
Proclamation vs. Protection: Reshaping The Vision Of Adventist Youth Ministry

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Abstract

In this chapter, the author argues that youth ministry in the Adventist church has focused on protection and retention of the youth that have grown up in the denomination. To achieve this goal, the majority of the denomination's resources have been invested into the educational system (I). Drawing attention to some of the short-comings of this approach, the author suggests a transition to a proclamation model of ministry and provides some basic principles (II). Furthermore, he draws attention to the increasing number of Adventist youth studying outside the denominational educational system and argues that it is both urgent and opportune to develop ministries that implement these principles (III).

Introduction

It is a disturbing fact to many of us involved in ministry to the youth of our denomination that the young people in whom we have invested so much time and energy are not sticking around. The latest studies show that we are struggling with a massive attrition problem. I won't rehash the statistics here. I also realize that in many ways these trends are not unique to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but that other Christian traditions are also grappling with them. In what follows, I want to share my perspective as an Adventist minister who has had the privilege of working with students on non-Adventist campuses for over two decades.

Part of the problem, I will claim, is our generally protectionistic and isolationistic approach to youth ministry (I). The solution, I argue, is found in implementing a new approach, one that seeks to teach youth to engage the society and culture outside the church and to communicate the gospel to it. I will call this the "proclamation" approach and suggest some basic principles (II). While these principles can be implemented anywhere, an ideal place for the implementation of this approach is the non-Adventist college and university. Investing in and developing ministries in this long-over-looked setting can play an important role in addressing the attrition problem and bringing positive changes to our denomination at large (IV).

Identifying the Problem: Protection and Isolation

The protectionist approach to youth ministry is pervasive in our church. My wife and I encountered it first hand just after moving to the San Francisco Bay area a few years ago. We wanted to find venues for Christian association for our then three teenagers who were all attending Berkeley High School—a school with a 3600 student population and a strong cultural prejudice against Christian belief and practice. My children had decided to attend the public high school primarily because they wanted to be a positive influence on other kids their own age.

We searched for other Christians for our kids to associate with. We would have been happy even with a local non-Adventist youth group or high school Young Life program, but being a college town, Berkeley had little to offer in the way of high school ministry. Consequently, we inquired about youth ministry events from the conference church and day academy. We were informed by the youth pastor at the time that their church had little in the way of youth ministry beyond Sabbath School and that academy events were not open to outsiders. Our kids would not be welcome since they did not attend the academy. Apparently, there was concern that non-academy enrolled students would negatively influence students enrolled at the academy.

More recently, in another conference within this division, an Adventist academy chose not to attend a regional denominationally sponsored high school event because the featured speaker had reportedly endorsed personal faith development by encouraging students to ask questions and to think and reason for themselves. Academy administration was apparently concerned about losing influence and control over their students.

Both of these examples highlight the extreme protectionistic attitudes still found among some Adventist ministry professionals. Adventist students in both situations were not only being insulated from non-Adventist youth, they were also being isolated from other Adventist youth and influence that might lead students in a direction other than desired by the school administration.

But what exactly is it that we want to protect our kids from? Some of the concerns are valid. We are worried about “the world.” Scripture describes the pull of the materialistic, lustfully seductive, and secular culture of the non-believing world (1 John 2:15-17; Romans 12:2). Sex, drugs, rock and roll, and peer pressure are huge temptations to young people. Students, who never intended to be drawn in, quickly feel the need for friendship and often wind up paying for it with the sacrifice of their own values.

We find, however, that along with this very legitimate concern, the additional desire to instill and preserve in our youth the distinctive beliefs and practices of Adventism. For better or for worse, we want our kids to believe in creation, to observe the Sabbath, embrace a healthful lifestyle, to understand the sanctuary and Ellen G. White, and to date another nice Adventist boy or girl.

We rightfully want to keep our kids in the church and to protect them from the negative influences of the world. However, unfortunately, this protectionist model has forced our entire youth ministry program down the path of a one-dimensional isolationism. It has narrowed our youth ministry focus to include only those who have grown up in the church. Additionally, we have focused our resources and our energies in one place--our educational institutions. We have developed a network of elementary schools, academies, and colleges and universities, staffed with some of our brightest and most talented workers.

However, putting the majority of our focus on keeping our kids in the church and calling it youth ministry has left us saving and re-saving our own kids with continued weeks

of prayer and spiritual emphasis. The protectionist model of youth ministry also alienates Adventist youth from the broader culture by creating a new subculture that is more regulated but may not be any more Christian as defined by enthusiasm for Christ, evangelistic fervor, and a heart for lost people. This philosophy of youth ministry has made our own Adventist kids sheltered and unprepared to live in the real world, as well as encouraging an elitist or fearful attitude toward non-Adventists. It also falsely defines and divides the world between Adventist and non-Adventist.

Furthermore, sending our kids off to boarding schools, and afterwards to a denominational college or university has also contributed to a major divide between our youth and the local church. Separated from their local churches, youth find it difficult to relate to the broader spectrum of Adventist society, and they learn to expect the kind of resources and leadership that can be provided only in settings of high concentration of our well-trained and gifted academy youth leaders, pastors, teachers, and professors. Adventist youth are not prepared to live out their faith in the broader context of the Adventist church any more than they are in the greater “real” world of contemporary culture.

Local churches also lose with the protectionist model since they no longer benefit from the sharp edge of relating to and reaching today’s youth with their weekly ministry. It seems that in the end everyone loses from our current approach. As often lamented, when Adventist youth graduate from boarding school, they also tend to graduate from the church. Other stick around a few more years if they chose to attend an Adventist university, but for many, graduation from university also means graduation from church.¹

A Suggested Solution: Engagement and Proclamation

What can be done to address this issue? I believe we must make some fundamental changes in our approach to youth ministry if we are going to stop the hemorrhaging we are currently experiencing. With this goal in mind, I want to make some suggestions on how we can shift from a protection model of ministry to one of proclamation and engagement.²

Principle #1: Rooted in the Word

First of all, we must be radically Christ-centered. By this I mean that our young people must be led to see clearly

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that our faith is less about being Adventist and more about being Christian. Jesus Christ must be first and central in their lives. This may seem like a basic point, but sharing their faith continues to be difficult for many young people who have grown up in the church because they don't really know what to share!

For many of our young people, Adventism, i.e., “the good news,” is a list of many “fundamental” things to know and do. As important as these things are, these things can make the Christian life seem confusing and complicated. We must come to the priority of the gospel ourselves if we are going to help others recognize its priority. Everything else emanates out of the relationship that God has established with us through Jesus Christ.

Our fundamental problem is not that we profane the Sabbath, or that there is a delay in Christ's Second Advent. The core issue is that we are all estranged from God, and no complicated theologizing or behavioral modification is going to fix it. We are not making our own way to God through observance of the law or radical human effort like improving our diet, observing the Sabbath, or consistent church attendance. We must stress the absolute necessity of the cross and explain to students why it was so necessary for Jesus to die in our place. We must help them see that our sin is so great that we could not develop our own way to God. God has instead made his way to us and found us on a cross cursed and in need of his solidarity with us.

Outside of this experience and new covenantal relationship with God through Christ there is no Christian or Adventist life. The life we are introducing students to is not a carefully controlled and well-organized life structured by rules and a closely controlled lifestyle. These are not bad things at all — just not good enough. What we must introduce students to is a whole new life — a life in Christ the Living Word who spoke the world into existence, raised people from the dead, and raised himself from the dead. We must make this distinction that the only real life is the life of God himself and nothing else will do. It is Jesus that our young people need, and He alone can radically alter their lives and lead them to a new appreciation for the church and our mission in the world.

Principle #2: Loving Others Well

We must teach our youth how to develop and maintain healthy friendships with non-Adventists. We have to be with people to affect a radical difference in their lives. In their book, *I Once Was Lost*, Don Everts and Doug Schaupp write about the five thresholds that post-moderns must cross for a personal faith in Christ. The first one is meeting and trusting a real Christian (Everts and Schaupp, 2008). The Christian life is better caught than taught. This is why Jesus

said things like “Let your light so shine among men that they might see your good deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” And, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Matthew 5:16; John 13:35)

We model this through our own caring relationship with the young people who have been entrusted to us. The Adventist message too often gets in the way of the Adventist messenger. We are guilty of teaching the truth about God in place of living it by including others in our own lives. The life of Jesus is first off a matter of the heart rather than the head — a living presence, not a list of commandments or a systematic theology organized around doctrinal statements about God. Our young people need the living word that has been incarnated.

Young people need real models of living faith. They need our time and personal involvement. The brokenness of sin has created such damaged and broken lives that, more than ever, youth need extended human contact and personal investment to even begin to restore trust in others or in an intangible God they cannot see or feel. They need to be discipled the way Jesus taught his own disciples. We need to think more of developing people through relationships instead of teaching them the doctrines or making people behave.

Since the goal of following Christ is love, just as babies must have human love and contact in order to live — so young followers of Christ must have loving Christ-like leaders to teach them how to live and grow in their faith. This is no less true of our own Adventist youth who have grown up around us yet still need careful spiritual guidance and discipleship. Love is a verb and must be acted out. Our youth will have a much greater chance of staying with us if they have been loved and mentored in a discipling relationship.

Principle #3: Communicating Christ to and in Culture

In order for the message of the gospel to connect with today's culture we have to be speaking the language of contemporary culture. The buzzword is “relevant.” Is the message we are trying to communicate about Jesus interesting and intelligible to our kids? To assume that the gospel needs no translation because Adventist youth grow up in our homes, attend Adventist churches, go to Adventist schools, and may some day work at an Adventist job is a false assumption; we would be erroneously assuming that they have no interaction with pop culture. I-phones, I-pods, Facebook, MySpace, and of course popular music, television, and the movies still penetrate the minds and hearts of our youth.

In order to help the message of Christ speak to even our own youth, not to mention non-Adventist culture, we will need a good grasp of the music, video, and language

of contemporary culture to gain their respect and to speak into their world. Otherwise what we are saying about Jesus will not get through. We need to prepare to use the mediums that our kids are immersed in to help them translate the message of Christ. Actually, in *My Freshman Year*, Rebekah Nathan points out that youth slang changes almost completely every seven years; if we hope to keep up we better stay in touch with the language our kids are speaking (Nathan, 21).

There are five practical methods for keeping relevant in the language of youth culture.

1. *Interpreting Christ with Culture*: Utilizing contemporary symbols and icons to relate biblical truth — (Paul at Athens with the altar to the unknown God).
2. *Discovering Christ in Culture*: Finding biblical truth in contemporary mediums such as film, music, and the arts.
3. *Redeeming Culture for Christ*: Intentionally making use of contemporary culture to illustrate or convey biblical truth.
4. *Recognizing Timely Opportunities for Christ in Culture*: Discerning cultural shifts or moments that show God's involvement in history.
5. *Influencing Culture through Christ-like Discipleship*: Jesus, model of being in the world yet not of the world. Jesus remained radically obedient to God while still radically identifying with people.

Foreigners are always impressed when we go to the huge effort to learn their language. It is always gratifying to see them smile when we try to say it in their words. Youth are also impressed when adults are tuned in enough to make reference to the musicians and cultural icons of their world. It gives us an authority and respect we would not have without it.

Principle #4: Creating Dynamic and Diverse Ministries

Many young people I have worked with feel that the church is no longer relevant to their faith. The values and beliefs that have become a priority are not the ones central to an Adventist worldview. Issues like human rights, the environment, and social justice become greater concerns than church affiliation or being a part of the remnant church. Many young people see Adventism as stuck in a Victorian era where one's faith is defined by a set of beliefs and practices that no longer seem that relevant in the face of the bigger issues, e.g., a starving planet, depleting natural resources, and globalization. The world they now traffic in has become bigger than the narrow confines of a community defined by last day events, Bible prophecy, and the three angels' messages. They have grown beyond an Adventist world-view.

In addition to this, we know that youth ministry is about change. Students are in a constant state of flux, and youth and young adult groups are always creating and being recreated. Churches and youth group leaders that are not prepared to change will lose their relevance and connection with students. Successful youth ministry that is able to clarify key principles that do not change while adapting to new expressions of how those principles are lived out will last over time. Those ministries that are rigid and based on programs instead of principles will lose their effectiveness. Since young people are constantly on the move, we need the model of the Old Testament sanctuary instead of the temple. The sanctuary could be moved at a moment's notice whereas the temple was a permanent fixture.

The sanctuary could go where God led. When we become fixed on buildings and programs, we limit ourselves to places and programs that may not intersect with where students are. This is part of the problem in Adventist youth ministry today. We are so fixed on our system of youth ministry and our institutions that unless students intersect with us here we lose contact with them. This calls for constantly new and adaptive ways of connecting with a culture that is constantly changing.

Principle #5: Empowering Students to Serve, to Lead, and to Share

It has been said that youth are made for war. They are idealistic and highly motivated to effect change. We do our own Adventist youth the greatest disservice when we communicate that the faith in which we have been instructing them is either too difficult to explain to others or not practical enough to change their lives. Youth want results. They want a working practical faith—one that can be trusted; and the only way to determine that is by trying it out. A faith that cannot help anyone else is an empty faith and on the way of being abandoned.

Michael Gleason makes a salient observation:

Many of the great social revolutions - from the free speech movement at UC Berkeley in the 60's to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the 80's began as campus movements. Most of the spiritual revivals of history, including what is often referred to as the great awakening of the early nineteenth century, that spawned preachers like Dwight Moody and Charles Spurgeon and the spiritual revivals of the twentieth century were birthed on a college campus. Most of the spiritual revivals took place in the midst of a cultural environment characterized by vast spiritual and moral decline. These movements started when young men and women, students attending college, experienced the call of God to go (Gleason, 2002).

We have all witnessed the difference that a mission trip can make on a young person's life. Mission trips provide opportunities to see how the compassion of Jesus really works. Here students also get a chance to witness the brokenness of sin first hand. The truth of the gospel begins to come together in a real life situation of need.

But here again we have to be aware of our protectionist bias. Why is it a good idea to take young people out of country or somewhere else to serve when we have people in our own neighborhoods and communities who are in just as great a need for the ministry of Jesus? I would suggest that for many of us the danger of trespassing the Adventist vs. non-Adventist line of demarcation poses a lesser threat when away from home.

Jesus was a master of empowerment, and it is how he helped the disciples internalize their own faith in him by giving it away. When sending out the disciples he instructed them not only to announce the kingdom of God but to offer it in personal ways through the casting out of demons, healing the sick, and providing for those in need.

The good news of Jesus was real and practical. It was news that met people's needs. In order for young people to connect with the church and its mission they have to be empowered to study the Bible on their own, lead their own Bible studies, reach out in their communities, and take an interest in their friends. They have to be challenged with the needs of others and empowered with ways to help meet those needs through programs they initiate or are in charge of. Of course, they need leadership and training; but until they are just as moved in their hearts to follow Christ as we are still being moved today it will never become their own faith.

Principle #6: Partnering with Others for Christ's Mission.

Successful ministry that retains young people in the mission of the church will always be ministries of partnership. The Bible calls us to depend on one another. Jesus said, "Anyone who is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:49). Successful ministry that helps students build life long partnerships will create eternal ties among students and others for God's kingdom.

In Adventist ministry, we have to help students understand the partnerships between the local church, pastor, church administration, local communities, and other student leaders. This is the way of Jesus as he taught the disciples to learn to love and trust one another.

This is very important for us today as we face a splintering of Adventist youth ministry and the tendency to

again guard and protect our own turfs. Frankly there are too many lost people to be competing with one another in ministry. Paul reminds us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). If this is true we actually need each other to fight this war. When we are fighting one another we give victory to the real enemy. We also have too much in common with each other to be splitting hairs over theology or worship experience.

We also need the partnership of other Christians from other denominations, the partnership of older seasoned followers of Christ, partnership of those who do not see things as exactly as we do and even those outside the faith who can help give us a balanced ministry perspective.

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Adventist Christian Fellowship and the Mission of the Church

Thus far, I have suggested that the central problem of youth ministry in our church is the protectionistic approach we have taken. I have suggested some principles to transition from this model to a proclamation model. However, I have not addressed the issue of focusing most of our youth ministry resources into our educational system. The central problem with this narrow focus is that the majority of our young people are no longer there!

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that we close our schools, do away with boarding academies, or eliminate our colleges. We have a wonderful educational system in place that provides an invaluable educational experience for many of our students.

However, according to our best statistics more than two thirds of our young people are not attending Adventist colleges and universities. This means that in comparison with the some 23,000 Adventist college students in Adventist institutions of higher learning, we have at least another 50,000 attending other institutions. With close to 100 Adventist Christian Fellowship organizations now functioning on non-Adventist campuses throughout the North American Division, we are at least in contact and providing ministry to approximately 2,000 of them.

This is equivalent to the student population or even more than many of our own Adventist colleges. This, of course, is to say nothing about reaching out to the nineteen million non-Adventist students on those same campuses, which to put in proper perspective is a number equal to the population of the five largest cities in the U.S. It would,

of course, be incomprehensible to not have an Adventist presence in the cities of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Phoenix. Again being unable to see past the structures we already have in place prevents us from carrying out our greater mission. In this case our programs and institutions become the mission by default, and we miss the majority of our denominational youth culture as well as missing the target of the mainstream youth culture around us.

When we first moved to the University of California, Berkeley in the summer of 2001, I had one purpose in mind. I wanted to see if it was possible to transition an Adventist church near a large secular campus to be both a place of refuge for Adventist students and an outreach to the campus community surrounding it. I wondered if it would be possible to lead a church to the core and center of an orthodox Christian faith while still remaining true to Adventist beliefs. I wanted to see if Adventist faith was still relevant to the needs of thinking Christians and if a local Adventist church could attract today's Adventist students and their friends. To be honest, it has been a long road with many ups and downs and over the past seven years, and we have learned that beyond the relevancy of Adventism, there were even more issues to consider. There were things like disintegrating church membership, a diverse student population, and the dearth of local church leadership.

Despite these challenges, we have learned that Adventist young adults are interested in engaging the church and the mission of Jesus. We have found that when students are given a chance to serve and lead out that they step up to the plate. In over twenty-three years of campus ministry, first at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, and now the last seven years in Berkeley, I have seen the principles I have shared work. Students respond to them and the kingdom of God grows.

Today the growing number of Adventist students attending non-Adventist universities is forcing our church to become involved in public campus ministry. From one perspective, it is the church's last line of defense, a final effort to stay connected with students. However, from another perspective, Adventist ministry on public college campuses is affording the church a wonderful opportunity for growth and evangelism. In such a setting, students learn to stand on their own spiritually and to integrate their beliefs with the real world. It is unfortunate that drastic statistics like two-thirds of our own Adventist young adults now attending non-Adventist colleges are the driving force for this effort. What has kept us from seeing the campus mission opportunity before now? How could we have been so blind to the nineteen million college students on these campuses for so many years?

Again I would suggest it stems from a systemic problem built into the very DNA of current Adventist youth ministry. Adventist youth ministry over the years has drifted from a position of outreach and mission to contemporary youth culture to protecting our own kids from that culture. Our only hope is returning to a more biblical model of proclamation and engagement.

It makes sense to want to protect our kids from a secular, hedonistic culture. Still if we follow Jesus' words carefully, he reminds us that He is "with us to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20) and that "I shall lose none of all that he has given me" (John 6:39) and again "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24).

I would suggest the way to save our kids is to follow Jesus' command of helping them give their lives away in Jesus' mission. He challenges us to turn them loose on a world that needs their witness. When we involve students in the proclamation of Jesus kingdom it energizes them and puts them dead center into Jesus' heart for saving the world. The irony is that this is truly the safest place for them to be.³

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Endnotes

1. For the perspective of a professor at one our universities, see Chris Blake's (2008) essay, "We Need to Talk."
2. In our newly published book, Kirk King and I (2008) lay out ten essential values or principles for doing Adventist or Christian ministry in general on today's public college campus. I won't attempt to present all ten of these ministry principles here. I will, however, share a few of them, in the hopes of helping initiate this transition in other settings.
3. I would like to thank Zane Yi, an Adventist graduate student studying on a non-Adventist campus, for his help preparing this chapter for publication.