
The Development of Adventist Youth Groups and Ellen White's Empowerment of Youth in Evangelism and Service

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Abstract

How did youth work begin in the Adventist church? Did it start with “professionals”? What was the point of Adventist youth groups originally? And what is the point today? This provocative paper may generate some discussion with your youth and leadership team –and maybe even re-focus your ministry!

Sequence of the Development of Adventist Youth Societies and Their Subsidiary Organizations

Although primary source material is limited, historical consensus gives Luther Warren and Harry Fenner the honor of originating the first Adventist Young People's Society in 1879, conceived from a desire to help their young friends experience spiritual birth or revival (Warren, 1917).

Teenager Meade MacGuire, who was later to develop into a prominent Adventist leader and author, organized a second Adventist youth organization in Antigo, Wisconsin in 1891. Several of his friends had attended evangelical youth meetings, such as the Christian Endeavor Society and the Epworth League, and MacGuire felt the need for something similar within Adventism. MacGuire's proposal met initial firm refusal, until an elderly “saint” stepped forward in support (MacGuire, 1917).

The first known testimony from Ellen White urging workers to do something definite for youth came from Australia in 1892 and was read to the General Conference Council on January 29, 1893. Included in the testimony was understated affirmation for the fledgling youth organizations: “. . . We want [the youth] to act a part in well-organized plans for helping other youth” (Seventh-day Adventist General Conference [SDAGC], 1893, p. 22).

A short time before the 1893 General Conference session, Elder A. G. Daniells organized a Junior Youth Society in South Australia (Andross, 1920, p. 13 & 55).

The Young People's Society of Christian Service was organized in College View, Nebraska, in 1893 at about the same time that the Young Women's Dorcas Society emerged in Battle Creek, Michigan. As young men were enlisted to split wood and help in other ways, the name evolved to Christian Help Band (Andross, 1920, p. 13-14). The next year, Luther Warren, now a young adult of 29, organized Sunshine Bands in South Dakota. By 1896 the Sunshine Bands had proliferated sufficiently to warrant a Sunshine Band Convention, held in Bridgewater, South Dakota (Andross, 1920, p. 14).

The Ohio Conference organized the first formally recognized youth society, an organization that existed until it was assimilated in 1907 by the newly created Young People's Department of the General Conference (Andross, 1920, p. 15). Adventist Youth Societies became international with the creation of a German Youth Society in 1900 (Andross, 1920, p. 55). However, a number of leaders of both the Ohio and Iowa youth societies were already working in foreign fields by 1907 (Andross, 1920, p. 15).

The year 1901 would be pivotal for Adventist Youth Societies. Although many societies had sprung up in various places due to the “spontaneous combustion” of youthful energy, zeal, and sense of mission, combined with the support of many adults who shared their vision, there seemed to be obstacles to further growth without some form of central organization. Those obstacles included the extreme differences in the societies due to varying maturity levels and zeal of individual leaders, attrition rates of Adventist youth from the church, and the objections of some “conservatives”

(Andross, 1920, p. 16) who saw no need for a “church within a church” and even saw Young People’s Work as “productive of evil results” (Andross, 1920, p. 68). In an apparent effort to show support and strengthen the scattered societies through the “seal of official GC approval,” the General Conference of 1901 approved a recommendation to organize an official Young People’s Department of the General Conference (SDAGC, 1901, p. 332).

In a subsequent meeting of the General Conference Committee, a committee under the auspices of the Sabbath School Department was asked to actually assume responsibility for the Young People’s Department, rather than establish a separate General Conference entity (SDAGC, 1901, p. 20). (The separate entity none-the-less ultimately emerged in 1907.)

General Conference directives to the Sabbath School Department included the need for a rousing public relations campaign which would promote awareness of and participation in the youth societies. This proved more easily requested than done, since only three of the fifty North American Conferences even had a young people’s secretary (youth director) (Andross, 1920, p. 19). Conference Sabbath School secretaries (directors) were drafted to do double duty, a coercive measure that doubtless hastened the election of official young people’s workers!

By 1903, there were enough societies in California to warrant two young people’s conventions, attended by three or four hundred youth (“A Young,” 1903).

The report of the societies, now called Young People’s Work, given by the secretary of the Sabbath School Department at the General Conference held in Oakland, California in 1903, was an evidence of progress (Andross, 1920, p. 20):

“The last General Conference laid the foundation for an organized movement in behalf of our young people. . . . We have an actual record of 186 societies, with a membership of 3,478” (Plummer, 1903, p. 122).

Though the Young People’s Work in North America and Australia began almost simultaneously, with a German society reporting as early as 1903, the societies would not really begin to proliferate outside of America until 1905. Nevertheless, a new youth society era that included census taking had begun!

Underlying Purpose Driving the Establishment of Adventist Youth Societies

The passion for evangelism that spawned leadership skills in teenagers Luther Warren and Harry Fenner seems to have been kindled or nurtured by their local congregation, the Hazelton church of Michigan. According to the Trustees Record Book of the Hazelton church, a special day of prayer for the salvation of the church’s youth had been declared early in 1879 (Youngberg, 1976, p. 4-5). It is in this milieu of adult concern for youth that these teens initiated Adventism’s first youth organization for evangelistic outreach which seems to have included strengthening friendship bonds through social activities to which they could invite their non-Adventist friends (“Inspired by,” 2001, p. 5).

The thirty members of MacGuire’s Wisconsin youth society focused on hymn singing, testimonies (all were expected to regularly testify,) Scripture study, and intercessory prayer for the salvation of their peers (MacGuire, 1917, p. 4).

The Young People’s Society of Christian Service was organized in 1893 at College View, Nebraska for the purpose of securing increased spirituality in the young people and enlisting them in missionary activity (Andross, 1920, p. 13).

“The purpose [of Luther Warren’s sunshine bands] was to direct young people in missionary work” (Andross, 1920, p. 14).

The dual focus of the Young Women’s Dorcas Society was outreach to the poor and marginalized along with seeking the Lord in prayer (Andross, 1920, p. 14).

Even when the grass roots Societies were taken under the umbrella of the General Conference Sabbath School Department in 1901, the stated purpose of official organization was for “more effectual missionary service” (SDAGC, 1901, p. 332). This resolution was preceded by an impassioned speech by Luther Warren in which he quoted from the messages concerning the Societies sent by Ellen White from Australia in 1893 and which he said had been sent again and again during the “last eight years:”

“Young men and young women, can you not form companies, and as soldiers of Christ enlist in the work, putting all your tact and skill and talents into the Master’s services, that you may save souls from ruin? Let there be companies organized in every church to do this work. Young men and women, come to the work in the name of Jesus. . . . [Unite] together upon some plan and order of action.

“General Conference directives to the Sabbath School Department included the need for a rousing public relations campaign which would promote awareness of and participation in the youth societies.”

Let there be a company formed, somewhat after the order of the Christian Endeavor Society” (SDAGC, 1901, p. 331).

The first published devotional lessons for the Societies appeared in the *Youth's Instructor* of June 27, 1901. Two weeks before, the June 13, 1901 issue of the *Youth's Instructor* carried the first of a continuing column referenced as “The Young People’s Work.”

Although the Young People’s societies were to grow almost exponentially (considering the total Adventist membership) between 1879 and 1903, from the first they were characterized by careful observance of parliamentary procedure and evangelistic fervency, including the expectation that all faithful members of the youth societies would sign temperance and mission pledges (Warren, 1917, p. 4).

Having the society’s general management taken over by professionals did not seem to dilute its original purpose of organizing youth for service, at least through 1903 (Andross, 1920, p. 19-20).

Ellen White’s Empowerment of Youth for Evangelism and Service

Ellen White’s investment of power to youth for evangelistic involvement in church life bears closer investigation:

“Never, never feel the slightest disturbance because the Lord is raising up youth to lift and carry the heavier burdens and proclaim the message of truth” (White, 1892, p. 279).

“In order that the work may go forward in all its branches, God calls for youthful vigor, zeal, and courage. He has chosen the youth to aid in the advancement of His cause. To plan with clear mind and execute with courageous hand demands fresh, uncrippled energies” (White, 1913, p. 535).

“Those who are older must educate the youth, by precept and example, to discharge the claims that society and their Maker have upon them. Upon these youth must be laid grave responsibilities” (White, 1913, p. 536).

“The church may inquire whether young men can be entrusted with the grave responsibilities involved in the establishing and superintending of a foreign mission. I answer . . . we must manifest confidence in our young men. They should be pioneers in every enterprise involving toil and sacrifice. . . . Providence thrust [their] experienced fathers into trying, responsible positions at an early age, when neither physical nor intellectual powers were fully developed. The magnitude of the trust committed to them aroused their energies, and their active labor in the work aided both physical and mental development” (White, 1913, p. 516-517).

“The minds of many of the youth are rich in talents which are put to no available use, because they have lacked opportunity to develop them. . . . Aids to self-development

must be given to the youth; they must be drawn out, stimulated, encouraged, and urged to action” (White, 1893, p. 30).

“We have an army of youth today who can do much if they are properly directed and encouraged. . . . We want them to act a part in well-organized plans for helping other youth. Let all be so trained that they may rightly represent the truth, giving the reason of the hope that is within them, and honoring God in any branch of the work where they are qualified to labor” (White, 2005, p. 205).

“In the closing scenes of this earth’s history many of these children and youth will astonish people by their witness to the truth, which will be borne in simplicity, yet with spirit and power. They have been taught the fear of the Lord, and their hearts have been softened by a careful and prayerful study of the Bible. In the near future many children will be endued with the Spirit of God and will do a work in proclaiming the truth to the world that at that time cannot well be done by the older members of the church” (White, 1952, p. 489).

“When the youth give their hearts to God, our responsibility for them does not cease. They must be interested in the Lord’s work, and led to see that He expects them to do something to advance His cause. It is not enough to show how much needs to be done, and to urge the youth to act a part. They must be taught how to labor for the Master. They must be trained, disciplined, drilled, in the best methods of winning souls to Christ. Teach them to try in a quiet, unpretending way to help their young companions. Let different branches of missionary effort be systematically laid out, in which they may take part, and let them be given instruction and help. Thus they will learn to work for God” (White, 1915, p. 210).

To a retired minister: “You should not carry the burden of leading the church in meetings. Younger hands should do this, and you should not bear the responsibility. You should not feel that you are required to hold meetings yourself, having the charge in different places, for your mind and your physical strength are not equal to the task” (White, 1990, p. 126).

“Youthful talent, well organized and well trained, is needed in our churches. The youth will do something with their overflowing energies. Unless these energies are directed into right channels, they will be used by the youth in a way that will hurt their own spirituality, and prove an injury to those with whom they associate” (White, 1915, p. 211).

Comparison and Contrast of Adventist Youth Societies and Current Trends in Adventist Youth Ministry

Although nearly every facet of youth ministry today—Pathfinders, short-term mission trips, youth camps,

youth and young adult retreats, youth campmeeting programming—could be said to have sprung in some way from Warren and Fenner's dream in 1879, there are differences between the beginnings of Adventist youth organizations and youth ministries today.

In the early years of Adventism, youth work was often initiated by youth for the purpose of sharing Christ with their friends, first in their own communities and then extending to the world. The Societies' emphasis on personal revival combined with regular missionary activity buoyed the members, providing a strong sense of purpose, structure, and community.

Today's youth programming and ministries are usually adult-initiated and administered. Although there is still an underlying aim of evangelism, that focus is usually centered on evangelizing the youth of the church, rather than for the conversion of non-Adventist youth. In addition, the methodology for achieving the salvation of Adventist youth is more entertainment-oriented than it is organizing with the purpose of providing opportunities for youth to do sustained, systematic evangelism.

How Does the History of Adventist Youth Societies Impact Adventist Youth Ministry Today?

Youth societies in early Adventism sprang up as youth-initiated and youth-managed organizations in response to Christ's clear mandate to evangelize the world (Matthew 28:19-20). Although the response to the call to witness and save souls was strengthened, perhaps even awakened, by adults in Adventist congregations who shared this passion for the lost and by Ellen White's messages on youth organization, early Adventist Youth Societies were largely the outgrowth of youth commitment.

Toward the end of the period surveyed (1863-1903), adults took over the management of youth societies. Although every organization goes through periods of growth that includes some degree of institutionalization, this growth need not stifle the initial purpose for the organization if some plan is kept in place whereby the original purpose and vision is not obscured by bureaucracy or programming that is not contributive to the founding purpose. In the case of Adventist Youth Societies, the vision of reaching the world for Christ appears to have remained intact throughout the period surveyed.

Central organization of youth work could have produced lasting benefits, including reducing the disparity between youth groups, by providing a structure, educating and training youth and their leaders for evangelism, providing relevant and practical resources, and keeping youth groups aware of the soul-winning activities carried out in many areas.

Unfortunately, however, personal proclamation and verbal witness have been in serious decline in evangelical churches influenced by a post-modern culture. Adventist youth ministries may now be in danger of not only a loss of mission but a distortion, even reversal, of the original purpose for the establishment of youth groups (Dayton, 1944, p. 122).

In 2008, with occasional exceptions in the Hispanic and African American culture, there are no youth societies, no Missionary Volunteer Societies, and even Adventist Youth Societies are largely defunct. With the exception of student literature evangelism programs, on-going, non-anecdotal, systematic organization of youth, for the purpose of working for the lost, is largely missing from Adventist youth ministries. Though there is some evidence of informal small Bible study groups within the Adventist youth culture, much of today's youth ministry focuses on youth rallies, camporees, retreats, forums and camp meeting programming featuring dynamic preaching, drama, and culturally relevant gospel music, with little or no emphasis on organizing and training for soul-winning.

"For a long time, some leaders and analysts within Methodism have regretted the unfortunate tradeoffs experienced when Methodism went 'a whoring' after the respectability of the Presbyterians and Episcopalians and shifted its accent from lay ministry to professional ministry" (Logan, 1994, p. 18).

Although the transfer of youth ministry from youth to professionals may have affected the paradigm shift from evangelism to entertainment, that shift may not have been inevitable. Youth professionals could successfully re-pristinize evangelism in youth ministry if they again see themselves as coaches and mentors, training youth for actual soul-winning, rather than seeing themselves as primarily programmers of inward focused ministry. It seems evident from this study of youth groups in early Adventism that today's Adventist adolescents need more than entertainment or fast-moving programming to anchor them to Christ and to His church body.

"The problem with most Christian young people is that they have no game. We keep giving them all the things they need to do as Christians—read the Bible, have devotions, study, pray, do God's will, do the right thing—but they have no reasons to do all that. There's no game to use it in. They need a mission . . ." (Ford, 1998, p. 112).

The reason today's young people do not appear to have the same appetite for evangelism as evidenced by the members of early youth societies may be that they're getting little exercise in evangelism. Adventist youth in the 21st century, particularly in western culture, are often spiritual couch potatoes—filled with spiritual junk food,

over-entertained and under-challenged, bored, apathetic, sometimes appearing overtly rebellious. To appreciate the meat of the Word and the beauty of a living relationship with Christ, they must once again organize and seek training in order to experience the rejuvenating reality of evangelism. Our youth should be involved in movements to combat systemic injustice and activities that aid those who have the least in society, but they must also participate in the deepest mission of all—introducing their friends to Jesus and inviting them to make Jesus Lord of all their lives.

A correlated factor that may be impacting young Adventists to take a vacation from church is that our Adventist identity is in flux. There is an increasing trend toward pluralism regarding core doctrines on which there was general consensus in the earlier days of Adventist Youth Societies. Young Christians may thus be ambivalent on what it means to be authentic “leaven” that transforms society.

Until youth leaders truly internalize that our world is lost, without hope and without Christ, and mobilize our youth to be that army of workers who will not just look for but hasten the coming of Jesus by their efforts to heal the bodies, souls, and minds of enslaved men, women, youth, boys, and girls, we are simply treading water, running in place. It could even be argued that we are running backwards.

It is yet possible, however, that this generation of youth will recapture the vision of early Adventist Youth Societies and become that segment of laity who model, lead, and inspire the church at large to re-engage in house-to-house and heart-to-heart evangelism. Participating in mission trips to faraway places is usually beneficial, but that’s not enough. Youth need a local mission they can own. Perhaps the best antidote for young adult restlessness, anxiety, and meaninglessness is to work intergenerationally to “save souls.” As a consequence, not only could the proverbial generation gap be narrowed, the youth themselves could discover a renewed loyalty for God, His body, and His church.

With Paul, I see our youth and young adults learning with Christians of all ages to hate what they once loved, love what they once hated, and truly become new in Christ, through the energizing presence of the Holy Spirit. As this happens, our youth will lighten the earth with God’s glory: “Fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners” (Song of Solomon 6:10).

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