

WHEN THE CANARIES STOP SINGING

by Martin Weber

Abstract

Concerned about attrition of Adventist students attending secular campuses, we seek ways of inducing them to remain with us—unaware that their departure is due to systemic dysfunction in churches throughout North America. The causative factor of young adult attrition is judgmentalism resulting from a lack of knowing how to love. We have forgotten a core insight into the Great Controversy—that love requires freedom of choice, despite the inevitable risks. Paradoxically, our very concern about safeguarding the spirituality of our young adults generates a judgmental counterfeit of love that drives them away in a spirit of toxic anxiety.

Introduction

Before the days of modern technology, coal miners placed canaries in cages throughout their subterranean tunnels as an early warning against the invasion of carbon monoxide. The toxic gas often seeped into mines, odorless and thus undetected. The dying of songbirds provided an early warning that the miners were endangered in an atmosphere of systemic toxin. When the canaries stopped singing, it was the first sign that everybody in the mines was doomed unless they could get to fresh air.

For the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, the canaries are ceasing to sing. We are losing our young people, and our churches themselves are dying. Paul Richardson of the Center for Creative Ministry reports, “The median age for the Seventh-day Adventist community in North America, including the unbaptized children in church families, is 58. . . . Among native-born White and Black members, the median age is even higher.”¹

Symposium colleague Ed Dickerson cites another study of Adventists in North America which confirms that more than half of attending members are 58 years or older.² Richardson adds the chilling statement: “There are more than 1,000 local churches in the North American Division that have no children or teens at all.”³

Confronted with the loss of these songbirds, what should we do?

Many church leaders, concerned about losing our youth and young adults (Y&YAs), focus on what can be done to persuade them to stay with us—as if the solution to a noxious atmosphere is to develop a strain of poison-resistant victims.

Let us remember that the loss of our Y&YAs is evidence that our entire church system suffers from a toxic atmosphere; it’s just that Y&YAs are the most vulnerable to it. Their demise warns of impending doom for all. Our task is to identify what is poisoning our Y&YAs and then lead our whole church into life-giving fresh air.

I believe the toxin we suffer from is systemic judgmentalism, resulting from a lack of love. It’s not that we want to be unloving; on the contrary, we care deeply, as evidenced by how deeply our church invests in educating children from kindergarten through their college years. But we suffer from a misunderstanding of how to love that generates judgmentalism. How come? We have forgotten the major issue of the Great Controversy—that love requires freedom of choice, despite the inevitable risks. Thus, paradoxically, our very concern about safeguarding the spirituality of our young adults generates a coercive and judgmental counterfeit of love that drives them away in a spirit of toxic anxiety.

Good intentions do not guarantee good results. I may open my car door with no intention of denting yours, but the damage is done just the same—and I may not even realize that I caused your problem.

We will look for solutions to Y&YA attrition after documenting evidence of the problem and its causes.

Evidence of Systemic Judgmentalism

With Adventists in North America increasingly older in their demographic profile, we obviously suffer Y&YA attrition. We need not wonder why. ValueGenesis I and II documented that many Adventist youth have felt condemned and unloved by elder members. More recent studies indicate that judgmentalism persists.

In the previous report of this Symposium,⁴ Van G. Hurst, president of the Indiana Conference, asks: “What is causing Adventist youth to leave the local church?” He cites a non-scientific but broad-based study that lists a number of reasons. Here are the first 12 reasons given by the Y&YAs themselves:

- Conservative elderly people that criticize us.
- Older folks never let it go if you do mess up so that you will never feel accepted there again.
- Peer pressure is causing youth to leave.
- Pushy grown-ups spouting rules instead of a real message.
- Church is boring and often we have non-existent youth groups.
- The older people make you feel like a sinner and that you do nothing right.
- Adults freak out over the smallest things like clothing (they need to worry about more important stuff).
- People judging the youth the ways we dress.
- Church is boring with songs from the 1800’s that I’ve never heard.
- Crazy old people with really strict views.
- The majority of our views always seem to come from Ellen White.
- People are constantly looking down and judging the youth.

These future voices from the grave should command our attention. Hurst’s data are replicated in the DMin project of this author, a scientific study of attrition among adult children of SDA clergy. My study identified 40 attrition factors, 11 of them extreme. Nearly all of these could be negatively understood, directly or indirectly, as an expression of judgmentalism.⁵

Let me re-emphasize that our problem as Adventists is not that we don’t care about Y&YAs. In prayer meetings, our predominant concern is their attrition. Often tears are shed. No fair-minded observer could accuse these praying grandparents (most prayer meeting attendees seem to be older members) of not caring about their kids, young and old. And yet many prayer warriors—in the same spirit of concern that stimulates their intercession—form the core group of judgmentalists in the church. What makes them oppressive to Y&YAs is their confused idea of love as being a forceful “straight testimony” rather than relational mentoring.

Picture the Adventist grandmother who stays up past bedtime to bake cookies for the youth group; then when delivering those cookies she feels compelled to admonish (scold) the teens for what they are wearing or listening to. Her condemnation is done for the sake of Christian love. But talking about love—and even trying to love—is not the same as actually being loving. Even though our intentions are good, we need to learn what love is and how to express it.

Hollywood seems obsessed with love, although most see it as a counterfeit to the real thing. Could the same thing happen in church—not the world’s counterfeit of cheap love, but *a religious counterfeit of love in the form of costly intolerance?*

Learning to Love

Biblical love comes not only from a caring heart but an educated mind. Paul said, “It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, *with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent*” (Phil. 1: 9-10). Without knowledge and discernment that empowers us to approve what is excellent, our attempts to love may find a counterfeit expression in intolerance.

We see this in the *agape* love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. Verse 5 says of true love, “It does

not insist on its own way.” This includes selfishness, but that’s not all. There is another way in which people withhold love—insisting on having things their own way and expecting everyone else to agree with their own views of dress, diet, music, worship, and everything else. They canonize their convictions, and anyone out of compliance may become the target of judgmental correction, even coercion.

To further clarify the connection between knowledge and love, 1 Corinthians 13:9 warns, “Now we know in part.” Nobody but God knows everything, and true love recognizes this, not only individually but corporately. Loving members and churches humbly tolerate some variance in understanding and expressing Christian standards. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

The fact that love requires liberty lies at the heart of the Great Controversy. Despite its risks, the God of love extends freedom to His creation. Will we do the same? It might be that we need to experience God’s love more fully in order for us to share it in our churches and communities, including secular campuses. Liberty of conscience is vintage Adventist doctrine, so we, of all of Christians, ought to understand the need for it and promote it!

Another evidence that love is lacking is the toxic anxiety throughout our system. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18⁶). Besides the fear of freedom that robs us of love and causes judgmentalism, other systemic anxieties in North America Adventism are just as toxic, such as:

- Fear of culture—distancing ourselves from secular society
- Fear of man—intimidation by church bullies which empowers them
- Fear of truth—reluctance to journey on the road of theological discovery
- Fear of joy—so afraid of emotionalism that worship becomes lifeless
- Fear of job—career concerns so leaders are hirelings instead of shepherds
- Fear of funding—dread of financial crisis if benefactors become offended

Each of these systemic anxieties robs the church of its capacity to love. Each is worthy of further exploration for helpful remedies.

Conclusion

The alarming aging demographic profile of the Adventist Church in North America raises the question, “Are we killing our youth and young adults?” Are we blindly living in a toxic atmosphere, desperately in need of fresh air? God’s call to his endtime people might first be to cast out our systemic anxiety by a fresh wave of love. The liberation from the Spirit will make us such people. That’s when judgmentalism will cease and our young adults will have the freedom to sing their own song. That’s when students on secular campuses will have reason to bring their friends home to worship with them.

Endnotes

¹Martin, A. Allan. “Burst the Bystander Effect: Making a Discipling Difference with Young Adults.” in Roger Dudley, ed., *Ministering to Millennials: A Complete Report on the 180° Symposium* (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2009), 112. Hereafter cited as *Millennials*.

²Dickerson, Ed. “Suffer the Little Children (and the Young Adults),” in *Millennials*, 48.

³Martin, Ibid.

⁴Hurst, Van G. “Unity and Ministry Through the Massification of Adventism,” in *Millennials*, 85.

⁵Weber, Martin. “Resolving Young Adult Attrition,” in *Millennials*, 185ff.

⁶Unless noted, all scriptures are from the *English Standard Version*.

