-energize the inactive/passive youth and young adults in an attempt to increase spiritual enthusiasm among them.

January 2004-August 2004

- After the first year, it was assessed that all the efforts to reach out to inactive/passive older youth/young adults (19-23) were not working well and decided to focus on the older children (8-10) and the early teens (10-14) as a case study to see whether this new approach would have a better success in retaining them in the church when they grow older.
- New approach in youth ministry was intentionally, but subtly, executed as much of the church human resources were directed to mentoring and nurturing the older children (8-10) and the early teens (10-14).
- Youth/young adults attended the weekend AMiCUS retreat for the second time with great participation. Youth from the two neighboring churches joined the youth of the church.
- Adventist Youth Society was organized with the name K-W (a.k.a “DUB” -Disciples United for Benevolence) with a new AY leader in his early 20s. Previous AY leader was in her mid-late 30s, mother of 2 children.
- Many creative methods were used in the children’s ministries: KidZone-Children’s Church, PreschoolZone, Puppet Ministry, purchased large carpet for children to sit on floor and stools were purchased to make the children’s church more child-friendly.
- VBS (Vacation Bible School) was conducted for the first time in many years in spite of some challenges at the beginning to find the volunteers for the program. Had good turnout (both children and the volunteers).
- Renewed excitement in children is ministry personnel as resources were readily available to support any and every children’s ministry program.
- Many children, especially the older children, started to really appreciate all the attention they were receiving.

Third Year of Ministry

September 2004-December 2004

- NET 2004 Satellite Program was held at the church but youth and young adults showed little interest.

- More focus was given to mentoring early teens and older children.
- Started Adventurer Club with some success by enthusiastic participation from the children.
- Held joint Christmas Concert between three churches to help the local Family and Children Services. Many youth from the three churches participated during the preparation for the concert and also during the concert. This caused them to be proud of being Seventh-day Adventists as local radio station and local TV news weather man were part of the concert with much community donations.
- Encouraged youth to participate in ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) ingathering rally to help them learn more about the various ministries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

January 2005-August 2005

- The AY leader serving his second term doing a much better job than the first year when he was first elected to the position. He attended church board meetings to give youth ministry reports and also brought youth agendas.
- New Children’s Ministry leader was appointed who is an elementary school teacher to provide more intentional mentoring and nurturing for all the children.
- The Children’s Sabbath School classes were joined as one class to properly train teachers and strengthen the structure of the children’s ministry program. Children’s Ministries leader trained two other new teachers and made major progress in being efficient and effective children’s Sabbath School teachers.
- Church pastor became the chair of CYMAC.
- Adventurer Club was doing relatively well with newly appointed leader
- VBS was held for the second consecutive year with more participation from church children and community children with many volunteers who successfully conducted VBS without much input or assistance from the church pastor or his wife.
- Pathfinder Club was launched for older children and early teens with eight members at the start of the club.

Fourth Year of Ministry

September 2005-December 2005

- NET 2005 Series conducted at the church but still unable to attract youth and young adults.
- Beginning to see major development and improvement in children’s ministry programs causing the children’s general behavior to become more reverent and respect-

ful in the church. Noticed major change in some of the children who used to be known as troublemakers.

- Children's Sabbath School divisions now have well-structured and well-organized programs for Beginners, Kindergarten, Primary and Junior classes, contributing to the visible spiritual growth of the children. Successful local children's ministry allowed the church to be known to visitors and members of neighboring churches.
- Many young couples with children started to attend the church, and the number of children was growing rapidly as the church congregation witnessed more and more children present and at the front during the children's story time.
- Presence of many children excited the church members, making the church feel younger and full of energy and vitality, seeing children everywhere.

January 2006-August 2006

- Eight youth days were scheduled where the youth/young adults participated in all the parts of the worship service. At the end of the year, nine youth days were held with great participation of the local youth and youth from neighboring churches. Many speakers were invited to address many youth relevant topics such as: Christian dating, Christian relationships, Christian lifestyle issues, young adult spirituality, etc. Those speakers and their presentations were well received and appreciated by the church members especially the youth/young adults.
- Church pastor continued to chair the CYMAC.
- Great communication between the church board and the CYMAC readily providing all the resources necessary, including monetary funds, for successful children's and youth ministries.
- Reports were given monthly from all the leaders of children and youth ministries, including Pathfinders, Adventurers, and AY Society.
- Another successful VBS was held by one of the two trained children's Sabbath School division teachers. More participation from the church members.
- Children's evangelistic series was held for the first time for the children, especially for the older children, using the materials from the "Truth 4 Youth" child-friendly PowerPoint presentations designed to teach Adventist beliefs to children. Church pastor was the one who conducted the series, building relationships with the children as they received spiritual care by their own church pastor. In spite of a few challenges, the end result was an excellent one, as most of the children pledged to be baptized at the end of the series.

- Pathfinder Club going through some challenges due to some older Pathfinders dropping out.
- New AY leader was appointed who was 23 years old and served two years previously as the AY associate leader. She was one of the two teachers initially trained by the Children's Ministry Leader and now teaches the Kindergarten class as the main teacher. She was intentionally mentored.
- Beginning to see more and more youth coming to the church from the two universities in the twin city where the church is located.
- Started to fully utilize the internet and cyberspace by setting up church emailing system for members, youth, church board, elders, etc. and also using a new church website.
- Successful children's ministry programs are attracting many more young couples with young children.

Fifth Year of Ministry

September 2006-December 2006

- Youth ministry is doing relatively well and the youth day Sabbaths starting to attract many other youth/young adults from other churches.
- New dynamics are developing because some new youth/young adults coming into the church have very strong wills and initiatives.
- Started Friday night youth vespers meeting using more interactive Bible study and small group discussions. Did not work too well.

January 2007-August 2007

- Youth days excited a lot of youth, but music was a major issue on one occasion when the church had to take an action to make a statement against the music that was played during the youth day divine/worship service which offended a lot of people including some youth. Unfortunately, the one youth/young adult who created much concern for the church was not a member of the church but a new attendee who was refusing to follow the instructions of the church leadership, in the process offending many members. His refusal to respect the recommendations of the church leadership/board but continuing to influence other youth/young adults with his strong views created major challenges for the church as the church observed a couple of young adults distrusting and disproving the decisions of the church leadership/board.
- A couple of youth/young adults influenced a handful of other youth/young adults creating divisions between the youth/young adults for those who were supporting the decision of the church board and the other

group which was criticizing the church leadership because of her decision. Among the displeased youth/young adults are those who have not been attending the church regularly who didn't get a chance to be mentored. However, all the AY Society leadership supported the decision of the church leadership/board and sought guidance and counsel from the church pastor resulting in stronger bond between the youth leaders and the church pastor.

- As a result of this conflict, a handful of youth/young adults became less frequent church-goers. However, now, most of them except one have returned, and the church is looking for a way to accommodate their spiritual needs once again.
- Missionary spirit vision was cast, and a mission trip plan was set by the church pastor and youth, especially the early teens, who were excited to participate in missionary work.
- Many youth, including a handful of early teens (13+) who have been mentored for the past three or four years join the missionary training along with other teens and three other young adults in their 20s. They spent three full days in missionary training, learning Adventist beliefs and acquiring skills to conduct a VBS in the mission field.
- Missionary candidates joined with other VBS volunteers and conducted another successful VBS program.
- Missionaries who have been trained during the missionary training sessions and also during the entire week of the VBS program went to Six Nations, aboriginal people's reservation, as ROMM (Reach Out Missionary Movement) missionaries. First youth missionaries sent by the church.
- Youth missionaries went through a week-long life-changing experience with: morning and evening devotional worship; conducting a VBS program in different stations, participating in service projects in the mission field, and witnessing how children change before their eyes.
- At the end of the mission trip, six youth, between the ages of 13-17, who had been mentored for the past three or four years, got baptized at the end of their mission trip. The church experienced a major synergy effect as the youth missionaries shared their missionary experience with the entire church. Church was successful in creating a positive peer influence that motivated others to volunteer to go as youth missionaries the following year.
- Children's evangelistic series, "Truth 4 Youth" was held for the second time by the church pastor continuing to strengthen the relational bond between the pastor and

children. Children once again pledge to be baptized at the end of the series. Many parents appreciated the series because they observed major changes in their children's behavior.

- Even many older children pledged to be baptized; however, their baptism is delayed as they are continuing to be mentored and nurtured. This is to ensure that the children do not get baptized out of impulse but rather as a result of their long-term conviction.
- Children's ministries going very well with full blown children's ministry programs, also participating in the adult Sabbath School programs frequently.
- Children's choir established, and the choir and the K-W Adventist Junior Choir performed their major concert at the end of the year making all the children very proud of their accomplishments.
- Many of the children who were mentored for the past four or five years who are now older and some early teens joined the Pathfinders Club, thereby exciting the instructors. The Pathfinders Club had their first investiture and induction service with over twenty Pathfinders and five instructors.

Sixth Year of Ministry

September 2007-December 2007

- Started AMiCUS campus ministry chapter at University of Waterloo naming the club, "The Blue Rock Christian Fellowship." Met regularly every Friday afternoon at the university campus student center with non-Adventist students attending time to time.
- All the youth missionaries and some other youth, about fifteen of them, attending the midweek Wednesday Bible studies and prayer meetings, regularly studying the Book of Genesis learning about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and their faith experiences.
- Youth days continue to be dynamic, especially when the youth missionaries share their mission experiences. The youth missionaries continue to be a positive influence/example to other youth, especially those who are younger.
- The youth missionaries are creating a new culture by motivating the young people that being a missionary is a "cool thing" and it is a privilege as youth of the church. A new tradition for the youth of the church is being established as the youth want to be part of the ROMM missionaries.
- Instilling in the youth the missionary spirit is giving positive motivation to the youth as they build their Christian identity.

- ROMM missionaries' motto: "Whom do we believe? Jesus! I am a missionary! The LORD calls me! I can do it! Yes, we can!"
- Full-blown youth ministry with two associate leaders and many youth AY Society officers. More and more youth are getting involved and youth are organizing among themselves the events and activities under pastoral guidance.

January 2008-August 2008

- First of two years of evangelism emphasis years.
- The church is continuing to grow, and more new non-Adventists are visiting the church and even some non-Adventist youth among whom one was baptized, and the other is awaiting baptism.
- Children's Sabbath School classes/divisions getting full, possibly need additional class for the Primary division.
- Good communication with parents making the children's ministry work more efficient because of parental support.
- AY Society leader who was appointed for the year 2006 served two full terms (two years) and was asked to serve another two years (2008 & 2009). She has been mentored, and she is now mentoring many other youth along with four additional associate and assistant K-W(DUB) AY Society leaders.
- Youth missionaries trained for the second year with new missionary candidates excited to go to the mission field. A couple of youth join to go as youth missionaries who were known as "mischievous" youth but came back from the mission trip as changed youth.
- Second successful mission trip to Six Nations with new teens as ROMM youth missionaries. Youth missionaries painted the local Adventist church at the mission field, conducted VBS for the children, visited another Adventist church for Sabbath mission presentation, and came back fired up and more dedicated to God's service with a burning "missionary spirit."
- Youth missionaries conducted another successful VBS at their local church with little assistance from adults. This was the first VBS the youth ever sponsored.
- Third children's evangelistic series was held when all the children once again pledged to be baptized one day and they are continuously being mentored and nurtured with specific intent to instill in them Christian identity by building good habits.

September 2008-Present/November 2008

- Church evangelistic series with the most attendees ever, and many decided to be baptized. Many youth and young adults came out to support the series.

- Pathfinder Club is stronger than ever with twenty-five members with seven instructors. It is the largest in the region, winning awards, and making the children proud of their achievements.
- Children's K-W Adventist Junior Choir going strong, meeting regularly to prepare for the second year-end concert.
- Youth vespers meeting every Friday night in addition to midweek Wednesday Bible studies and prayer meeting. Youth Friday night vespers meeting called "Friday Night Live" where the youth discuss challenges they face in their culture and other issues and topics that are relevant to them.
- Youth leaders who are organizing the "Friday Night Live" youth vespers services, which were mainly attended by the older teens and up, decided to have one new Friday night youth vespers meeting per month for the early teens (10-14) and call it "Friday Night Lead" (led by youth to lead early teens as they are being reminded of how they were led as early teens for the past four or five years). They also decided to have another youth/young adult Friday night vespers service per month for the older youth/young adults (college/university students and up) for the specific purpose of them being mentored by the church pastor. They decided to call the other Friday night youth vesper services "Friday Night Light" as they continue to address and discuss current youth issues and concerns as they learn to be "The light of the world."
- Youth/young adults planned the entire youth evangelistic series.
- Youth evangelistic series is scheduled for November and the speaker, former conference youth director, is to come as the main speaker.
- Youth leaders are reaching out to other youth/young adults as they are building dynamic youth programs and synergy effect among the youth/young adults.
- Youth/young adults are playing a major role in the church, participating in many church events and activities.

Children's and Youth Ministry Programs and Other Notables Launched for the Past Six Years

1. K-W AY Society organized and remains in operation for the past four years.
2. CYMAC organized and remains in operation for the past five years.
3. Adventurer Club organized and remains in operation on and off for the past five years.
4. Pathfinder Club organized and remains in operation for the past four years.

5. VBS for the past 5 years.
6. Children's evangelistic series held three times in the past three years.
7. Children's Sabbath School reorganization, restructuring, and teachers' training done in the year 2005.
8. All together, more than fifty members have volunteered for VBS at least once in the past five years, some volunteering more than three times.
9. Two short-term mission trips by ROMM youth missionaries
10. Two youth evangelistic series.
11. Two children's ministry Sabbaths when children preached and sponsored all parts of the worship service.
12. Adventist Junior choir organized and in operation for the past two years.
13. Regular youth mid-week Bible study.
14. Friday Night Live, now called *Friday Night Lead*, *Friday Night Light*, and *Friday Night Live*(verb), youth vespers service by the youth for the youth, discussing relevant youth cultural issues and topics.
15. Regular youth involvement in local community services.
16. *Blue Rock Christian Fellowship* Campus Ministry at University of Waterloo.
17. Eight or nine youth days (Sabbaths) held per year for the past three years.
18. Children's service projects in the church.
19. Youth leaders receiving mentorship by the church pastor.
20. Youth participated in the regional camp meetings as presenters.

Conclusion and Reflection

In looking back, since 2002, the local church membership grew from 186 to 270, over 45%. Since then, the retention rate for older youth (20+) is between 70-80%. The retention rate for youth below 20 is close to 90%. The retention rate for the entire group of youth (some are older youth over 20 years old) who were intentionally mentored for more than three years is 100%. Over six years of ministry in the church has convinced me beyond doubt of the importance and the power of intentional mentorship.

As I look back a little over six years ago when I first came to this church, my first impression of the church was how old the church appeared to be with about a dozen children and about a dozen youth. The members all agreed and supported the idea that we needed a stronger children's ministries and youth ministry. We did not have any special know-how or expert knowledge. All we knew was that we had to do something soon before we lost our children to the

world. We had to do something, and so we tried everything to see what worked and what did not work. We worked together with one common goal, which was to revive the children's and youth ministries.

Six years passed by so quickly; we did not even have an opportunity to look back and analyze what we had done as a church. Only now I do have a chance to look back and realize how many children's and youth ministry programs we offered. We were intentional about doing everything we could for the spiritual growth of our children whom we believed God had entrusted to us as His special gifts. Ellen G. White wrote that, "Parents are to look upon their children as entrusted to them of God to be educated for the family above" (White, 1954). She continues to say that, "The training of children constitutes an important part of God's plan for demonstrating the power of Christianity" (White, 1954).

Proverbs 22:6 reads, "Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it."¹³ I believe we have failed to be effective in reaching out to Millennials because we may have failed to fully put into practice what the Bible teaches us to do. God's Word clearly instructs us that we are to "train up a child." Ministries that we offer for our children and youth must be continuous and progressive, without any interruptions. We care for them when they are in the children's ministry, but when they graduate from it, we often take some time before we introduce them to youth ministry. At this point, youth ministry becomes more of an attempt to entertain the youth in trying to attract their attention and presence, rather than nurturing a growing spiritual life of faith with their personal Savior, Jesus.

For us to be successful in retaining our youth, we must provide a kind of ministry that grows along with them, allowing their Christian experience to develop, strengthen, and mature as they go through major transitory periods in their lives. Instead of our children and youth ministries becoming event-oriented, tailored to impress, attract, and entertain, they should rather be vision-oriented, with opportunities for the children to discover their own faith, separate from their parents. They should be filled with opportunities to discover their own Christian beliefs and experiences as they test and discover what truth really means to them and as they begin to develop their own spiritual journey with Jesus by learning to serve others as He did. Millennials need children and youth ministry professionals along with their parents who will mentor them, "be there" with them, and guide them in this journey.

In closing, I quote Ellen G. White, "We need to make the education of our children a business, for their salvation depends largely upon the education given them in

childhood” (White, 1954). As stated in my title, “Youth Ministry – It Begins Sooner Than You Think!” we must be reminded that the sooner we minister to our children, the better chance they have in developing their own faith and Christianity. Youth ministry is not simply a set of programs or events, cool music or great socials, that are geared towards a specific age group from this age to that, but rather, it is a ministry that begins before children even reach early adolescence. It is a vision, instilled in the hearts of young children, that grows and develops as they mature, a faith that may be simple at first, but one which is strengthened as it is tested, and a love for Jesus that leads them to serve others with a selflessness that reflects the character of Christ. Let us not allow our children, youth, or young adults to fall through the cracks. “The work of education and training should commence with the babyhood of the child; for then the mind is the most impressible, and the lessons given are remembered” (White, 1954).

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Endnotes

1. Jean Piaget’s Developmental Theory (Theory of Cognitive Development).
2. Information taken from the official website of the Center for Disease and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services in October 2008 (www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/earlyadolescence.htm).
3. Information taken from the official website of the Center for Disease and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services in October 2008 (www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/earlyadolescence.htm).
4. Information taken from the booklet *Helping Your Child through Early Adolescence* by the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Communications and Outreach, published in Washington D.C., 2005.
5. Information taken from the website *About.com: Pediatrics* in October 2008 (www.pediatrics.about.com/cs/conditions/a/early_puberty.htm).
6. Information taken from the website *AT-RISK.ORG* in October 2008 (www.at-risk.org/whois-atrisk.html).<?>
7. Proverbs 22:6 (King James Version).
8. Proverbs 22:6 (New International Version).

9. Ibid.

10. Proverbs 22:6 (New Living Translation).

11. Information taken from the website of *WIKIPEDIA* in October 2008 (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Z).

12. Information gathered from Barry Gane as he described what he discovered while he was writing his dissertation for his PhD proving that “Any youth ministry is better than no youth ministry,” and also that “Youth ministry presence makes a positive difference in youth spirituality.”

13. Proverbs 22:6 (New King James Version).