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Give them a fighting chance¹

Our church cannot be immune to new ideas, new goals, and new plans. We talk about these new ideas, goals, and plans through mission and vision. When God gives a vision for ministry, you know it is of God because the vision outlives you.

Christian education is a God-given vision. A God-given vision does not die with you; neither does it rest on your wallet or pocketbook. I have never had a vision for ministry that I could afford. If I could afford it, then I would say, “I did it.” So God makes sure I cannot afford it, and you cannot afford it; so when God does it, we can say, “God did it!” If it’s God’s will, then it’s God’s bill. If it’s God’s choice, then it’s God’s invoice. That is Christian education.

Our world is stricken with many societal ills that are plaguing our young people. When we talk about ministry and the gospel message to boys and girls, and our young people, we can’t help but think of Adventist Christian education. The servant of the Lord says, “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, ‘other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’ 1 Corinthians 3:11.”²

A hospital, not a hospice

Yet the interest and support for Christian education is waning.³ We

must do something about it. Our vision for ministry, our methods, our manner, our action plans for the future of this church must center on effectively reaching our children, youth, and young adults. If not, we die.

The church is a hospital; it is not a hospice. A hospice tries to make you comfortable before you die; a hospital tries to make you well so that you do not die. We have got to make ministry to our children, youth, and young adults a priority, because we are not here to make the church a comfortable place to die. This is not to displace our senior adults or anybody else. Young people stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before them. But this is to acknowledge the need to intentionally reach our youth; because Satan is trying to destroy them.

What do I mean?

In the first instance, young people today are exposed earlier than ever to illegal drugs. Based on a 2007 survey by the Centers for Disease Control, 45 percent of high school students nationwide drank alcohol and 19.7 percent smoked pot during a one-month period. According to the same survey, nearly 50 percent of all young people between the ages of 12 and 17 said it would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to get marijuana. One in five said it would be easy to get cocaine, and one in ten said it would be easy to get heroin. It’s not just happening in the world, it’s also happening in the church. Whatever you are looking for,

you will find it—and even at a Christian school.⁴

Beliefs

In a study conducted by the Barna Group for the Adventist Church in 2013, 17 percent of all Adventist young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 feel it is OK to use illegal drugs, 26 percent think it is OK to engage in premarital sex, 44 percent feel that it is OK to drink alcoholic beverages, and 50 percent do not feel modesty is important.⁵

Millennials—persons who have reached adulthood in the twenty-first century—make up 26 percent of the United States’ population but only 14 percent of the Adventist population in the United States. The average age of a United States’ resident is 35, while the average age of an Adventist in the United States is 61. We desperately need our young people.

In the last eight years, 33 percent of our Seventh-day Adventist members in the North American Division have left the church. Of those who have left, 63 percent were young adults, and we are sitting around debating about music and arguing about drums, women in ministry, and what time the young people get to church. I’m just praising God that they’re singing about God *in* church.

Suffer the little children

Some people say, “It’s the shaking time. This is what’s going to happen right before the Lord comes. The youth are going to leave the church. Let’s just

give up.” No, we can’t give up. We have to fight for our kids. Fight for our young people. Fight for our young adults. Give them a fighting chance.

These are our children. These are our grandchildren. Yes, their music is loud. Yes, their hair is red, yellow, black, and white. Yes, their dresses are sometimes too short. Yes, they have hats on in church when they need to take them off. But we are not going to give up on them. We’ve got to fight for them. Our children are a heritage from the Lord. The devil cannot, will not, shall not, have our young people. Jesus

old enough to be lost, then they’re old enough to be saved.”

In the second instance, the passage says, “And they brought young children to Him, *that He should touch them*” (v. 13, KJ21; emphasis supplied). The people wanted Jesus to touch and bless the children. But the passage continues, “And His disciples rebuked those that brought them.” The disciples, Christ’s followers, Christ’s ambassadors, church people, thought that Jesus should be focused on the adults and not give so much attention to the children. The disciples were

give money to the church. You don’t contribute to the church.” “You’re a liability, not an asset. You’re an expense, not a source of revenue, you should be seen and not heard.”

Without realizing it, we are keeping our young people away from Jesus. The children are not able to get to the house of God; the youth and young adults don’t want to get there. The world is full of enough hindrances for our children—drugs, alcohol, sexual perversions, violence, bad influences, and peer pressure—to keep them out. Let’s not help the world. Give our

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said in Mark 10:14, “ ‘Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. . . . Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in’ ” (*The Message*).

In the first instance, the passage says, “And they brought young children to Him” (v. 13, KJ21). God is calling us to be sensitive to the spiritual welfare of all children, not just our own. All of our children need Christian education. And we are not pushing them off on to something that’s inferior. The research is clear: “In all grades, in schools of all sizes, students in Adventist schools outperformed the national average in all subjects.”⁶ Some parents prefer to wait until their children are old enough to decide for themselves about spiritual things, yet they don’t let them wait until they are old enough to decide for themselves if they should go to school, go to the doctor, or clean their room. One pastor states, “If they’re

trying to keep the children away from Jesus. Sometimes, without realizing it, we keep the children away from Jesus. They can’t drive to Sabbath School. They can’t drive to Adventist Youth Ministries. They can’t drive to choir rehearsal. They can’t drive to Pathfinders or Adventurers. And they can’t drive to our schools.

We say, “I’m too tired. Nothing’s really going on over there. You don’t have to go.”

What we do not realize is that we are keeping them away from Jesus. Because if they can’t get to God’s house, how are they going to know about Jesus? But not just the children; we are keeping the youth and young adults away from Jesus, too, and we don’t even realize it.

We say, “You can sing only one style of music.” “You can’t clap in here.” “You can’t usher.” “You can’t serve on the pulpit.” “We’ve been doing it this way for years, and we’re going to keep doing it this way.” “You don’t

children, our youth, and our young adults a fighting chance.

Age of decision

When we invest in our children, we are investing in the kingdom. Not only that, what we invest in our children we are investing in the kingdom of God. Eighty-three percent of those who come to know the Lord do so before the age of 18. In fact, 2 out of every 3 solid Christians make the decision for Christ between the ages of 13 and 19. If the Lord delays His coming, where will this church be in 20 years if we don’t invest in our young people today? We invest in houses that get eaten by termites, burned down, or blown away in a tornado or hurricane. We invest in cars that rust, break down, and get crushed for scrap metal. We invest in clothes that go out of style, get too small, or get too big. But what we invest in our children, young people, and young adults will count for eternity.

This church was started by young people, and the servant of the Lord says it will be finished by young people. “With such an army of workers as our youth, rightly trained, might furnish, how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Saviour might be carried to the whole world!”⁷ Serving the Lord isn’t just for the older folks. Serving the Lord is for young folks too. Jesus put the disciples in their place: *beneath* the children. He stated, “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein” (Mark 10:15, KJV).

Christian education and ministry to youth cannot be taken lightly. We are losing our youth to the many false religions of drugs, alcohol, gangs, sexuality, homosexuality, and the lifestyles of this world. Old forms of teaching no longer have an effect on our young people. The way you found Jesus may not be the way a young person finds Jesus. The way your mother came in may not be the way you came in. The way you came in may not be the way your child comes in. You cannot do eight-track ministry in an Internet-downloaded society. We’re up there preaching and talking, and they sit in the pews and distract themselves on their phones, on the Internet, on Twitter, because they either find the message boring or of no interest. Don’t misunderstand: there is nothing wrong with our message, the message remains the same, but the methods must be different.

People are tired of revelation without relevance. They are tired of seeing the emphasis of policy placed over the needs of people. They are getting tired of being unable to come to a church where they cannot share their burdens and problems simply because they are afraid of what others might say if they come clean. People want real, authentic, life-changing, soul-saving, scratching-where-the-people-itch ministry.

Messages to young people

Young people often say, “I’m not going to church because those people

don’t understand and they’re not trying to understand.” Tradition always puts the institution higher in importance than the individual. Tradition puts religion above relationship, the law before love, and the commandments before Christ; when, in reality, we are to keep the commandments because of Christ.

Jesus died for people: young, old, all people. So the passage closes by saying, “And He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:16, KJ21). Jesus blessed them. He blessed the children. He blessed the young people.

Now the first part of this message was primarily for the young at heart. But the final part of this message is for the young. Young people, God wants to put His hands on you and bless you. Catholic film writer Martin Doblmeier said that Adventist education is superior; he made a movie about it.⁸ But young people want a taste of the church and a taste of the world. You can’t have God’s hands on you and Satan’s hands on you at the same time. You can’t be in church on Saturday morning and then be in the club on Saturday night. You can’t have a Bible in your hand during the worship and then have a marijuana joint in your hand during the week. You can’t take pictures in the lobby after church and post them on Instagram for your friends to see and then take pictures in your bathroom at night and post them on Snapchat when you think only one person will see.

Young people, check your behavior and your appearance. Young men, you can’t praise God in church and curse people in the week. Young ladies, you can’t dress holy and saintly in church and then dress loose and light during the week. Don’t follow the world’s standards. “Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world.” Trust God. Satan is no match for Jesus.

When on this earth, Satan threw his best shots at Jesus and never could win. He threw disease at Jesus, but Jesus said, “By My stripes ye are healed.” He threw temptation at

Jesus, but Jesus said, “Not My will but my Father’s will be done.” He threw fame at Jesus, but Jesus said, “You will worship God alone.” He threw the depressed and hopeless and the addicted at Jesus, but Jesus said, “You are whole.” He threw hatred at Jesus, but Jesus said, “Father, forgive them.”

He threw storms at Jesus, but Jesus said, “Peace be still.” He threw death at Jesus, but Jesus said, “Lazarus, come forth.” What a mighty God we serve.

Whatever Satan may have, Jesus has more. He has given us the home, the church—and the school. Do not let anything keep our children, youth, or young adults away from Christian education. Whatever the obstacle or objection, Jesus is the overcomer. Nehemiah said, “ ‘Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes’ ” (Neh. 4:14, NIV).

Older folk, give our young people a fighting chance. Young folk, don’t give up, don’t give in. Hang on in there. Give yourselves a fighting chance. 📌

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- 1 This article is adapted from a sermon preached at Oakwood University Church, based on Mark 10:13–16, KJV.
 - 2 Ellen G. White, *Counsels for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1991), 202.
 - 3 John Wesley Taylor V, “What Is the Special Character of an Adventist College or University?” *Journal of Adventist Education*, January–March, 2017, <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2017.2.5>.
 - 4 Gary Hopkins, “Christian Education and High-Risk Behaviors,” *Adventist Review*, July 27, 2006, <http://archives.adventistreview.org/article/640/archives/issue-2006-1521/christian-education-and-high-risk-behaviors>.
 - 5 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists/Barna Group, “Seventh-day Adventist Church Young Adult Study,” 2013, <http://www.youngadultlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Barna-SDA-Millennials-Report-final.pdf>.
 - 6 “The Cognitive Genesis Study,” http://adventisteducation.org/assessment/cognitive_genesis/numbers.
 - 7 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1952), 271.
 - 8 Martin Doblmeier, *The Blueprint: The Story of Adventist Education* (2013). See Journey Films, “Blueprint Intro,” video, 1:59, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/75863840>.