Radical Restructuring for Church Ministries

By Ellie Green

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Imagine...
By Ivan Williams

...recreating the best of your college and seminary classes, mixing it up with the passion of a massive convocation, connecting it with a class reunion, and thoroughly bathing it with the flavor of Adventism and you've got my vision for the first ever NAD Ministerial convention. I'm looking forward to seeing all of you at the NAD Pastors Family Convention, June 28-July 1, 2015.

Ministry with Millennials:
Can You Hear Me Now?
By A. Allan Martin
"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around." - Leo Buscaglia

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Let's Talk About Evangelism
Seventh-day Adventists are mission driven. We have a world to win for Christ. We are in the business of making disciples for Christ. **Best Practices** is looking for articles about creative evangelism in the local church. Articles should be single-subject focused, 300 - 700 words, and accompanied with the author's name, title, and picture.

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**Ideas, Events, Resources, Announcements**

The General Conference Communication Department has produced a short video called **A People Connected** to help members and friends of the church understand the relationships that build the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Rick Warren talks about ministry burnout in two articles: **Four Big Mistakes that Lead to Ministry Burnout** and **Four Steps to Reversing Ministry Burnout**.

**Previous resource links:**

- 10 Must-Have Tips for Giving a Public Invitation
- 5 Types of Sermon Illustrations
- SONset Friday Entertainment
- Amazing Grace
- Bridges to Health | Video Summary
- 7 Qualities Women Bring to a Leadership Team
- AdventSource Military Bible Kits
- 7 Steps to Getting the Most From Your Vacation

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It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. By this definition, our church in Charlotte, North Carolina, might have been considered insane, because it seemed that we were doing the same things over and over and always hoping that something would change!

But then Minner Labrador accepted a call to pastor our church. And our church did begin to change! Through his leading, we began to catch glimpses of the power of the Holy Spirit. With each glimpse we wanted more. We prayed. We prayed more. We were impressed that the Holy Spirit could work more effectively in our church if we changed our organizational structure.

There were no job descriptions, no policies, no mission statement, and no clear-cut lines of authority. There were no plans for specific ministry growth. Every two years the nominating committee might (or might not) re-elect a current church officer-holder so nobody really cared much about their “here today, gone tomorrow!” church positions.

Facing these facts seven years ago, Labrador invited me, the head elder, to join him in brainstorming how our church might be restructured to overcome these challenges. Having spent 18 years of my nursing career restructuring healthcare organizations, I was no stranger to this process. We concluded that a radical restructuring was necessary if we wanted to live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit’s power as outlined in the book of Acts. Without the Holy Spirit palpable in our midst, church seemed nothing but empty religiosity.

We began by clearly defining what we were trying to achieve by “operating” the Sharon Seventh-day Adventist Church. A committee was formed to develop our mission, vision, and values. Without going into the details, let me just say that our mission became “To Know Jesus Christ and Share Him.” That mission began to drive every decision.

Next, we brainstormed the vision for our church and agreed that based on our values of Bible study and evangelism, our vision should be “A passion to reach people and grow believers.” To accomplish this, all church activities were partitioned into ministries. We wanted these ministries to be directed by men and women possessing spiritual gifts and passion for the ministry of their choice. It quickly became obvious that without a radical restructuring this goal was unattainable!

Labrador was not to be deterred — he envisioned our elders in a management role as overseers of all the church’s ministries. These ideas were accepted and voted by the church board. The board further voted that elders would only be added when new ministries were formed and needed someone to manage them. This was based on the model Jethro suggested to Moses in Exodus 18, as well as the New Testament model in the book of Acts.

We talked it up, wrote it down, and here’s how it evolved: each elder was assigned to supervise one or two ministries. (We had nine elders at the time. We now have 16). The directors of the ministries were instructed to take all their ministry problems to their supervising elder rather than the pastor. A ministry flow chart was drawn to present a visual image of the new church structure.

But there was a problem! This vision would only be possible if elders and ministry directors maintained their church offices over a period of time. The traditional turnover of church officers every two years by the nominating committee would negate the desired continuity of ministry leadership. So we moved away from the traditional every-two-year nominating committee and, with the church’s approval, made the Board of Elders our “standing” nominating committee. (Many Adventist churches now have adopted a standing nominating committee. See the Connections curriculum available at AdventSource.com.)
By doing this we took a human resource approach to the election of officers in that every ministry selection would be gift-based and every member, insofar as possible, would be matched with an appropriate ministry as part of our overall strategy.

Not too many weeks into this program we saw a decided rise in church attendance. Suddenly everyone was interested in joining a ministry or starting a new one. We made a “spiritual gifts test” available and emphasized that those who had the spiritual gift for a particular office would be asked to serve. We also made a "rule" that nobody would be asked twice to fill a church office. We believed that if a person had a passionate call from God they would be eager to serve, and we could safely turn them loose to flourish in a ministry compatible with their personality and passion.

People became excited that they could join a ministry and invest their time and money without fear of being dropped by the nominating committee the following year! The church began to prosper and grow.

A quick glance at an early ministry flow chart compared to our present flow chart will demonstrate the enormous ministry growth over the past five years. This growth is 100 percent attributable to the Holy Spirit, who has moved among us like we’d never before experienced. We believe restructuring opened the way for the Holy Spirit’s work.

Just one example: an announcement informed the church that, following each quarterly Communion service, all elders would be anointing those who sought spiritual, mental, or physical healing or who desired a fuller measure of the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This had never been done before! Certainly elders anointing, while the pastor prayed for those coming forward, was a new concept.

We had no idea what to expect. We wondered if, at the end of the Communion service, the elders might be left standing alone, holding their little jugs of oil, while all the members left for home. But something amazing happened that brought tears to our eyes. Approximately 150 people attended that Communion service and about 125 remained to be anointed. Long lines of people patiently waited their turn. The anointing attendance has not lessened in the past two and a half years and, we believe, testifies to the hunger people have for the Holy Spirit’s power in their lives.

Through this radical restructuring we are convinced that the Holy Spirit is anxious to come and work among God’s people to prepare them for His coming—especially when they intentionally seek Him and provide an opportune setting.

And He most definitely is working! Our church went from 450 members to more than 900 in five years. But that’s not the best part! The best part is that for the first time in our church’s history, there is visible excitement and energy in our congregation and because of our 35-plus ministries, almost every Sabbath people walk in, uninvited, and say, “I’ve heard about your church and decided to visit.”

I will be supporting Minner Labrador in conducting a seminar at the Equipped for Ministries convention this August 28-31, 2014 in Frisco, Texas. The seminar will be about our radical restructuring experience with special emphasis on the development of an expanded role for elders.

If you think that definition of insanity might fit your church, as I thought it fit mine, pray! Then pray more! I encourage you to make plans to attend this upcoming convention and our seminar!

Find more information at: www.equippedforministries.com.

Ellie Green is a nurse whose career included 18 years restructuring healthcare organizations to meet accreditation requirements. She co-authored three books on management, served as editor on several journals, and published over 300 articles. After retirement Ellie completed the Southern Union Lay Pastor Assistant course and then teamed with Sharon Church Pastor Minner Labrador, Jr. (now VP of SWU) to develop a church structure that would enable every member to use their spiritual gifts to expand church ministries thereby growing the church.
"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around." –Leo Buscaglia

Often we intuitively look at program attendance, church activity, and/or behaviors of our young people to give us a sense of what their trajectory of church involvement will be later in life. In this most recent study of Adventist Millennials, conducted by the Barna Group, there were some fascinating findings.

Here’s what the research revealed, as summarized in Ministry Magazine:

Based on their responses to various questions in the survey, respondents were categorized as either “engaged” or “disengaged” from their local congregations. Engaged respondents were those who attend services at least monthly and indicated that church is relevant for them. Disengaged did not meet one or both of those criteria. Then, key differences between these two groups were extracted from the data.

. . . there were no significant differences between the behaviors of the engaged and disengaged young adults when they were children and teenagers. In other words, we cannot look at the level of activity among the children and teens and then predict which ones will disengage from the church as young adults. But negative experiences with their childhood church (specifically with the leadership and adult members) are strong predictors of such disengagement.
If a key factor in maintaining engagement among young adults are positive experiences and relationships with older Adventist members and church leadership, the next question is, “What does that look like?” To find out, we conducted two discussion groups via an online platform.

The groups were amazingly insightful. As we listened to the stories of these young adults — hearing about the good and the bad in their upbringing and current situation, we were alternately excited and dismayed.

The excitement was from hearing so many stories of transformation and spiritual vibrancy, and how these experiences happened in a social context of love and acceptance. The dismay was from hearing so many stories of personal rejection and angst. Over the course of the discussions, several themes emerged that point the way for local congregations to create a positive environment for their youth and young adults.

**Theme One: Sharing Personal Stories**

Among the prominent themes that emerged from the qualitative research was the desire among Millennials to have authentic platforms for sharing personal experiences. An incredible phenomenon illustrating this occurred in the research process, as the online discussion groups were filled almost instantaneously, many more young adult respondents asked how they might participate even after the capacity was attained for the qualitative portion of the study. The findings from the online discussion groups were telling, and are summarized well in *Ministry Magazine*:

There is a power to experiencing God’s love and strength. There is a power to sharing that experience with others. And there is a power in hearing the story of another person’s encounter with God.

Callie’s story is both an encouragement to her and a testimony to others. “I almost died when I was young due to an infection. I remember waking up in the middle of the night and hearing my dad cry as he whispered prayers into my ear. . . I also remember the doctors telling my parents that they didn’t understand what happened, but I that I was healed.”

Thomas’s story is less sensational, but no less personally powerful. “God spoke to me in such an amazing way that night. I was standing in the sand, out of reach of the encroaching water, looking up at the stars and talking with God. I asked Him a question, and hoped that if His answer was “yes,” that I would know without a doubt. As soon as I said that, the water touched and went past my feet. That was a big moment in my life.”

How can the Adventist faith communities make sure that its members have platforms to share with others how God has worked in their lives?

These experiences can be both positive and negative. Some of our respondents shared stories of healing, and others shared stories of struggle. Both types of stories were extremely encouraging to the others young adults in the discussion group. How can a church make it acceptable for members to share not only their victories, but also their struggles? Their shared testimony could be what keeps a young person engaged with the Adventist church, enriched by the relationships sharing stories affords.

Even amidst all the technology, programming wizardry, and media sophistication of our contemporary culture, it is the age old art of story-listening and story-telling that engages the next generation.

I imagine we all have stories from childhood, teen years, and young adulthood where adult members of the church truly
“heard” us, listening empathically to our stories. Likewise, many of us may have accounts of where we were ignored, a personal story dismissed.

As a church leader/pastor/member, what might you and your team do to more intently listen to the heart of next generations?

One model that I make mention of in the step-by-step young adult ministry development matrix, LOST2LIFE⁴, is the 180 Symposiums being held throughout the Oregon Conference. Find out more about how church leadership is listening intently to young adult stories at http://orgcyouth.netadvent.org/cy-180symposium

Next episode, we’ll give further attention to what the research reveals as young adults express themes to consider when fostering a vibrant Millennial ministry⁴.

A. Allan Martin, PhD is the teaching pastor of Younger Generation Church [www.YGchurch.com], the vibrant young adult ministry of the Arlington Seventh-day Adventist Church in Texas

Notes

¹Barna Group, a Christian research firm, is the world leader in understanding Christians, attitudes toward Christianity and Christian organizations, and spiritual perspectives in general. They surveyed Millennials who were (or had been) part of an Adventist congregation in order to understand their common experiences and attitudes. The survey was followed by multiple, moderated online discussions with Adventists and former Adventist young adults. Each young adult discussion group lasted for three days. One group focused on college-aged Adventist Millennials, and the other focused on post-college Millennials. All the young adults in the groups were still connected in some way to the Adventist church, but some had cut ties with their local congregation to one degree or another. For more on the Barna Group and their research with Millennials go to https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials


³Provocative parallels can be found in the emphasis on intergenerational church relationships noted in the Adventist Millennial Research and the work of Dr. Roger Dudley, professor emeritus at Andrews University, whose study of youth and young adults spanned over four decades. See https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2009/01/embracing-those-who-reject-religion

⁴Let me suggest a step-by-step matrix for developing your young adult ministry. LOST2LIFE offers steps to follow in progression as you consider starting or sharpening your ministry to Millennials. Download free https://db.tt/MRq3qRs9
The 11:00 Hour: Is Society Changing What We Hear on Sabbath Mornings?

By Stephen Chavez

I wish I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard someone remark, “I just don’t seem to get anything out of church.”

Implied in that statement is the sense that the worship service is a spectator event, at which members of the congregation critique the worship participants and pass judgment on the experience as if it were a concert, play, or motion picture.

And of course, since the central figure in most worship services is the preacher, he or she gets the most scrutiny. If the sermon misses the mark, or doesn’t “speak” to everyone in the congregation, it’s the preacher who is often blamed.

An Audience of One

The problem with such a generalization is that it assumes there’s a “one size fits all” model of communication; that the same message should have the same appeal to retirees as it does to teens, or single parents, or immigrants, or high school dropouts, etc. How does a preacher effectively reach a congregation that includes members who are lifelong Seventh-day Adventists, those who have been Adventists only a short time, as well as “seekers,” those who know very little about the Bible?

It also ignores the fact that communication during the past 25 years — indeed, the past two years — has changed exponentially. Gone are the days when John Wesley, George Whitefield, or William Miller could command audiences of thousands just by going to a city square and setting up a platform. The lack of popular entertainment in those settings made every sermon a spectator event. Now, as the size of auditoriums has increased, along with the “wow” factor at most athletic and entertainment events, the appeal of preaching as entertainment has diminished.

Add to that the way we watch, listen, and communicate today, and you have a communication revolution. Admit it: how many of us watch TV with one hand on the remote control? How many of us have Twitter accounts, or follow somebody who does? Never before in the history of human civilization has communicating in 140 characters been an art form.

Next time you go to church, notice how many times people look at their smartphones (and not just to follow the texts referred to in the sermon). While you’re at it, notice the difference in age represented in the congregation. In most congregations in North America, people between the ages of 18 and 35 are most likely to be underrepresented, perhaps because they’re least likely to sit still for a 45-minute monologue about some mildly relevant Bible topic.

Focus, Focus, Focus

There are preachers of a certain age who, after spending most of their careers preaching in twentieth-century pulpits, are content to preach as they always have. And because they preach mostly to congregations of a certain age, they have little inclination or incentive to change. And truly, some members feel shortchanged if the preacher stops after preaching just 35 or 40 minutes, but those members most often have gray hair, or no hair at all.

The members who are taking their place seem less likely to feel cheated if the sermon doesn’t last for a certain amount of time. Indeed, they may bless the preacher who gets right to the point and focuses like a laser on the main point.

Chris Oberg, lead pastor of the La Sierra University church, confesses: “I’m always thinking about people’s time.” She limits her sermons to 28 to 30 minutes.
The La Sierra University church also has what it calls a “liturgical service,” consistent with a more formal (some would say “high church”) style. The service at 8:30 on Sabbath morning at La Sierra, for example, has a scripture reading from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and one from the Gospels. In this highly structured service the preacher has 10 to 12 minutes to make a point. “It’s a great exercise in preaching,” says Oberg.

Although it’s a formula that goes back centuries, it reflects the shorter attention spans demonstrated by society in general. Network news can give an “in-depth” report about some far-reaching issue or event in three to five minutes. An in-depth report on National Public Radio rarely lasts more than 10 minutes. TED Talks (an acronym for technology, entertainment, design) are among the most popular audio and video downloads on the Internet, and most of them can be listened to in 20 minutes — or less.

One could argue that the 11:00 hour is nowhere near the same as network news and TED talks, much less like sitcoms and reality TV, where an episode tells a story in 28 minutes. But do sermons have to take 45 minutes to give us a dose of reality and connect us to our Creator?

“We’re narrowing our attention spans all the time,” says Oberg. “People are consuming more and more media, which means we’re connected and lonely; we’re connected and still longing for community.”

Scratching That Itch

For Michael Kelly, senior pastor of the Mount Rubidoux Adventist Church in Riverside, California, the sermon is all about being relevant. “We’re talking about things people care about,” he says. The young adults, who make up a significant portion of his congregation, appreciate sermons that speak to the issues that affect their daily lives: dating, relationships, and sex, for example. “We try to scratch where people are itching.”

Andres Flores leads the Epic Seventh-day Adventist Church in Chicago. Meeting in a theater building in a vibrant, urban setting, Flores’ group conducts services designed to appeal to young adults, hipsters, postmoderns, artistic types in a casual, informal setting. “We’re mainly trying to reach unchurched people in that community. For me, it’s all about loving people and loving Jesus,” he says. “We challenge people to practice the gospel; we like to create doers, not just thinkers. We challenge people with every sermon, giving them little tasks as a response to the message.”

And that’s the point: The worship service is never about the preacher. It’s about making connections: with God, with each other, and with the community. It goes back to the first century, when our spiritual ancestors gathered in homes as small groups. Surrounded by paganism and first-century immorality, they gathered for moral support and to share experiences from the past week. If they were lucky, they read a portion of a letter from one of the apostles, a story or two from the Gospels, or a passage from the Old Testament.

As Christianity developed institutionally and congregations grew, built their own buildings, and became more clergy-centric, the sermon became the focus of their shared time together. To the point that today, two millennia later, there’s often a sign in front of a building with the words “Seventh-day Adventist Church” and the name of the pastor, as if the pastor is part of the draw.

True, there are still preachers who can attract audiences in the thousands, but they’re not typically preaching in Adventist churches. The Adventist preachers most of us know are first of all pastors, serving a single church or a multi-church district. That means they give Bible studies, make hospital visits, chair one or more church boards, and prepare sermons in their spare time.

That may satisfy their congregations most of the time, but in view of the tremendous media competition for peoples’ attention, preachers can’t be satisfied going into the pulpit with a few random thoughts strung together with a text or two connected to a quotation from Ellen White.

There are people in their congregations whose marriages are in trouble. Some parents don’t know what to do with their
kids. Others are losing hope because they’ve lost their jobs and they’re getting desperate. Is there a word from the Lord for these people?

**Spiritual Discipline**

Initials such as M.Div. or D.Min. behind a person’s name do not necessarily make them good communicators. “Some preachers are OK with ‘I have this title, therefore I’m a preacher,’ ” says Chad Stuart, senior pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Visalia, California. “No, you’re not,” he says. “You still have to get better; you have to think about it; you have to prepare.” Those who do it well get heard. He mentions some services that consist entirely of preaching, and says he’s noticed that some people show up just for the preaching part of the 11:00 hour, skipping what some describe as “preliminaries.”

Flexibility is key to communicating in the twenty-first century. In addition to his 860-member congregation in Visalia, Stuart is also involved in a church plant in another one of Visalia’s six zip codes, called the Ark. “While big isn’t bad,” he says, “sometimes big can get comfortable.” The style at the Ark is less formal, more compact, meaning it is more likely to appeal to people who might not feel comfortable in a traditional Adventist church. “Of the 27 people we’ve baptized in the past two and a half years, 24 have been unchurched,” says Stuart.

The La Sierra University church has three services. In addition to the liturgical service, it offers what it calls “church@9:30,” a more traditional Adventist service, and “church@noon,” a contemporary service with livelier music that’s designed with university students and young adults in mind service. Oberg’s sermons at these two services are sometimes the same, sometimes the same with different illustrations, or they may be completely different.

The best preachers have a plan; they preach series on different topics or books of the Bible. They coordinate their sermons to coincide with different events on the church calendar, such as graduations, Vacation Bible Schools, church anniversaries, and events commemorating Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. “There’s a rhythm to the sermonic calendar,” says Oberg. “After a ‘heavy’ series, on Leviticus, for example, you have to give people a break.”

**Same Message, Different Voices**

Good preaching isn’t going away, but it is changing. Different congregations, responding to the needs of different demographics, are rearranging their services to suit the needs of their different constituencies. They’re also moving away from a format that’s centered on the pastor and the sermon to one that focuses more on the congregation.

Chad Stuart doesn’t wait until Sabbath morning to communicate with his congregation, or with anyone else who reads his blog or follows him on Twitter and Facebook. When he has to be away, he has a handful of speakers who communicate for a living.

But what would happen if congregations were more deliberate about making services more interactive, less like a performance?

At Mount Rubidoux, Michael Kelly encourages his members to post comments on Twitter during the service. He maintains that a number of people have attended subsequent services based on those “tweets.”

Chris Oberg is toying with the idea of placing microphones at strategic places in the sanctuary, so that at a certain point in the sermon members of the congregation can react to her message. “I believe in the power of the spoken word in Scripture, and I don’t think our commitment has to be compromised. But more creative alternatives might be in our future. We all come from the model of the preacher as the paid professional, but there’s also the priesthood of the pulpit model.”

Communication at its basic level is all about stories. Everybody has a story, and who’s to say the preacher’s story automatically has more validity than anyone else’s?

One reason preaching remains successful is because we still have entire generations of people who are used to a
particular worship model in which preaching is the center point. So a lot of success comes from people being comfortable with that model. When it's done well, it continues to resonate with people.

How would Adventist preaching—and the 11:00 hour specifically—change if they were directed at new believers or seekers for truth?

An Hour That Transforms
Perhaps you’re familiar with the famous and facetious definition of preaching as “the art of talking in someone else’s sleep.” Today’s preachers can’t afford to be complacent. Neither can they just copy the style (or sermons) from somebody or someplace else.

In geographic locations where Adventists tend to congregate near hospitals, universities, and publishing houses, the competition is fierce. There are lots of options. Church web sites post the preacher and sermon title for each week’s service, and people who are mere consumers tend to flit from place to place.

That’s why it’s important to create a sense of community, for pastors to know the individuals to whom they’re preaching. That’s why in small churches, perhaps with only a few dozen members, and no other Adventist churches for 50 miles in any direction, preachers have to be skilled communicators and take their craft seriously. They play a major part in creating that community.

Today’s preachers and worship leaders have to be good listeners. They have to be miners of feedback, good and bad. Chris Oberg calls it “the sacred art of listening.” This is more than “Good sermon, Pastor” that most preachers hear when they greet people at the door following the sermon.

For Andres Flores, the interaction he craves is transformed lives. “The best Adventist preaching produces disciples and disciple makers,” he says. “The question I always ask is ‘Are people being transformed?’ ” He points out that most Adventist preaching is addressed to Adventists who have heard variations on the same messages for decades.

“The big win for me is not just that people feel inspired and encouraged, but all of that needs to lead people to be doers of the gospel in their context,” says Flores.

Michael Kelly evaluates the effectiveness of the worship experience by something tangible as well. “The biggest thing is if somebody brings a friend or family member who usually doesn’t have a lot to do with church, that tells me that something good is happening, because they trust the environment, they trust the content of what’s being said, that it’s not going to push somebody away.”

The 11:00 hour (or 9:30, noon, or 2:30) is significant not just for the sermon people hear, but because it represents the one time during the week when longtime and new believers of different ages and backgrounds come together to experience the presence and power of God.

“Preaching doesn’t always take place in a pulpit,” says Kelly. “The apostle Paul says our lives are letters. Preaching will always be relevant. The form it takes may change, but people will always have a need for someone to give them the Word.”

Stephen Chavez is coordinating editor for Adventist Review

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