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# Where Have All the Youth Leaders Gone?

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## **Abstract**

*Valuegenesis has been a tremendous tool that has given the Seventh-day Adventist church valuable information about youth and young adults. It represents a fair cross-section culturally and ethnically of our young people. However, the sample is of 16,000 respondents of Seventh-day Adventist Youth in Seventh-day Adventist schools throughout the North American Division during the 2000 school year (Gillespie, 2004). The majority of the expenses are borne by local parents and churches (Gillespie, 2004). Sixty percent of the students said there was a youth pastor at their home church (Gillespie, 2004). Monte Sahlin's work in Adventist Congregations Today, says most Adventist churches are quite small. Worship attendance on a typical Sabbath is 75 or less. Only 17% have an attendance of more than 200 on a typical Sabbath. This means that the Valuegenesis sample represents a small slice of our youth who come from middle or upper-middle income families, attend churches that are larger than the average church, and have a church school and a youth pastor. It also means that the analysis of their faith development is somewhat skewed. Unlike most homes, they receive Biblical training from their parents, a pastor each week, a youth pastor, and a Bible teacher in their school. The 16,000 young people who attend Adventist schools represent one-third of all the youth and young adults in the Seventh-day Adventist church. I would contend that Valuegenesis does not sample the average typical young person in the Seventh-day Adventist church.*

## **This letter sent to Ron Whitehead better represents the typical Seventh-day Adventist youth.**

“Hello Pastor Ron,

**I** have read the article ‘Exciting Times, Challenging Times’ about youth in the Lake Union. I know your goal was to inspire people and to tell everyone about the exciting things happening in this particular area, and it was a very nice article. The opposite, however, has happened for me. It has in fact sparked a little jealousy (I guess that’s what I am feeling, maybe I just feel left out) within me. I don’t want to sound mean or anything, I just wanted to tell you that there are more young people out there than just in the Lake Union. I am 17 years old and live in Northern Illinois. My local Seventh-day Adventist church (which I am a baptized member of) here seems spiritually dead and I, being a youth, have absolutely no way of doing anything for my church. My church has been run by the same five people since before I was born, and we

have been through many pastors. For months we have gone without a real pastor, and despite many noble efforts by a few people, my church is dead. I am really the only youth in my church. There are a few others, but they don’t seem to care much for the church anyways. A few months back, if you would have been talking to me, you would have talked to someone who wanted to help the church and had a very deep love for Jesus and tried to make everyone happy. But, time after time people have brought me down (not in the church but in my school and more importantly, my own family have taken the bystander approach to their walk with Jesus). I have nobody to talk to about my faith and I have nowhere to turn. My parents have a “sit back and let everyone else do the work” approach to their belief, and I am stuck between this rock and a hard place. I tried to do a one man mission, all alone, but it didn’t work. Now I feel dead and bitter inside. I guess this is what other’s unbelief does to me. It just seems like everywhere else these movements into closer relationships with Jesus are happening, but here, it seems we are going in reverse. But alas, I know you are just one man (probably a very nice and understanding one

at that) and can't help everyone. So, go ahead and ignore me like everyone else in my life has. Sorry to waste your time. I guess I will just sit back and waste my life on earthly things rather than doing Jesus' work."

My paper speaks to this young person who I would argue is more typical than the youth sampled by Valuegenesis and, at the very least, is not represented by it. For that young man, who is not in one of our schools, does not have a youth pastor, much less a senior pastor, and attends the typical Adventist church, where are all the youth leaders?

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I recently completed reading an article by the President of the General Conference who reflected on his years of "Let's Talk," dialogues held around the world with youth and young adults. Two of the sessions were held on our campus. While I appreciated

the forethought of Elder Paulsen, I was somewhat disappointed by the lack of initiatives or substantive suggestions that came out of these talks. With the staggering statistics of young adult dropouts, it seems a bit hollow to arrive at just three or four observations from those conversations. Thom and Sam Rainer, in their latest book, *Essential Church?* report, "More than two-thirds of young adults in America dropout of church between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two" (Rainer, 2008). Their recent studies show that 70 percent leave the church (Rainer, 2008). How do we explain such a level of loss of youth and young adults from Christian churches around North America? What are Christians no longer doing that they once did? How do we forge a new paradigm for the future?

### Should We Really Be Surprised?

The church in North America is in decline. The Rainers write, "Most churches are dwindling...Even in some of the more relatively healthy denominations, conversions to Christianity have stagnated" (Rainer, 2008). In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 80 to 85 percent of churches have either plateaued or are declining (Burrill, 2004). No wonder we are losing young adults at such alarming rates. We are no longer winning anyone, and that trend is reflective into our ability to retain youth and young adult members.

### Have Young Adults Changed?

There seems to be a growing sentiment among those who examine young adult trends, that the millennial generation has changed from previous generations of the same age group. Columnist David Brooks, in a *New York Times*

editorial titled, "The Odyssey Years," writes of a seeming developmental change among today's twenty-somethings.

20-somethings go to school and take breaks from school. They live with friends and they live at home. They fall in and out of love. They try one career and then they try another. Their parents...understand that there's bound to be a transition phase between student life and adult life. But when they look at their own grown children, they see the transition stretching five years, seven and beyond (Brooks, 2007).

Social scientists are trying to understand this new developmental characteristic that can best be described as a wandering delay. Hence his descriptive title *The Odyssey Years*, so named after the seven-year wanderings of Homer after the Trojan wars. Brooks quotes two prominent sociologists who describe it like this:

Young people grow up in tightly structured childhoods... but then graduate into a world characterized by uncertainty, diversity, searching and tinkering. Old success recipes don't apply, new norms have not been established and everything seems to give way to a less permanent version of itself. Dating gives way to Facebook and hooking up. Marriage gives way to cohabitation. Church attendance gives way to spiritual longing. Newspaper reading gives way to blogging... The job market is fluid. Graduating seniors don't find corporations offering them jobs that will guide them all the way to retirement... The odyssey years are not about slacking off. There are intense competitive pressures as a result of the vast numbers of people chasing relatively few opportunities. Moreover, surveys show that people living through these years have highly traditional aspirations (they rate parenthood more highly than their own parents did) even as they lead improvising lives (Brooks, 2007).

Brooks concludes by saying, "...what we are seeing is the creation of a new life phase...in which some social institutions flourish—knitting circles, Teach America—while others—churches, political parties—have trouble establishing ties" (Brooks, 2007).

William Galston, senior fellow at the *Brookings Institution* identifies seven different characteristics of this generation's 25 year olds.

1. Unmarried (no committed relationship)
2. Tiny fraction have military service
3. Between episodic education and temporary jobs
4. Between living alone and living with their parents
5. Live outside institutions and are without institutional structure
6. Living without a script (making up life as they go)

7. Despite their age, they're not sure if they are adults (Galston, 2007).

So, as we contemplate the current changes that are taking place generationally and developmentally among twenty-something's today, we ask the question, How does this impact our approach to addressing the churches drop-out rate among young adults today?

## Looking Back

As I think about my own teen and young adult days, I can say that my home church did a good job of assisting my parents during those developmental years. Growing up in the church, I can identify a forest of adults who gave me shelter, shade, and support. I vividly remember the dynamic youth ministry and Pathfinder leaders who were dedicated to the youth and young adults of our church. I grew up singing in a Youth Choir that taught me the value of using my gifts and abilities to God's glory and honor. Every Sabbath afternoon we had Missionary Volunteer meeting (MV). Every year we went out in the community and participated in the church's "Ingathering campaign." Every year my church held an evangelistic series to win people to Christ. Our local church had a quarterly "doorbell operation program," where we rang all the doorbells in our community and passed out tracts and other literature.

The Conference Youth department also did a tremendous job in creating an atmosphere for my spiritual development and maturity. They sponsored oratorical contests, camporees, youth federations, youth congresses, Bible bowls, voice of youth crusades, summer camps, vibrant athletic leagues of Olympics, basketball, softball, volleyball. Our local church had a school where I spent the first eight years of my education before high school.

I can say with a degree of confidence that I would not be where I am today without the dedicated leadership of adults in the local church who poured themselves into my life. Their mentoring and modeling of ministry and service impacted my life and augmented the loving home and example of my parents. Simply put, my formative years of development can be attributed to a cooperative effort between home, church, school and conference. Can we say however that we find a similar scenario in the average local church today?

## Charity Begins at Home

The backbone of any vibrant youth ministry is the home, with engaged, attentive, loving parents. One of the miscalculations we have made as youth professionals is allowing parents to abdicate their primary responsibility in the process of raising and rearing their children through

the stages and transitions of life. Luke 2:52 tells us how Jesus was reared. It says, "He increased in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man." The primary place of Christ's rearing was His home and the primary person was His mother. Desire of Ages says, "The child Jesus did not receive instruction in the synagogue schools. His mother was His first human teacher. From her lips and from the scrolls of the prophets, He learned of heavenly things... As He advanced from childhood to youth, He did not seek the schools of the rabbis... for God was His instructor" (White, 1898). We have done great harm to families and young people, by serving as substitute parents. Youth ministry, properly conceived, is not a substitute for the home but a support. Youth ministries should complement, not compete with the parents of the children and youth we minister to. Rick Lawrence writes, "Nothing has more power to influence a teenager's life—for good or ill—than home and family. Every youth ministry hour spent equipping parents to nurture faith in their teenagers is like giving money to public television: your gift is almost always doubled by a matching grant. Parents will always out-influence even a great youth leader, so it makes sense to invest where you'll get the best return" (De Vries, 2004).

For too long youth professionals have been expected to "save" young people, and when it has not happened, their parents have blamed the church for failing them. This is a mistake. Jay Kesler reminds us, "While you wait for your teenagers to grow up, you can take comfort in the fact that by the time

young people reach their mid-twenties, their lines are almost always identical to the lines their parents drew" (De Vries, 2004). This means that in order to successfully close the back door that

has swung so wide in many of our churches, we must challenge parents to assume the primary responsibility God has given them in preparing their children for the kingdom. No one has greater influence in the lives of young people than their parents. A *USA Weekend* survey of more than 250,000 teenagers indicated that 70 percent of them identified their parents as the *most important* influence in their lives. Comparatively 21 percent of them rated peers the same way (Teens and Self Image, 1998). A survey of 1,115 teenagers done by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) revealed a clear link between certain types of parental behaviors and children who are likely to be free of chemical dependency. They

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list five parental behaviors that impact teens positively for abstinence from drugs:

1. They are engaged in their teens' lives, including helping with homework or attending teen's extracurricular activities
2. They have at least five sit-down meals together weekly
3. They attend religious services together with their teens
4. They set curfews
5. They see drug use as dangerous and morally wrong (Teens and Self Image, 1998).

We must re-awaken the sleeping giants who are the greatest allies in our quest to close the back door to our churches across the globe...parents.

It is significant to note that one of the main criteria Paul presents in determining fitness to become leaders (bishop or deacon) in the church is how they manage their family and children. As Paul says, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of the church?" (1 Timothy 3:1-12, NIV). As the saying goes, "Charity begins at home."

### Re-energizing the local Church

It has become apparent from personal observation and investigation that the average local church has left the business of youth ministry to others. While the problem seems greatest among Anglo churches, none-the-less in North America, the chasm of empty churches on Sabbath afternoons during the Adventist Youth hour is growing. A comparative study of four conferences in the Lake Union reveals the absence of Youth and Pathfinder leaders among the officer lists of many churches.<sup>1</sup>

Of the 442 combined churches in the four conferences, only 158 have AY leaders, and only 118 have Pathfinder leaders. There are more Communication Secretaries in the four conferences, 284, than AY & Pathfinder Leaders combined, 276. These statistics reveal the lost emphasis of youth ministry in the local church.<sup>2</sup>

Many churches have invested heavily in education and have by extension, seen this investment as a substitute for youth ministry in the local church. While we encourage and applaud the support of Christian education, we should never allow it to replace youth ministry in the local church.

Such a concept would relegate youth ministry to economic feasibility. Those youth whose families can afford Christian education would be its exclusive recipients.

There is no substitute for the role the local church plays in the life of its members. In order for us to successfully close the back door to our churches; families will need the help of the "Extended Christian Family." This is especially true for single-parent households that are deficient in family and financial resources. The local church is that extended family. De Vries writes, "Teenagers...need adults who can help provide a consistent, lifelong structure of Christian maturity. Apart from the family...the church may be the only lifelong nurturing structure left. Only the church and the family can provide Christian nurture from birth to old age—even death" (De Vries, 2004). The consistent involvement of the local church and the impact that committed adult members have on the lives of young adults has a way of binding them to the church. "When a student makes it to mature adulthood, he or she can almost always point to...at least one available, durable, non-exploitive Christian adult who modeled for them what being an adult Christian was all about" (De Vries, 2004).

Sometimes churches make the mistake of leaving the responsibility of youth ministry exclusively to trained professionals (youth pastor, academy chaplain, Bible teacher, etc.). While these professionals may be skilled and competent, they may not be able to transfer the connection youth make with them to their local church. Ben Patterson warns, "It is a sad fact of life that often the stronger the youth program in the church...the weaker the chances are that those same young people will remain in the church when they grow too old for the youth program. Why? Because the youth program has become a substitute for participation in the church...When kids outgrow the youth program, they also outgrow what they have known of the church" (Patterson, 1984). To this point De Vries says, "Wherever a mature Christian adult is found, chances are that a strong connection to an extended Christian family (the local church) will be found as well...This kind of growth happens not because of the charisma of a youth leader...but because of a web of connections to an extended Christian family that offers a different set of faith values" (De Vries, 2004).

Conference-year	Churches/companies	Youth %	Pathfinder%	Com. Sec.%	%
Indiana-2008	69/7=76	26-26%	0	74-97%	34
Wisconsin-2008	68/5=73	34-46%	17-23%	45-62%	70
Michigan-2008 <sup>2</sup>	162/23=185	0	54-29%	89-48%	78
Lake Region-2008 <sup>3</sup>	108	98-91%	47-44%	76-70%	134
Total	442	158-36%	118-27%	284-64%	62%

We can no longer expect to successfully close the back door of the church, without the church.

### The Role of the Youth Professional

It is clear that the foundation for youth ministry must begin with the home (family) and then the local church (extended family). If this is true, what role does the youth ministry professional play? The youth ministry profession must complement the home and the church. We must see the value of equipping families and churches to fulfill the responsibility God has given them. Mark Senter writes, “The youth ministries which will have the greatest impact in the coming revolution will be those which successfully recruit and equip lay people to bear the primary responsibility for reaching the current generation of junior and senior high school students” (De Vries, 2004). Youth professionals must make the effort to invest in parents and adults in local churches. “Traditionally, we youth ministers have viewed parents as an interruption, as obstacles to success in ministry...But doing youth ministry without parents is like driving a car without the engine. From the top of the hill, this kind of car can coast at high speeds. But only for a while. Eventually it will stop. Without an engine, it has no lasting power” (De Vries, 2004). Have we been doing youth ministry at the top of the hill? Have we been pushing a car all these years without the engine of parents and local churches? The time has come for us to re-examine our approach to youth ministry.

If we are honest, the only way we can effectively minister to all our youth and young adults is through the family and local church. Conferences cannot afford to assign youth pastors to every church, nor can conference, union and division youth directors minister to a division membership of one million plus in North America. It is of necessity that we change our trajectory and focus on the local church as the primary delivery system of youth and young adult ministry.

So where do we go from here, and what must we do? Let me suggest seven initiatives that we will need in order to reverse the dropout rate among young adults in our church.

### Regaining an Evangelistic Fervor

Saving churches are growing churches. It is significant that the only message Jesus gave to His followers before He left this earth was the “Great Commission,” to make disciples of the entire world (Matthew 28:18-20). This commission transcends all cultural, class, gender, and generational challenges that we will face on this earth. In a real sense, disciple making is a cure-all for every ill that infects the church. Ellen White gives this counsel: “The best help that ministers can give the members of our churches is *not*

*sermonizing*, but planning work for them. Give each one something to do for others ... *if set to work*, the *despondent* will soon *forget* their *despondency*, the *weak* will become *strong*, the *ignorant intelligent*, and *all* will be prepared to present the truth as it is in Jesus” (White, 1948, emphasis added) Churches that are energized to fulfill the gospel commission are more prone to be engaged in reclaiming dropouts. Growth breathes life and health into the church.

Though evangelism has become a foreign concept in some circles, we cannot escape two realities. First, soul winning is not an option, but a command from Jesus Christ. Second, soul winning changes the culture of the local church. The Rainers write, “Every church we have studied that is effectively reaching and retaining young adults is highly intentional about evangelism. No exceptions. Period” (Rainer, 2008). It is no accident that the today’s Adventist Youth Society meeting was originally called Missionary Volunteers. Fulfilling the gospel commission has always been apart of the Adventist DNA. If we are to reclaim our lost young adults, we must recover our evangelistic fervor.

### Reconnecting the Family

One of the by-products of the me-generation in America has been the loss of the family. Americans have sacrificed home for the pursuits of fame, fortune and finance. Dennis Rainey writes, “Statistically, no other parents in the industrialized world spend less time with their children than American fathers and mothers. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, American parents spend, on average, ‘less than 15 minutes a week in serious discussion with their children’” (De Vries, 2004). Rick Lawrence says, “If America were a parent, it could be prosecuted for child abuse...while three-quarters of third-graders’ parents claim high or medium involvement in their kid’s lives, only about half of eighth-graders’ parents do” (De Vries, 2004). When their children are young doting parents give their toddlers all the attention they can handle, until, puberty sets in. From that point on, parents begin to take less and less of an interest, as their children go through the most challenging developmental change of their lives. We cannot afford to allow parents to become disinterested bystanders as their children advance into their teen and early adult years. The home must play a primary role in this important stage of life.

The reality is, no matter how far they may stray, as adults, children become like their parents. “Young people may pull away from their parents’ influence during their teenage years, but as a general rule, as adults, they return to the tracks their parents laid” (De Vries, 2004). The persons most responsible for the path young adults take are their parents. It behooves us to challenge parents to pick up the mantle of molding, modeling and mentoring they have been

given in raising their children. Why is this so important? Young people need to see authentic models of Christian behavior and grace in the home. “In the crucible of the family, pious masks evaporate before the fire of human frailty. In our families, our grand theologies boil down to how we live amid the frustrations of our most intimate relationships. Parents do not need to give lectures...in order for those children to learn what their parents believe... And those children almost always catch the beliefs of their parents” (De Vries, 2004).

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Jonathan Edwards more than two hundred years ago said, “Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by his rule...If these fail, all other means

are likely to prove ineffectual. If these are duly maintained, all the means of grace will be likely to prosper and be successful” (De Vries, 2004). So we must engage parents in the reclamation process. And the good news is, if they are faithful in this task, when their children become adults they will not flounder but flourish. “Like a rubber band, young people may stretch away from their parent’s faith during their teenage years. But when they become adults, they ordinarily return to the core values of their parents” (De Vries, 2004). The Bible say, “Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). We must reconnect the family.

## Re-awaken the Church

There is a growing trend among local churches to abdicate the responsibility of youth ministry to someone else. More churches have left the responsibility of Youth Ministry to youth pastors, task force workers, or some other paid professional. This is a grave mistake. While youth professionals have an important place and a vital role, they should not replace the role of the local church. Researchers at UC San Francisco determined that the young people who are resilient despite home deficits (single parents, abuse, divorce, etc.), have one constant among them.

They all experienced the non-exploitive interest, care and support of at least one adult during their childhood years—a parent or grandparent, uncle or aunt, older brother or sister, coach or teacher, pastor or youth leader—an adult with no hidden agenda or exploitive design on the youngster (Palmer, 1992).

Youth professionals must see the value of local parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and train them to become youth leaders for the local church. Every Pathfinder investiture, every camporee, every youth federation, every youth congress, every opportunity where we are in contact with the laity, we should be training committed church volunteers to become Pathfinder and youth leaders for their churches. It is inexcusable for conference youth directors to only have summer camps to serve their conferences. Every youth director should be holding quarterly trainings around their conference, building a network and training our laity for youth ministry. Ellen White gives this challenge to us, “Let ministers teach church members that in order to *grow in spirituality*, they *MUST* carry the burden of leading souls into the truth” (White, 1925, emphasis added). Engaged, involved members are important, not only to the progress of ministry collectively but spiritual growth individually. “Those who would be overcomers must be *drawn out of themselves* and the *only thing* that will accomplish this great work is to become *intensely interested* in the *salvation of others*” (White, 1923, emphasis added).

Along with conference, union and division youth directors, each college and university in the North American division should sponsor at least one “Youth Fair,” on their campus for the churches of their union. We should encourage churches that do not have the personnel and adults to start Pathfinders to join a club that does. The same should be true with AYS. If there are not enough adults to lead youth ministry, connect with an AYS that does. Membership in Pathfinders and AY does not necessitate transferring church membership. Every church that does not have a youth leader or youth council should be encouraged to make the church board the youth council. Every month of necessity, the church board should be studying how they can improve their ministry to youth. We have too many resources as a church to be lagging behind in youth ministry. There is no excuse for an empty church on Sabbath afternoons.

## Transformed Leadership

One has said, “insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results.” In organizations insanity is using the same leaders and expecting a different direction. In sports, when a team fails to make the playoffs each year, they fire the coach or the manager. How can we expect a change in direction when we continue to select the same leaders. Bias, nepotism, cronyism, and the old boys’ network infests our leadership like a cancer, yet we refuse to have massive surgery. Leadership is not ownership bequeathed to anyone based on their race, culture, gender, family, or finances. Leadership is stewardship, and the Bible says, “It

is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

Jim Collins in his book, *“Good to Great,”* says one of the key characteristics that moves a corporation from a good company to a great one is having a leader who is, “infected with an incurable need to produce *results*. They will...fire their brother, if that’s what it takes to make the company great” (Collins, 2001). Collins relates the example of George Cain, who became CEO of Abbott Laboratories when the company had dropped to the bottom quartile of the pharmaceutical industry. He says, “Cain ...set out to destroy one of the key causes of Abbott’s mediocrity: nepotism...Cain made it clear that neither family ties nor length of tenure would have anything to do with whether you held a key position in the company. If you didn’t have the capacity to become the best executive in the industry in your span of responsibility, then you would lose your paycheck....Cain set in motion a profitable growth machine that, from its transition date of 1974 to 2000, created shareholder returns that beat the market 4.5 to 1” (Collins, 2001). Collins then contrasts Abbott’s success with its competitor Upjohn. He writes, “Upjohn, the direct comparison company to Abbott, also had family leadership during the same era...Unlike George Cain, Upjohn’s CEO never showed the same resolve to break the mediocrity of nepotism. By the time Abbott had filled all key seats with the best people, regardless of family background, Upjohn still had B level family members holding key positions...Virtually identical companies with identical stock charts...Upjohn...fell 89 percent behind Abbott over the next twenty-one years before capitulating in a merger to Pharmacia in 1995” (Collins, 2001).

When Jesus was confronted by His family for special consideration He responded, “Who are my mother and my brothers?...Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:33-35, TNIV). Jesus did not believe in leadership driven by nepotism. The days of being placed in positions based on name or fraternity or friendship must end. There is no excuse for having people in positions of leadership who produce nothing. In the parable of the talents, the one talent man was condemned, not because he tried and failed, but because he didn’t even try. And because he produced nothing his talent was taken from him and given to someone who did (Matthew 25:24-30).

We can no longer sit idly by and watch the same people, from the same circles, control the leadership of the church. Leadership should be based on performance not pedigree; productivity not popularity. If we are to change the direction of Youth Ministry in the church, we need transformed leaders.

## The Value of Diversity

If there is one lesson that has shone forth through the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama, it is the deep-seated desire humans have to be united. To see ourselves as having more in common than in conflict. Jesus Christ said the one identifier of His disciples would be their love one for another (John 13:35). His only recorded prayer in the gospels was for His disciples to be one (John 17:6-26). He said, “...so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent Me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23, TNIV). Acts 2 describes the harmony that existed in the early Christian church. It says, “All the believers were together and had everything in common” (Acts 2:44, TNIV).

Acts 4 says, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had...and God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them ALL...” (Acts 4:32-33, TNIV, emphasis added). Those are compelling, striking words that call our corporate condition into question. It is still true that the most segregated day in Christianity is the day that we worship (Sabbath or Sunday). How can we explain this dichotomy between the command of Christ, the example of the early Christian believers, and the remnant church which is supposed to be the last remaining faithful followers from those original Acts 2 believers? “The church should be known for its diversity, and our youth groups should be hotbeds of diversity and examples of inclusiveness, leading the church to practice what it preaches. However, the church is weak on this point, and...in modern youth ministry... many youth workers don’t notice their youth groups aren’t diverse. Even if youth workers notice the lack of diversity in their groups, they seem perfectly satisfied without it” (Yaconelli, 2003). What

a compelling admission from the late Mike Yaconelli. Do we really believe in diversity? The kind that Jesus calls His followers to exhibit? Is it something we tolerate, including a few token minorities or women here and there, or is it something we value and celebrate? The Seventh-day Adventist church is over 90 percent non-white and non-North American. Do we see this reality as an obstacle or an advantage? To that point Yaconelli asserts, “Diversity is not tolerated, it’s valued. It isn’t something we put up with; it’s something we desire. Diversity requires interaction, appreciation, understanding, and dialogue, and all of these take time. Genuine community

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doesn't happen overnight...relationships require time and space to take hold. Transformation of our prejudices is a slow process, but...if this process is *encouraged*, people will *value* the diversity of the group rather than simply *tolerate* it; they will realize it is *necessary* rather than simply politically correct" (Yaconelli, 2003, emphasis added). We cannot continue to discuss the future of our church and youth ministry in circles that all look and think the same.

Diversity will not happen naturally. Our natural human tendency is to surround ourselves with those who are like us. Diversity is unnatural and requires intentionality. "Youth ministry can't ignore diversity any longer...Scripture calls us to challenge prejudice. If we wait for it to happen it won't. If we wait for 'the right moment,' there won't be one. The effort to develop diversity...has to be *intentional*, and at first it usually meets with resistance from kids, their parents, and even the church itself" (Yaconelli, 2003, emphasis added). We must change the make-up of the rooms where ministry is planned and where worship takes place. Let me suggest three areas that need to be addressed.

### **Cultural Diversity**

I have already mentioned the make-up of our church. The diversity that began primarily as black and white is now Asian, Hispanic, middle Eastern, far Eastern and growing. Hispanics have surpassed blacks as the largest minority group in America, and demographers have already determined that by the middle of this century America will be majority, non-white. That transition will happen sooner in the church. It has become a necessity to seek diversity. And why has there been such a delay? The beauty of diversity is the mosaic that each ethnic and cultural community brings to the community of faith. As the mathematics principle states, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Youth ministry should be seeking the areas of excellence exhibited by other communities so that we can improve what we are doing in our context. The Biblical metaphor of the body to describe the church confirms the indispensable value that each entity has in the organization. There is a vital place for each community to fill and to deny or restrict or dismiss that contribution is to retard the functioning of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-30). We need cultural diversity.

### **Gender Diversity**

We need the input, inspiration, perspective, and expertise of consecrated women in ministry. More and more women are responding to the call of ministry, only to find the church still slow to include them in meaningful leadership. Chauvinism has no place in youth ministry. Throughout Christ's ministry, His most loyal disciples were women. They supported His ministry financially, stood by Him in

difficulty, and tended to his body after His death. They were the last to leave the cross on Friday and the first at the tomb on Sunday, yet their place in the church continues to be in question. We need women, not merely in supporting roles, but in leadership. They need to have a seat at the table that is secure, and their input and involvement needs to be sought after. It is still true that 59 percent of the church's membership is female (Sahlin, 2003). How can we expect to effectively plan and minister to young adults without women?

### **Generational Diversity**

A sign in the University of Colorado says, "The generation that knows only itself is destined to remain adolescent forever" (De Vries, 2004). A growing sentiment among some in youth ministry is to allow youth and young adults to minister to themselves. We have believed that older adults have no role to play or that because there are no capable, committed adults available, the best alternative is to allow youth to lead themselves. This idea has developed a growing separation between the generations. And while this may be necessary in some quarters, as a rule, it is a mistake. Paul Ramey writes, "Ours is the only era in the entire history of human life on this planet in which the 'elders' of the tribe ask its newer members what the tribal rules and standards of expected behavior would be" (De Vries, 2004). Youth ministry needs the leadership, collaboration, and mentorship of dedicated adults. There is no substitute for the wisdom and insight of experience and age. The wise man says, "Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many counselors bring success." "Listen to your father, who gave you life, and don't despise your mother's experience when she is old" (Proverbs 15:22, 23:22, NLT). Youth ministry cannot afford to function in isolation with the generations separated.

The church should be the place where we grow old together, so we should work hard to connect our students with the whole church, finding ways to break down the youth ghettos in their separate rooms at the back of the church and connecting the teenagers with all the generations in our churches. When the students graduate from our youth programs, their relationships with adults in the church will keep them connected to the church, and they will have reasons to stay in the church. This generational diversity will create friends and long-lasting commitments (Yaconelli, 2003).

The Bible says the Elijah message of the last days will bring the generations together. "His preaching will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:6, NLT).

The word *koinonia* means common. It was used in the New Testament to describe the fellowship of the early believers. It meant that the community of faith shared in a common life. That life was Jesus Christ. Our commonality in Christ is supposed to transcend all barriers that divide us and bring us together. The promise of Joel 2:28, 29 which was seen in the outpouring of the early rain in Acts, describes a manifestation that was all-inclusive. “I will pour out my Spirit upon **ALL PEOPLE**. Your **SONS** and **DAUGHTERS** will prophesy, your **YOUNG MEN** will see visions, and **YOUR OLD MEN** will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit upon **ALL SERVANTS, MEN** and **WOMEN ALIKE**, and **THEY** will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18, NLT, emphasis added). The prophecy of Joel is universal and complementary. It includes all cultures, all generations, all genders and all classes. The manifestation of the Holy Spirit embodies the diversity which the church will need to effectively fulfill the great commission in the last days of earth’s history.

### Money and Mission

In the spirit of the Acts 2 church, money is supposed to follow mission. But too often the mission follows money. Instead of following the “golden rule,” those with the “gold, make the rules.” This has led to church battles over resources. Those who donate the most determine where their donations are spent and the result has been church programming that caters primarily to the needs of the privileged and prosperous.

But this was not the focus of the ministry of Jesus. In every instance he directed His ministry to the outcast (Luke 4:18, 19). His mission was primarily focused on the “least” (Matthew 25:40), the “last” (Matthew 19:30, 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30) and the “lost” (Luke 19:10; Mark 2:16, 17). Paul calls us to become “servants to all, and all things to all people to save some” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). The primary group that our ministry should focus upon are those farthest from Christ. They are the “least, the last and the lost.” Yet today the bulk of our resources and energies are used to minister to “the fortunated, the first and the found.” This should not be. Within the church the greatest bulk of our resources should be directed toward those farthest from Christ, our youth. We can no longer afford to relegate youth ministry to the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.

### Christ Our Example

If you look closely at the ministry of Jesus, you would conclude that Christ was not about the status quo. From birth to death, His life was unconventional:

He was born to a teenage unmarried mother.

His birth was celebrated by foreigners and peasants.

His nationality was from an oppressed people.

His parents were poor laborers.

He was trained outside the established centers of academia of His day.

He announced that His ministry would be directed to the poor.

He chose disciples from outside the established church leadership.

And in every instance He accepted those who the church rejected: lepers, demoniacs, paralytics, publicans, adulterers, prostitutes, children, and the ceremonially unclean.

Christ’s ministry can be summed up in one word... CHANGE.

On His final visit to the temple in Jerusalem, He tried to get them to change. He said to them with voice choking and words quivering, “Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem,...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37). Christ desperately wanted to change them, but they refused. And so Jesus left them to themselves: “behold, your house is left unto you desolate” (Matthew 23:38).

Ellen White makes this compelling statement, “*New methods* must be introduced. God’s people must *awake* to the necessities of the time in which they are living. God has men whom He will call into His service,—men who will not carry forward the work in the *lifeless* way in which it has been carried forward in the past...” (White, 1946, emphasis added). Leadership expert Tom Peters once commented, “It is easier to kill an organization than it is to change it” (Peters, 1997). But Peters is referring to human run organizations. The good news is, there is nothing too hard for God. He never gives up on us, and there is no situation or institution that is beyond His ability to transform. But the question is, will we let Him?

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## Endnotes

1. The Statistics recorded were compiled from the Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan and Lake Regions Conferences 2008 conference directories.
2. Michigan conference lists 91 Youth Sabbath School teachers. When included, their percentage of youth workers increases to 78%; however, it should be noted that the other conferences do not include their Youth Sabbath School teachers in their officers' lists.