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Three Reasons To Serve

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Abstract

Young people in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are in need of leadership creating effective strategies for protecting the youngsters from engaging in high risk behaviors along with finding effective methods of keeping these same youngsters churched. It is clear that God had answers to these problems long ago. A review of Matthew 25 clearly states that our purpose as Christians should be to serve individuals in need. When young people engage in service, they are more likely to be attracted to the church, get involved in the church, and stay in the church. Furthermore, service is associated with better grades in school and is effective in preventing a host of high-risk behaviors.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could identify a strategy to keep our youth well protected from high-risk behaviors while keeping them in the church?

As a church we have struggled with this. Although the exact percentage of our youth leaving the church is unknown, the number is unacceptably high. In addition, a substantial proportion of our youth engage in high-risk behaviors (Hopkins et al., 1998). It is absolutely essential that we address and successfully correct these two problems.

So, who knows how to do this? Who has the absolutely effective strategy to make this happen? The answer to that question is found in the Bible in an unmistakable teaching of Jesus. He knows the answer. He told us a long time ago how to do it. It is time for us to revisit His instructions and get busy with His strategy.

His Strategy

First, we must review what Jesus taught us. This is not a subtle suggestion but a direct description of what God's

people do. Adopting this strategy has eternal consequences. The imperative is not "maybe you should do this" but rather "get busy and do it now!" Here is Christ's counsel direct from Matthew 25:31-46 (*New International Version*):

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **33** He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. **35** For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, **36** I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you

something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?

40 “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

In His clear statement, Jesus reveals that His people, the righteous, *serve* others by meeting their needs! Responding to Jesus’ assurance that the kingdom has been prepared for us “since the creation of the world,” we

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show caring compassion and give assistance to all His people. This story from Jesus also provides us with a strategy for protecting our young people from high-risk behaviors while, at the same time, encouraging their retention in the church. *We serve others.*

This insight is not just about financially supporting projects that aid others. We serve others together with our youth.

Service activities may be defined as the assistance we give for the benefit of those living in our local community. God’s imperative is to feed, clothe, and protect those in need. We can safely expand on this to say that we should support, visit, aid, help, and comfort others who are in a position of need for any reason. But, “what on earth does service have to do with youth and high-risk behaviors or church retention?”

Service and High-Risk Behaviors

Our research and the research of others overwhelmingly confirm that when young people become involved in service to others, it changes their lives. As a result of service, youth are much more likely to engage in healthy pro-social behaviors. In the Harvard Education Letter, Senator John Glenn, Chairman of the National Commission on Service Learning, identified that more than 80% of schools with active service-learning programs (that is service that is part of the school curriculum) report that the majority of participating students improve their grade-point averages. Senator Glenn additionally stated that, “A study of a Springfield, MA, high school found the dropout rate plunged from 12 percent to one percent after service-learning was incorporated into the curriculum. The number of students going on to college increased by 22 percent and those achieving a grade point average of 3.0 or higher jumped from 12 percent to 40 percent.” Isn’t it

interesting that by following Jesus’ Matthew 25 directive, youth in our world benefit personally?

Involvement in service is also strongly related to a lower rate of engaging in high-risk behaviors. There is an indirect relationship in that higher grades are related to a lower rate of high-risk behaviors. Research also suggests that service has a direct relationship to avoiding high-risk behaviors. Douglas Kirby, a highly respected researcher, is engaged at the forefront of reviewing programs for effectiveness in delaying the initiation of sex plus identifying features related to successful and unsuccessful interventions. Kirby reported that service-learning programs among youth are effective in reducing adolescent pregnancy and early childbearing (Kirby, 2002). Research we have conducted in an Adventist college has documented that those engaged in community service are significantly less likely to engage in a wide variety of substance use and other high-risk behaviors. For example, youth who were involved in community service for four hours or more per month were 40% less likely to have used alcohol in the last year (Hopkins et al., 2008).

Service and Church Retention

In addition to promoting positive behaviors and protecting youth from high-risk behaviors, service is also highly associated with our young people being attracted to the church, getting involved in the church, and staying in the church.

In Roger Dudley’s initial analysis of the *Valuegenesis* research (Dudley & Gillespie, 1992), he reported “a value of service to others proved to be the most important predictor of a mature faith in this study” (page 279). The investigation that laid the foundation for the *Valuegenesis* project, presented in the North American Division’s “Risk and Promise” report, stated, “If faith is to grow, greater involvement in service and outreach activities needs to be fostered.”

There are three evident reasons for this clear correlation. First of all, young people tend to be drawn to organizations that make clear and positive demands on their membership. Tony Campolo says it like this: “Young people are not going to be attracted to a church that tries to entertain them, but they will be attracted to a church that calls them in a ministry to others” (Campolo, 1983, page 9). We can’t hope to involve our youth in the church unless they are first *attracted* to the church.

Service activities provide an active, winning picture of the church that is new to many youth. Wayne French, the chaplain of Avondale College in Australia, talks about “memory events,” life-changing activities which “dominate an adolescent’s horizon, so that he or she is fully immersed in the event and will never forget it or its message.” French emphasizes that “memory events are most powerful when

they are combined with service” (French, 2005). It is such events, French maintains, that connect young people to the church. Up to 80 % of the adolescents French surveyed commented that the events changed their perspective on the church (page 82) and provided a sense of belonging.

Secondly, service activities furnish the immediate opportunity to be involved in the church. Service skills are sharpened, leadership abilities are developed, and an environment is created in which a young person receives permission to explore his or her ministry gifts even with the possibility of failure (Gane, page 230). No better way exists for that involvement to be deepened. “We get to experience the joy of discovering the gifts God has given us to build up the body of Christ through service” (Case & Cornforth, 1995, p. 15).

Finally, service is so highly correlated with lasting commitment to the church because service constitutes one of those bedrock reference points to which we may always return when uncertainties assail us. Pulitzer Prize winning author, Robert Coles, reminds us that “an idealism exerted at one moment in life” can ground our faithfulness in later times of crisis. It is at those moments, Coles contends, that courage is affirmed, a moral life is lived to the fullest, compromises are shunned, and utterly unassailable principles are consistently upheld (Coles, 1993, page 256).

Service and Developing Relationships

One of the very special benefits emerging from service is the development of relationships. Being helpful to others allows one the opportunity to develop a relationship with those being served. Our research has demonstrated that excellent relationships lead to effective communication and positive behaviors. Forming a great relationship *first* enhances the believability of what one has to say and the impact of what one says.

A study among Caribbean adolescents—measuring sexual behavior and substance use—confirmed the link between relationships, effective communication, and risk reduction. When parents have an **excellent relationship** with their children, and when these same parents talk with their youth about sex and drugs, their children were at lower risk for engaging in high-risk behaviors as compared to youth who do not rate their relationship with their parents as excellent when these same parents talk to their youth about sex and drugs. (McBride et al., 2005).

Actually, Christ’s method was precisely the same. First, he formed relationships with people, then he said, “Follow me.” *The Ministry of Healing* clearly states: “Christ’s method *alone* will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He

showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow me’” (White, 1942, page 143).

The Nuts and Bolts of Service

There are three important steps in youth service. First, as church leaders, meet with youth and discuss with them a service program. Get the youth involved in looking for service opportunities and developing the program. Identify ways to get youth involved in service in your community, not just in your church. Second, go with them to perform the service. Simply sending your youth out alone to serve is not a good strategy. Experience the service together. This additionally gives you the opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with the youth, and we know from research that when youth have a trusting relationship with a key adult, these same youth are at lower risk for dangerous behaviors (Hopkins et al., 2007). Third, spend time in reflecting on the service activity. Talk about the experience.

Ideas for Service

First, pray a prayer that sounds something like this: “Lord, please give me the vision and perception to identify your children in need and opportunities to serve people. Please give me clarity to see opportunities for service.”

Service activities

should be regular, perhaps once or twice each week. They should be fairly brief and change often enough to keep youth interested in service. Do not plan to pick up the garbage on the highway for six hours each Sunday. While it is a good thing to pick up garbage, youth will

lose interest in this quickly. Consider identifying people who are in the hospital and visiting them with the intent of cheering up their day. Get involved with the Parks and Recreation Department in your hometown. Get your youth involved in your local food bank, distributing clothing and food to those in need. Stand with your youth at the door of a supermarket with a list of foods needed at the food bank. Pass out these lists to shoppers as they enter the store and then collect what they have purchased from the list as they leave. Young people can help sick people with yard chores. As a goal, plan on spending half an hour or so once or twice each week in service with youth. And, how about Pathfinders as a service organization?

“Get the youth involved in looking for service opportunities and developing the program. Identify ways to get youth involved in service in your community, not just in your church.”

Conclusion

As a people, we have often struggled with ideas about how to keep our youth involved and committed to our church. This article suggests that the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 provide the best program for youth retention. Scientific research provides strong support for the words of Jesus. Youth who are engaged in service are significantly more likely to engage in positive behaviors, avoid high-risk behaviors, and develop a mature Christian faith that keeps them committed to the church.

Service is not something we just send our youth to engage in. We must clearly understand what service is and what it can mean for our young people. If we want to encourage our youth in the never-ending battle with high-risk behaviors, if we want them to discover an active role in the church, and if we want them to remain vigorous contributors to our family of faith, we must recommit to leading them in a life of service. If we are willing to make this commitment on our part and work with our youth in developing service programs in our church, we can make a difference in their lives on this earth and, based on Matthew 25, for eternity!

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