

PETR ČINČALA

Genuine Discipleship Empowered by Acceptance: A Case Study —Working with Youth

Tim would always sit quietly in the church as a first-born, obedient pastor's kid. He did all of the things a "good PK" should do. He started to play the violin when he was seven years old. Two years later, however, he asked his parents to let him learn to play drums. When he was 12 years old, a rebellion hit and he began struggling; however, he still did things against his own will just for his parents, including attending church. At age 14, he started his own music band called "Fake City" with three other friends from his public school. They played Pop Punk music just for fun. His local Seventh-day Adventist church allowed them to use their Generations Family Outreach Center, but it almost seemed as if Tim was using music to get away from the church and himself in the world. However, God was about to interfere in a miraculous way.

Working with youth is an "unknown" variable that has puzzled researchers and church leaders for at least several decades. A number of research studies have been conducted to clarify the reasons why young people increasingly leave the church. The goal of the studies is to ultimately help reverse the trend. Yet in spite of extensive research "about half of teenagers who grow up in Adventist Families in North America have left the church by their mid-20s" (Sahlin 2013:24). Teenagers who left the church grew up in a world very different from their parent's world. How can the Adventist Church reach its young people and more importantly, how can it disciple them to follow Jesus in the context of today's culture? This article draws practical implications from numerous research findings and describes a few insights gathered from mission work among youth who grew up in the church and those outside the church in a secular European environment.

After some time Pavel, who played bass guitar in “Fake City,” noticed Tim was different than the other members of the group. He did not drink alcohol or smoke marijuana, and that got Pavel’s attention. He found out Tim was a Christian, and that the Family Outreach Center where the group played was a Christian endeavor. He wanted to know more. One day Tim came to his dad (the pastor) and asked if he could borrow a Bible for his friend, but he added “Dad, don’t talk or try to persuade my friend like you do with other people. Just let him read the Bible on his own!”

Disciplining youth is a unique discipline in itself. When focusing on discipleship in other cultures or among people from other world religions, missionaries tend to be more open than when church members work with local youth. The youth in most Western countries are greatly misunderstood and underestimated. They are not just in a different culture, they live in a different world. As Leonard Sweet noted early in the new millennium, young people are less interested in copying existing knowledge and more interested in contributing something themselves, as they have different sources of learning. Often these sources of learning are, in fact, themselves (2001:12, 13).

Tim’s dad did not talk with Pavel; however, about a year later, Pavel reached out to him on Facebook. Pavel asked Tim’s dad for a meeting to talk about differences between various Christian denominations. At that time (around December 2010) Pavel had read the Bible and googled enough information to know that he wanted to follow Jesus and become a Christian—specifically a Seventh-day Adventist Christian.

Often we forget that young people process information differently. In the present “World Wide Web society,” there has been a massive shift in the culture and worldview of the emerging generation. Young people live in a different culture and world than do those Christians who want to teach them about God. Back in 2001, Sweet boldly claimed young people have built a new world from scratch apart from the church because the church refused to rehear the gospel in any other than the mother tongue of previous generations (2001:27-33). The gap between church and youth has only widened since then. Fifteen years later, the world is even more different and the church is still holding onto the ways of doing church in their generation.

Tim and Pavel passively attended the local church plant on Sabbath meetings in the Family Outreach Center. The newly converted Pavel, however, dreamed of reaching more young people—especially after he had learned about the purpose of the center. As a result, Pavel and some of his friends got involved in various outreach events, such as a Free Hugs campaign. They enjoyed themselves and had fun. They bonded together as they saw various responses of people coming in contact with Christ. Some people on the street looked at them suspiciously, but

those in nearby shops who had to work over the holidays appreciated receiving free hugs. This only inspired Pavel and his friends to want to do more!

Two recent studies among Seventh-day Adventist Pathfinders and other youth (Institute of Church Ministry 2015a and 2015b) showed that those who attend Seventh-day Adventist schools adhere much more closely to Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and the Adventist lifestyle than those attending public schools. This is great news, with one exception—children without any friends besides those within the church have a hard time relating to those outside their church world. Once they enter the world as adults, they either become “outsiders” (held hostages by a world that used to be), or they experience cultural shock, since they have to learn how to live in a very different world than they were raised in.

The youth leaders from several local churches of different denominations got together and planned a major outreach event. The event, entitled Exit Tour 2012, used preventive lectures in schools, popular music by foreign Christian bands, and incorporated the band’s evangelistic testimony. The Family Outreach Center supported this event because it was a meaningful way to reach out to young people in the local community. During school days the group visited local public high schools, shared music, and had fun. Then the students were invited to come for follow-up activities in the afternoons. They were also invited to a major Christian rock concert on Friday evening in a concert hall. Between the songs during the concert, the Californian Christian rock band shared testimonies about their faith and at the end of the performance, the young people were asked to give their life to Jesus and to pray the sinner’s prayer for the first time.

The huge gap between the old way of witnessing and this new approach easily causes many to feel totally disconnected. Teenagers in many cases are not leaving their faith in God when they step away from the church. However, the church does not make sense to them anymore. It does not feed their spiritual hunger. For them, attending church and coming to Christ are two very different things. They feel that the way the church interprets and applies the Bible through dogmas is obsolete. Jesus dwelt among people—he incarnated; however, local churches often fail to incarnate the gospel among young people in their communities.

At that time, eight students including Tim and Pavel formed a small group and started to meet once a week to talk about life issues and to inspire each other to grow spiritually. Soon after, in the summer of 2012, four of these young people were baptized and started to meet Sabbath morning to worship together as well. They also reached out to their friends and encouraged them to attend.

Experienced church planter Peter Roennfeldt shared during one of his lay-mission trainings/missional seminars in Europe this observation: Churches that set their primary mission focus on reaching their youth tend to end up losing their youth. However, churches that focus on living

out Jesus' Great Commission and seeking to save the lost experience the joy of their young people joining them in their mission.

One of the challenges Tim's local church faced during the youth outreach program was that the young people had grown away from a traditional church. Even the outreach church plant was not a place they could connect with—it was too small, too traditional, and there were not enough interpersonal attachments to the members of that body. The adults did not speak their language and did not use relevant ways of communication for the youth. Since the youth were holding great outreach events and there were dozens of their peers who were interested to learn more, the church leaders encouraged them to start their own church fellowship in the form of a youth cell church.

The church often falls short—particularly in terms of discipling young people. There is generally a great emphasis on education and passing on information in modern societies. Children and youth are bombarded with information every day, both in school and on all their devices. As a result, they are less likely to eagerly receive Bible information or to admire the beautiful logic of God's Truth. Their spiritual hunger is more geared towards experiencing positive emotions, specifically that of unconditional love. They acquire information through threads of hopes, feelings, events, dreams, sayings, facts, observations, stories, and worries—simply through experiences of everyday life. As a result, ideas are prized “less for their content or ‘truthfulness’ than for their energy, vitality, joy, and their ability to tickle the soul” (Sweet 2001:66).

Youth Generation (the name of the youth cell church) developed its own leadership. After their Sabbath worship service, they orchestrated their own events. Sometimes on Saturday afternoons they might hang out in someone's back yard swimming pool having fun together, while also allowing time to listen to a story from the Bible. Other times they might participate in street evangelism followed by a sleep over in the Outreach Center. For Christmas 2012, they visited homeless people, not only sharing food with them, but also their faith and literature as well.

Working with both church and secular youth in Central Europe helped the church I was working with get a grasp of what “genuine discipleship” requires. We found that discipleship among young people happened in so many ways that were way outside the comfort zone of typical or traditional churches. We initially drew inspiration from looking at Jesus—his actions and teachings. When he called his young disciples to his school, he invited them to be with him outside the “classroom” or “youth chapel,” beyond merely “business hours.” He did this so that they could connect with him personally, getting to know who he was, how he lived, and how he truly desired their good. It was his way to win their confidence and enter their private lives as one who passionately cared and who therefore was able to minister to their needs. He would take them to a wedding

party, to a banquet, out into nature; he was willing to spend leisure time with them. By creating a close-knit community he carefully prepared the soil of his students' hearts.

As all of this was happening with the Youth cell group, the music band, formerly known as Fake City—including band members Tim and Pavel—was transformed and renamed itself “Home for Real.” Their mission also shifted from simply creating music to building bridges with secular teenagers. Although the music style was definitely on the edge (it was considered unacceptable by many Christians), the message of the songs was spiritual, reaching young people who were far away from the church and touching their hearts (notice the message in the lyrics of one of their songs).

Verse 1

The first floor in my home is based on trust, love, and friendship,
 It cannot be broken, nothing is stronger than those three.
 I'm gonna make it clear and I'm not done with it,
 And I'm sure you wanna find out what it was that gave them the key.
 Well, there's no lock on the door up the stairs,
 That leads you deeper than you ever wanted; I swear,
 If you found this key I would welcome you in my home,
 Accept my trust, my love,
 My love with all my heart.

Chorus

I guess this is the time when falling for my closest friends is not a crime.
 And everything I feel and everything I wanna give you,
 Is my heart based on understanding and truth.

Verse 2

True love doesn't need any deeds;
 “But eyes are blind; one must look with the heart!”
 You have a duty, you have to keep the promise,
 Protect your home, beloved bros and sis!
 It fills my life!
 It makes my days, it makes me!

To listen to this song, check out <https://youtu.be/RKtwrxcHWV8> You can find out more about the band, Home For Real, on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/HomeForReal>

Even when Jesus taught, he did not limit his teaching to just one closed space. He would teach his disciples in synagogue, in the Temple, out in the grain fields, and in all sorts of other unconventional spaces. One day he

taught on the shore and then, because there too many people, he jumped into a boat (Matt 13:2; Mark 3:9). He used parables so that people could better relate to his message. He picked up images “like a magnet does paperclips” (Sweet 2001:81), allowing his followers to learn by using all their senses. Paradoxically, his illustrations came from everyday life and yet they did not always make immediate sense and remained mysterious for most of the hearers (Matt 13:13-15). Jesus provoked people’s thinking, putting a bug in their heads so to speak, so that his words would stick in their minds and awake interest to hear more. His words appealed not merely to the intellect, but most importantly to the hearts of his listeners. Perhaps our post-factual culture, driven by emotions and likes, may need Jesus’ emotional appeal once again.

Clearly, God was able to use even the “wild” music in rock clubs where ordinary Christians would never go and where traditional and usual means of outreach would never have worked. One of the musicians in Home for Real left the band because he did not feel comfortable with the group following Jesus. (It must be noted that Home for Real received critiques from some of their Adventist peers; the band had to be reminded to remain focused on their mission and not to seek approval from the church, but only from God.)

If someone teaches the most intellectually sound lesson from the Bible but does not radiate God’s love and if the life of that person does not resonate with the words, few teens will stay around to listen and learn. If teenagers do not feel welcome, accepted, and connected again, they often will not choose to stay and listen. When teaching doctrines from the Bible, typical Christians use language that is often filled with abstraction and absolutes, and thus their words lose power to transform. The young generation processes information more through images than through words. Young people today also learn by a variety of sensory experiences: listening, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting, as well as thinking. Words for them are more powerful when connected with images, and intellectual concepts gain strength in their world when connected with a passionate experience. Using different media, both audial and visual, enhances their ability to remember and perceive the depth of ideas (provided these approaches are a means to ignite a passion for Jesus and are not an end in themselves).

The Home for Real band adhered to the so-called “Straight Edge” movement; the members were committed to no smoking, no alcohol, no drugs, no sex outside marriage, and to strict vegetarianism (List of People 2016). One may wonder why “Straight Edge?” Why not follow the less stringent teachings of the Bible or Ellen White? Perhaps they did this to offer a practical demonstration of a contrast with the lifestyle of most young people today. Just recently, one of them shared a story of how he became committed to paying tithe. Interestingly, he made a decision to

pay tithes because he heard an inspiring speech by leadership guru John Maxwell on a podcast. Apparently, although the youth was part of a Bible study group, he needed more time to “discover” biblical truth on his own, through another channel other than simply a church worship service or study group.

Researchers from the Barna Group have noted the following:

While Adventists seem to place great importance on outward behavior, such behavior is a poor predictor of their relationship with Christ. Time and again we hear from young adults who are deepening their relationship with Christ (and people in the church) during a time when their outward behaviors are not in conformity to the church. In many cases they will later become further committed to the life-style standards of Adventist doctrine, but only after internalizing them rather than conforming to them. (2013)

Over and over again the leaders of this youth outreach endeavor saw how the relational and emotional bond was the alpha and omega that allowed young people to be disciplined. Two daughters of lay leaders in the local Adventist Church started to hang out with Youth Generation. They got involved and supported both the youth outreach program and the Sabbath meetings. Later on, these young women decided to be baptized. Joining them in baptism was another young lady who had become part of the group by visiting the Family Outreach Center for a preventive lecture on Sex, HIV, and Relationships.

One of the challenges youth outreach programs face is that older, fellow church members express their well-meant expectations in ways that communicate condemnation and rejection. Through Christ’s teaching and actions, Jesus conveyed God’s unconditional love. He came to save the lost and no one who came to him was (or is) rejected (John 6:37). Genuine discipleship is therefore empowered by acceptance. For young people, discipleship is more about experiencing love than about church doctrines. Discipleship requires time and a personal investment. It is messy and requires older members in the faith to be willing to get dirty by interacting with people’s lives that are broken and messed up.

One would expect the teenage children of the local Adventist Church to join their parent’s church when they decided to be baptized. However, as those two girls prepared for baptism they no longer felt connected with their parent’s church. According to their testimony, joining the youth cell group helped them open their hearts to Jesus and helped them grow spiritually. Because of this, their baptism was their public statement to join and become a part of the youth cell group. Three years later (in 2016), these young women are still actively involved: one is back in the local church of her parents, the other is with an outreach church, and the new believer goes to church once a month in a new location where she recently moved.

One of the lessons learned from this experience is that if the youth are

allowed and encouraged to meaningfully participate in the mission and life of their church, they often have a much richer and more meaningful learning experience. Young people do not like to be considered a *mission project*; they like to be on a mission *with us*. Faith that remains a mere intellectual exercise is boring for them. Young people are attracted to faith in action, faith that works in the real world, faith that tangibly transforms their own lives and helps them live and love well. When *graduation time* arrived for Peter, Christ's disciple, he was surprisingly not tested about his knowledge of doctrines, rather his test was about his character and love for Jesus (John 21:15-17). This is the authentic type of faith for which today's youth yearn.

Although the Youth Generation adopted Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, their emphases and expressions were different. Learning about God was important to them, but not all of them were involved in deep Bible study or learning theological doctrines as one might have wished. In a survey, their highest ranked priorities for Sabbath were "to be with people I love," "to feel God's presence," and "to sing songs and praises." Unlike previous generations, they were finding their greatest inspiration during their worship service by a pleasant atmosphere.

We often forget that Jesus defined mission as a process of discipleship and vice versa—discipleship is made real through the process of mission. The means by which young people are discipled is by baptism (acceptance to God's family) and by learning and following what Jesus taught (Matt 28:18-20). It all starts by simply belonging. In our work with secular youth, we have learned that discipleship begins prior to conversion, not the other way around. Discipleship involves participation in community prior to even beginning the conversion process—participation and experience prior to conversion; and even participation in mission prior to conversion (Stetzer and Putman 2006:102-104).

Due to transitions and transfers, Youth Generation no longer meets weekly but continues to connect and encourage the members through a closed group on Facebook. Some have joined existing local churches; others have been able to connect with local churches and are loosely connected with the group as their spiritual foster family. Pavel is attending seminary and studying theology (2016). Tim is actively involved in music ministry in a local church.

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Petr Činčala, MDiv, MSW, PhD, married, four children, served as a freelance missionary among Czech Atheists for 10 years, presently works at Andrews University as a director of the Institute of Church Ministry, assistant Professor of World Mission, Director of NCD America, Executive Editor - *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.