
Handing On Faith: Equipping The Next Generation to “Leave Church”!

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Abstract

In view of the continuing high attrition of next generations from the Adventist church, perhaps, like with effective parenting, the best the church can do is to equip the next generation to “leave church” — releasing them to give birth to the next generation of Adventism. This involves trust — trusting the next generations, and trusting God with the future of his church.

Society is changing—and church is changing. The only consistent factor may be that next generations choose to disconnect. It is disturbing and discouraging for a church family when the youth choose another path. It challenges the church’s identity. However, there are some hopeful signs in the research—although they may point to uncomfortable possibilities.

Handing on faith or a world-view to the next generation is complex. This 180° Symposium is another serious attempt to address this issue, and those involved are committed to practical, tangible outcomes. Here is a radical suggestion. It has been researched and tested. It is not entirely proven, but is shared as a serious proposal. It is simply: **It may be more effective if the church invested its energies in equipping the next generation to “leave church”!** Obviously such a radical idea needs explanation.

Some Background

In the Christian world local churches are experiencing the most significant recalibration in 150 years. This is impacting the thinking of Adventist youth, and will have yet a greater flow-on impact. Globalization, multiculturalism and social networking are major contributing factors, changing the sources of authority, truth, and structures; breaking down the claims of denominationalism and hierarchies; and opening new avenues for participation, fellowship, ministry, and service. This is reshaping church—confronting youth with diverse options from which to choose. While the forms are really not the issue, the freedom of choice to shape spirituality and participation with God’s mission heart is critical.

Although it does not do so, the proposal to equip youth to “leave church” may at first seem to run counter to the efforts of educators, childhood specialists, youth leaders, and pastors. However, here is the reality: in spite of the best children’s departmental leaders and resources, Pathfinder and teen programs, the most dedicated teachers in our Adventist education system, camping programs, youth rallies, youth pastors, and leaders, the majority are still leaving. It is hardly feasible that simply more, different or even better programs will change the exodus.

Another difficult reality for those of who are older to accept—although accepted by the next generation—is disconnecting from the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not synonymous with leaving Jesus. The 28 fundamental teachings are really important and are valued, but people other than Adventists will be saved, and the freedom to interpret faith differently is a high priority. Our freedom of choice was given to us at high cost to God. He suffered with Adam and Eve’s choice. They suffered with the choice of one of their two sons. It is important to keep this in perspective. Next generations make choices different from ours. That is reality. However, the choices of our youth, although painful for us, are not always wrong nor a choice to leave God. Sometimes they are choosing to create networks and communities that they are convicted honor God, change lives, and transform societies in more biblical and meaningful ways.

The proposal to equip youth to leave signals a new paradigm. This is not to suggest that what has been done by local churches, parents, pastors, youth leaders, educators, or the denomination is wrong or a failure. But new mission eras call for new responses (Bosch, 1991) but responses that have

biblical and historic antecedents and precedents (Anderson, 2006). Although not a youth pastor, I have been researching and experimenting. Hundreds of postmodern young Adventists have been involved in planting new Adventist churches with the same commitment and sacrifice of the youth in the mid-nineteenth-century Advent Awakening who pioneered the birth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. During the last eighteen months I have provided pastoral oversight to a local church planted and led entirely by next generation Adventists who had disconnected from the church.¹

Handing on Faith!

Sociologists (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) indicate it is impossible to perfectly hand on complex worldviews to the next generations. Adventism is complex. Not only do we have 28 statements of faith, that most trained theologians struggle to explain in simple terms, but we also have the traditions, shared expectations, understandings, symbols, language, and myths that surround these statements. We also have the structures and policies, written and unwritten, that form the message, mission, and structures of Adventism.

It is complex, and it is changing. The reality is that what we are trying to hand on to our next generations is not what our grandparent Adventists were trying to hand on to us fifty years ago. And what we interpret as Adventism is not what they thought was Adventism. And what the next generation takes on as Adventism (if they take it on!) will not be the same as what we think is Adventism!

This is further complicated by the insight that all theology—and that also means doctrinal understandings—is contextualized (Bevans, 2007). It simply means that what I as an Australian think Mark Finley means when he articulates Adventism on a satellite evangelistic program may be very different from what he as an American thought he was saying. But then it becomes even more complex, for what my postmodern thirties-something inner-city graphic designer son thinks Finley said is different again; what the generation-Y planting Revive Adventist Church for their unchurched friends heard was different; and what those hanging around the fringes of an established church heard will be different again. We could add the different contexts of the Bible writers and our Adventist pioneers to the context of our next generations.

This does not suggest that the Bible writers were not saying something specific and important, inspired by God. But it raises the question of what can be handed on. While models are available to hand on as effectively as possible our complex faith system—and our educators, children and youth specialists, etc. are developing fantastic resources and programs to enable this—we are still being disappointed.

Does Parenting Provide an Effective Model?

This may be simplistic. But parents who equip their children to leave home have healthier relationships with their young adult children than those parents who are overly protective and controlling. Christian education is also designed to equip “youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought” (White, 1903). There are many models that are useful, but this family/parenting model is most instructive for the church. It is also biblical, for New Testament churches were built around *oikos* or the extended family or household.

Effective parenting could be defined as building relationships of love and friendship and equipping the kids to leave home to make their own decisions for life, relationships, beliefs, structures, families, society, and the world. Perhaps, as with effective parenting, the best the church can do is to equip the next generation to “leave church.”

Clearly more and better programs and resources are not keeping them at home in the church. Just as with adolescent children in a family, the next generations must be equipped to be released from the controls, dictates, and resources of the church family to reinterpret and apply their faith to life and community. The model by which families hand on life to their children is instructive for the church wishing to hand on faith to the next generation. But it is just as scary—perhaps more so! However, we must do this— equip them to leave, for we are failing in trying to keep them!

A Scary Option—Equipping Them to “Leave Church”!

By leaving I mean fully releasing youth to mold the next generation of church — and this is best done by (again using the family model) releasing them to reproduce and give birth to new churches. This is not just giving them a say. It is not letting them have a part in the program or sit on a committee. It is not just sending them off on mission trips— only to come back home to a situation of control. It is not just training them to do things in the home church. It is not just letting them run a youth church or take part of the worship service, under the watchful eye of the church board, elders, or pastor. It is letting them mold their future—including their churches and church. It is letting them go with our full support and blessing—but not control. And, if they have not been equipped and released by the time they are 15-19, there could be rebellion—as in a home where parents try to control their kids.

Young adults (teens and early twenties) fall in love. They are passionate. Some make a commitment and get married. Perhaps for years they work and travel without

ties or responsibilities, we say. They live for each other. But when they reproduce and have a baby, life changes. They think differently, plan differently. And so it is when young Adventist postmoderns (and post-postmoderns) are released to mold the new life of future Adventist churches and the church! They tune into God's heart—identifying with his mission, discipleship, spirituality, and commission. They develop new approaches to interacting with God. They experience his living presence, network with their communities, and address the justice issues of the world. They read their Bibles, find a new relationship with Jesus, explore their heritage, and reinterpret the message of Adventism.

Having fostered and equipped teams that have planted over 500 new Adventist missional groups and churches, and having seen hundreds of next generation postmodern Adventists rediscover their identity with Adventism on this journey, I would suggest that a priority reason for Adventism to recapture its heritage of being a planting movement is that it equips our youth to “leave church”—to give birth to the next generation of church!

Concerns!

Does this foster generational churches? No, our experience is the opposite. As in families, when the next generations are respected and equipped to leave and make their own decisions, they include in their relationships all generations. It is an environment of control that creates resentment and generational distinctions.

Does it mean the distinctive features of Adventism will disappear? Again, experience proves the opposite. In an environment of trust and respect, the stories of Adventism are shared, and distinctive features are pro-actively explored and interpreted.

Does it mean Adventism will change? Yes. The next generation will apply faith and our message to twenty-first century issues, and isn't that the dynamic of a message (Revelation 14:6-12) that is relevant for end times? It also means that some of the institutions and structures built up over generations will no longer be seen as of value. But that is how the next generations come to own our church.

Does it mean providing a safe refuge for Adventist young people? No, in fact it builds on the idea Jesus used in Luke 10. He sent out people who didn't even believe that he was the Messiah, to be involved in his mission. By being involved they came to realize who he was—they found their faith. Cities of refuge in the Old Testament were safe places for people who had really messed up, but even the church on the cutting edge of mission may be the best safe place for those few who do mess up!

Does it mean our message will change? Yes, in the sense that it will be understood and applied anew and afresh. It will be articulated in new terms. It will be applied to new environments. It will address new challenges. It will still be based upon Scripture, centered in our Savior, and experienced through the presence of the Spirit. It will still find relevance in sacrificial service and joyful hope in the second coming of Jesus. But it will be like Adventism reborn. It could be like the book of Acts and our pioneer days all over again!

Hopeful Sign!

Reggie McNeal (2003) made an alarming observation in his book *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*: “A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith” (p. 4). I am aware of Adventist young people who are leaving to grow spiritually—leaving church to be the Church. This is perhaps a hopeful sign, but it will take new attitudes to foster and equip so that this becomes one of the great opportunities for Adventism.

Three Stories

The story of Elijah is really important to Adventists for we believe our message is the Elijah message, to be anointed with the power of the spirit of Elijah. What did he hand on to Elisha? It was his relationship with God, his coat, and a double portion of the Holy Spirit. The story of Jesus is our message. What did Jesus hand on to his disciples? He handed on a relationship with himself and the Holy Spirit.

Here is the story of Revive—an Adventist church planted by disconnected next generation Adventist youth in Australia. About 18 months ago a couple of us made a list of 20-plus young adults who had disconnected from church. We invited them to join us for a weekend. No advertising was prepared. It was personal invites: “We know you no longer connect to church, but we think you are still interested in God. Would you join us for a weekend, just to sit and talk?” Some of them invited friends; some were not Christians. All agreed to read the book of Acts. They paid their own costs for the weekend. Over 40 turned up.

There were no presentation style meetings as such. We were just sitting around asking: “What did you find in Acts? What is God saying to you? What do you think church could be like?” I told a few stories of young adults planting new churches. We started to pray conversationally. We sat in silence. We shared an Agape Meal. During some sessions, some went outside to smoke.

By Sunday (the third day) some common interests surfaced and we invited people to form groups to discuss

their ideas for the future and encouraged them to go home, meet to pray, read their Bibles, and do what they thought God was saying to do. A few months later one group developed a house church, and six months later another group launched a community church, Revive. It is organized and run by the youth. Although I am the pastor I do not preach there and most would not know I am the pastor. They have identified community needs—supporting a feeding program for the homeless, providing a family dining room for destitute families each week, supporting homes for at-risk girls, and a church for girls called *Chick’s Church*. They have a string of small groups for young people, families, old ladies, etc., and are currently in dialogue about starting a cluster church in a retirement home. They give support to youth and churches in three country areas of Victoria, to a church in Darwin (in the Northern Territory), and have missions they visit and support in Thailand and Africa.

Eighteen months ago these young people had disconnected from church. They live in an area of the city with vibrant Adventist churches, with good youth pastors, Pathfinder programs, an Adventist academy, youth rallies, etc. They now have a church with 80-95 attending. They are reaching new people for Jesus, and they are releasing others to start new again! By this time next year they could have another four or five daughter churches.

Encouragement!

Young adults love involvement and big celebratory events. We have used big events to build teams and to multiply the releasing of youth. There are so many principles that are important in this story. Does it scare me? Sometimes! Do I know where it is going? No. Are we seeing Adventist youth reconnecting by being equipped to “leave church”? Definitely!

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Endnotes

1. This is one of 5 plants (churches and house churches) that I now pastor.