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Allen Walshe

Andrews University, walshe@andrews.edu

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Transformational Youth Ministry

Allan Walshe

Director M.A. in Youth Ministry

Andrews University

Abstract

This paper will point out how deeply ingrained post-modern thinking has become in Western culture. It will remind us that our youth and young adults, who are post-modern, are not the enemy (as some would categorize them), but that they are 'the beloved of God.' We have been called and commissioned to reach them by the grace of God. This paper will argue that the church's response to our post-modern youth, if it is to be efficacious, will require a paradigm shift, from its predominantly information style toward a more relational model of ministry. This can be facilitated by restructuring the church and its youth/young adult program around the development of 'God Connections,' a radically different model of small group that focuses on authenticity, community building, and spiritual formation.

Introduction

Strong writers, poets, artists and social commentators have commented that times are changing. None of them, however, could probably have realized to what extent the emerging generational and cultural changes would dramatically recolor the landscape of society. Neither did the Seventh-day Adventist church

Our failure to recognize and respond to the challenges of the generational transition, from Baby Boomer to Generation X and the Millennial Generation, as well as the cultural shift from the Enlightenment – Modern era to the Emerging – Post-modern era, has meant that the church in the western world has ceased to grow, and many of its youth and young adults have disconnected.

Contextual Awareness

Gary Land, Professor of History and Chair of the Department of Historical and Political Science at Andrews University, noted in a paper he presented at a Bible conference at Avondale College, Australia, January 2004, "Seventh-day Adventism is characterized by a dominant rationalism" (Land, 2004). Land then went on to define what he meant by rationalism. "I am using this term to refer to a mind-set that establishes propositions on a basis of evidence or proofs, attempts to harmonize or systematize all propositions, and regards correct belief as essential" (Land, 2004). He used non-rational to describe "intuitive, emotional,

imaginative, and relational or personal means of seeking truth (Land, 2004). He did not see the non-rational as in any way contradictory or in opposition to reason but as a complimentary function.

That Adventism is characterized by an informational, propositional approach to Christianity is not surprising when one gives cognizance to the fact that we commenced in an era when doctrine and propositional truth were primary. Our church arose because its pioneers believed that there were Biblical truths being overlooked, misused, or misunderstood. We, therefore, saw ourselves as reformers, with the task of rationally convincing people of "present truth" using a propositional, informational methodology. It should be clearly stated here, however, that information is not to be neglected. Information is important as it is an essential foundation on which to build a relationship with God and a spiritual future. Without the information about God, doctrine, or eschatology that the Scriptures supply, we could easily make wrong assumptions about a relationship with God or be misled by false ideas about life or end time events.

Unfortunately, however, this early focus on a more propositional, informational approach to faith has become in many ways our modus operandi. Richard Rice, a professor of religion at Loma Linda University, and an astute observer of Adventism's style of ministry, concurs.

The purpose of our evangelist activities is to inform, to make people aware of things they need to know . . . this is the strategy of traditional Adventist evangelism. The classic evangelistic effort consists of several sermons or lectures designed to present ideas to people in a persuasive way. The goal is to convince them that the church's beliefs are true. (Rice, 2002)

There is little emphasis on discipleship during this process, and it is still more of a cognitive informational approach than a relational one. Kenneth Boa warns, "Discipleship is more than a cognitive dump; teaching and training are important components, but they should be imparted in a context of personal association and community" (Boa, 2001).

This informational model worked well for many years, but as the culture transitioned from modernism to post-modernism, we, as a church began to lose ground. We struggled, not only to interact with the culture in an engaging manner, but also to meet the needs of that segment of our own membership who were affected by the cultural shift, as well.

Living in the Past: Lack of Accounting for Societal Change

The cultural upheaval from modernity to post-modernity and now post post-modernity is with us, and it is real. Middleton and Walsh in their book *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be – Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* point out, "The modern project is in radical decline. Like the Tower of Babel described in Genesis 11, modernity has come to a grinding halt, its ideals unraveling, its accomplishments incomplete" (Middleton, 1995). Post-modernity and its extension, post post-modernity, are no longer merely part of academic theory; they are now part of reality. They have infiltrated life as we know it and are not only manifested in magazines, music, TV, and art, but also in the way people relate, communicate, and live their everyday lives. Despite this reality, however, Jimmy Long author of the book *Emerging Hope* claims, "Some in the Christian households of faith do not seem to realize that a major cultural shift is taking place" (Long, 1993). This has been true of the Adventist church, yet we can't afford to disregard or underestimate these changes.

Neither, says Eddie Gibbs,

Will a defensive stance suffice . . . what we are experiencing is not a short lived turbulence but the dawn of a new era? The transition from modernity to post-modernity represents a seismic shift that can result in churches becoming paralyzed in the midst of the shock

waves. The changes are deep-rooted, comprehensive, complex, unpredictable and global in their ramifications. (Gibb, 2000)

A Brief Overview of Some of the Characteristics of Post-modernity

Rejection of the Establishment

Current generations have experienced hurt, abuse, and betrayal from the establishment, which has led them to become skeptical. Scott Cowdell in his book *God's Next Big Thing* says, "In tune with post-modern skepticism there is a characteristic suspicion of institutions" (Cowdell, 2004). They no longer trust bureaucracies and hierarchies to the point that there is a positive resistance to "the establishment's" way of doing and seeing things. Post-modern culture has rejected the worldview of the establishment and is inventing its own.

Seeking Authenticity

Current generations are relationally orientated and seek authenticity. There has been a shift away from individualization to what Cowdell describes as "a sustained recovery of the virtues of friendship" (Cowdell, 2004). Also, "as a reaction against what they see as the self-serving perfidious establishment, "authenticity" among post-moderns is a valued commodity" (Jones, 2001).

View of Truth

Along with their disillusionment with the establishment there has been disenchantment with absolute truth. Eddie Gibb explains, "In the post modern culture there is a strong resistance to propositional statements dropped from above, that have to be accepted without examination and question" (Gibb, 2000). Many of those "certainties" were propagated by a hierarchical system that made dogmatic pronouncements, which the people adhered to; whereas, post-moderns are not dogmatic. They are not concerned to prove themselves right and others wrong.

From Individualism to Community

Post-modernism is also characterized by a shift from individualism to community. Relativism is not new, but, in the emerging post-modern world, it changes from individualistic relativism to community relativism, so that only those within their community have a right to comment on what is deemed to be "their" truth. Stanley Grenz underscores this. "Beliefs are held to be true within the context of the communities that espouse them" (Grenz, 1996).

In their rejection of institutions, bureaucracies, and hierarchies, post-moderns have cast themselves adrift

from the security of the establishment's belief systems. This has been a bold move as it is simple and safe to hold onto propositional dogma. To distance oneself from dogma can lead to complexity and insecurity. So post-moderns have sought to find security in the solidarity of community.

Interest in Spirituality

While post-modernity does provide very real challenges for the church, there are reasons to be optimistic. One of the positive aspects of the post-modern shift is that it is not devoid of spirituality. Babin and Iannone, in their book *The New Era of Religious Communication*, see in this movement a real "sensitivity to spiritual realities" (Babin, 1991). Eddie Gibb has noted that people are currently responding to their own inner call for a spiritual encounter. "Increasing numbers of people are already on a personal spiritual search for meaning . . . there is a hunger in people's hearts for the transcendent dimensions of life" (Gibb, 2000).

Furthermore, Tony Jones in his book *Soul Shaper*, makes this observation, "Our age is no different. People are still seeking. Young people are foremost among those seekers. The Internet generation is seeking – searches for God and spiritual matters are some of the most popular on the web" (Jones, 2003). There is, then, an openness to spirituality, and while it may not be spirituality in the sense that the church understands it, a spiritual hunger is there.

Challenges in Dealing with Youth Spirituality

One challenge is that many of the youth who attend religious services have a superficial faith. Christian Smith responding to a nationwide survey on youth spirituality divulges these disturbing trends in his book *Soul Searching*.

While the vast majority of U.S. teenagers identify themselves as Christians . . . a substantial minority of them regularly practice religious faith. Only four out of ten say they attend religious services weekly and are currently involved in a religious youth group. At the level of subjective consciousness, adolescence religious and spiritual understanding and concern seem to be generally very weak. Many say they simply have no religious beliefs. Others can articulate little more than what seems to be the most, paltry, trivial, tangential beliefs. Religion seems . . . for most of them quite unfocused, implicit, in the back ground, just part of the furniture (Smith, 2006).

"One challenge is that many of the youth who attend religious services have a superficial faith."

It is systemic. The church must also come to grips with the reality that this is not just a youth situation, but that adults are also infected by the post-modern mindset (Jones, 2001). This "is the most significant cultural shift we have seen in the last five hundred years. It is not a generational issue exclusive to Gen X or Millennials. In fact, it is fast becoming the adopted epistemology of all adults. Everyone in ministry will have to wrestle with this phenomenon" (Jones, 2001).

It is systemic, as it is a phenomenon that is not external to the church. Douglas Groothuis points out that various polls have shown that a high percentage of evangelical Christians have a post-modern mindset. Thus, these changes have not impacted just one segment of the population. It is a societal shift, which has effected youth as well as adults and the church as well as the unchurched.

A further challenge comes from Barna: "Our projections are, that unless things change significantly in the church and the culture, people in the emerging culture are less likely to accept Christ as their Savior than previous generations" (Long, 2004).

Again Christian Smith highlights that it is systemic. Youth and young adults are just responding to the way parents live their lives: "of parents whose faith is not important in their daily lives" only 2% of their youth report that faith is important in their lives (Smith, 2006). A further comment from Smith that underscores our problem 'is systemic,' is this, "in sum, therefore, we think the best 'rule of thumb' that parents might use to reckon their children's most likely outcomes is this, 'we'll get what we are'" (Smith, 2006).

The challenge for the Adventist church is that we now find ourselves facing a culture that does not seem to even speak the same language. If we had been awake to these changes earlier on when our church was still thriving, we could have more easily withstood the shocks that are associated with change. However the church's "sleep walking," although unintentional, means that we now stand at a critical juncture in our history, with few alternatives. We can stay with the formula that has worked so well for us in the past. We can disregard or even resist culture, batten down the cloister hatches, and get ready for a safe though dissatisfying and nonproductive ride. Alternatively, we can pay attention, listen, seek to understand post-modernity, and reframe our ministry to youth and young adults in harmony with these insights. This will not mean letting go of the truths that the church holds as fundamental, but it will mean finding new ways and new methodologies.

The church's response, if it is to be efficacious, will require a paradigm shift from its predominately informational style, toward a more relational/transformational model of ministry.

What Do They Want?

What is it they (our youth and young adults) want? What is it that we want for them? At a physical level they want activity, they want fun, and they want friendship; therefore some of the components of our youth and young adult ministry program need to meet those needs. Outdoor camps, backpacking trips, games nights, outings, sporting events, mission trips, youth Sabbath school, Friday night fellowship, community building activities.

But they also want **'something more.'** They want to know God at a deep level. They are open to spirituality; many of them are theistic. At an undiscovered level they sense that, bidden or unbidden, God is present, and they want to become aware of Him.

What Do, We Want for Them?

We want for them, not just to know **about God**, but to **know God**, at a deep personal level. We want them to have attentiveness to God, receptivity to the Holy Spirit, and a deepening relationship with Jesus. Transformational youth ministry is not about superficialities. It is about helping youth and young adults become aware of the presence of God. It is about helping them become alive in Jesus. Mark Yaconelli puts it this way: "This generation is longing for relationship, experience, passion, wonder, creativity, and spontaneity. In other words they want to go past where 'the sidewalk ends.' They long for the place just beyond words, the shore of discovery. In other words, they are looking for Jesus. What else do we need to know?" (Yaconelli, 2006). If we are prepared to live and model it, then mentor, listen, notice, and relate, they will be more open to a deep, transforming relationship with God.

How Could a Transformational Model of Youth Ministry Be Facilitated?

This discussion on post-modernism provides the context from which we can draw our model for transformational youth ministry. There are three characteristic of post-modernity which provide an open opportunity for ministering to the youth and young adults in a transformational way. Their desire for:

- community
- authenticity
- spirituality

We will explore this triptych and examine how they provide ministry opportunities for transformation.

Community

The question then is how can we build community? Ralph Neighbor has the answer: "Community can occur most completely only in small groups" (Neighbor, 1990). Some may say we have tried small groups, and they were not sustainable. The reason that Adventist small groups are not sustainable is that they are based on an informational model; therefore people won't continue to come. Jimmy Long supports this reasoning in his book *Emerging Hope*. "Most Christian small groups primarily pursued an intellectual understanding of the Christian faith and scanted the relational dimension . . . they were spent in a heady Bible study that emphasized the mind over the heart" (Long, 1993).

The kind of community that post modern youth and young adults want is not built by sharing information, even from Scripture, as important as that is. Scripture should always be used in a small group, but, if other components are missing, community will not be experienced. "The essential elements of community include interpersonal commitments and a **sense of belonging**. Community takes place when there is a shared life" (Neighbor, 1990). If we are to build post-modern community, we need to become real people to each other; our masks need to be removed in order for us to develop the **authenticity** that is prized by post-modern youth.

KEY POINT: A Transformational Model of Youth Ministry will be developed by the training of 'Process Orientated' small group leaders to facilitate the community-building spiritual formation groups described below.

An effective way to provide transformational ministry for youth and young adults in the Adventist church is through 'God Connections,' a radically different model of small group which focuses on community building, authenticity, and spiritual formation.

What Does a 'God Connections' Small Group Look Like?

There will be a number of unique characteristics in a God Connections small group that will accelerate spiritual growth and develop authenticity and community. They will operate on a ten-week cycle, they will be closed groups, they will operate a trust cycle, communication skills will be taught, they will operate on a contract, and they will model and teach devotional habits/spiritual disciplines.

A God Connections / spiritual formation group will be one where:

- Issues of faith can be wrestled with, not extinguished.
- Spiritual formation will not only be fostered but have high priority.
- The devotional habits will be taught and explored together.
- Communication and listening skills will be practiced.

- Reciprocal trust and openness will occur.
- The Bible will be used to enrich relationship and community rather than to merely gain information.

God Connection Small Group Model

- Group cycle--the group will meet for 10 weeks
- Group will be a closed group for the following reasons
 1. To build trust within the group by activating and honoring the trust cycle
 2. It provides a hothouse experience for rapid interpersonal and spiritual growth
 3. It allows for progression through the three levels of interpersonal relationship to community
 4. Closed groups are intensely transformational. They produce authentic people who become magnets to the post-modern generation
- The group will operate on a covenant building contract around issues that will develop trust, authenticity, community, and personal spirituality.

Authenticity

Foundational to the development of this style of community building small group will be the learning, honing, and then modeling of the interpersonal skills that bring about openness, transparency, and bonding between group members.

Devotional Habits/Spiritual Disciplines

A fundamental reason for the development of a God Connections/spiritual formation group is to provide opportunity for youth and young adults to learn, to experience, and to practice the devotional habits (spiritual disciplines) that will lead them into a transforming relationship with God. The devotional habits/ disciplines are about positioning ourselves so that God can gain access to our minds and hearts.

In the group we divide the devotional habits into two sections: Habits of disengagement (solitude, silence, and contemplation) and habits of engagement, (conversational prayer, attributes of praise, and spiritual reading). As Adventists we often talk about experimental religion. Young people love experimenting, especially with things that draw them closer to God. Each week in the small group they will be encouraged to use the devotional habits such as contemplative Bible reading or conversational prayer. Then there will be opportunity each week to share their experiences of personal and spiritual growth. As we train group leaders to facilitate these groups we will see young peoples' lives being transformed as they participate, experience true community, authenticity, and spiritual growth.

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