Never Give Up

Practical insights regarding reclaiming inactive youth

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Stop your crying and wipe away your tears. All that you have done for your children will not go unrewarded; they will return from the enemies land. There is hope for your future; your children will come home. I, the Lord, have spoken. Jeremiah 31: 16-17 (Good News)

The loss of young people through the back door is a real issue for the church today. It is imperative that we take steps to make sure that as many as possible of those growing up in the church will remain to become active members. I also believe there is an overwhelming need to reach out to those who may, for whatever reason, have already become inactive over the years and reclaim them for the church.

In undertaking a doctoral level dissertation I undertook a pilot project at a local church. Although the numbers were limited, the findings were significant. The headline news is that over 90% of inactive youth responding to an initial contact, together with a short questionnaire, clearly still saw themselves as being Christian, and fifty per cent felt that they would one day return to the church of their youth.

So how do we help make this a reality? I think we would all resonate with the following assertion that the effective care of young people today must be seen as a) an immediate priority, b) a strategic priority, and c) a critical issue for all Christian leaders.

1. I believe that the church – our church – has a limited window of opportunity which demands that the time for action is now.

Summary of Research Findings

A summary of the survey findings, that I personally conducted, revealed a number of interesting practical insights that can be summarized in the following ten points.

1. It is imperative that those who are inactive are followed up and not left to drift away unnoticed. From my limited sample, females seemed more responsive than males to cold contact, but males will respond once a real and warm link can be established.
2. In their early years, friends remain the top reason why young people enjoy attending church.
3. The early, mid and late teenage years are the focal point when youth make decisions for or against continuing church fellowship. The peak age bracket for becoming inactive, in this study, was between ages fifteen and twenty.
4. There exists a continuing contact system through the family. This usually remains intact even when a young person has left church fellowship.
5. The church is not seen as warm and caring and youth often see church members as being critical and narrow minded. The attitude of older members was expressed as the top area of dislike felt about the church.

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After a break in issuing this significant journal, it is now back on track with an expanded editorial team and a strong commitment to quality.

Stan Patterson, the Director of the Christian Leadership Center, shares important thoughts on “the treachery of selfish ambition”, starting from the parable in Judges 9:8-15 and the tragic tale of Gideon’s sons. He says that “a dominance orientation is always rooted in an exaggerated opinion of self and a marginalization of others. It opens the door for coercive behaviour that engenders fear and force, limited only in terms of what the character of the person will allow”. Through a careful reading of the parable about the trees that went forth to anoint a king over them, Patterson points to the biblical message that “dominant coercive leadership brings decay and death”, it is a “life-starving leadership” completely opposed to the values and ideals set before us by Jesus Christ. In a recent committee meeting at the Trans-European Division, one union president urged us all to remember the importance of “knowing our own story”, not just the story of God or Christ. As leaders we must remember how weak and failing we are (like the apostle Paul) and how dependent we are on the grace of God and the love of Christ through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. There is no servant leadership without humility, as it is defined in Philippians 2:3-8.

The issue provides three feature articles:

- David W. Boshart writes on “Revisiting Mission in Postchristendom: Story, Hospitality and New Humanity” (pp. 16-31); Michael E. Caffery’s article has the title “Honour the King. Yes, but Emulate the King?” (pp. 32-51); and Sylvia Gonzalez deals with “Hardship and Leadership: Is there a Connection?” (pp. 52-62). The issue ends with six book reviews, a list of dissertation notices on leadership, and a call for papers for the Second Annual Leadership Conference at Andrews University, July 20-23, 2012.

- Boshart describes the findings from a study analysing the common understandings of national, regional and church planting leaders for the commitments and practices that support keeping mission at the centre of the church’s being and purpose. Three core commitments were noted: (1) trusting in narrative-based ways of knowing, (2) witness shaped by holy hospitality, and (3) welcoming fresh expressions of the new humanity rather than settling for like-mindedness. These commitments are illustrated with the story of Missio Dei, a new Mennonite church planted in the Cedar Riverside neighbourhood of Minneapolis. (From author’s abstract.)

- Caffery deals with the issue of leaders seeking to discern God’s will for their lives and draws lessons from the biblical ideals embedded in the concept of “kingship”. He explores the biblical characteristics of the ideal king with the goal of identifying lessons for contemporary top-echelon leaders. He also reviews the connection between creation and kingship and the biblical concept of the Kingship of God, biblical guidance available in the selection, anointing and annual renewal of the king, and the duties and the role of the king. He draws lessons regarding contemporary top-echelon Christian leaders in terms of personal traits, behaviours and relationships with the members of the communities or organisations they serve. (From author’s abstract.)

- Gonzales focuses on the connection between hardship and leadership: How do human beings face hardship and how do they turn an adverse situation to advantage? It is quite clear that both on the Thinking Climate and the Church Warmth measures decrease with age and that we are currently not meeting the needs of our older youth. The “thinking climate” measures to what extent a church stimulates its members to think, learn and ask questions. The “church warmth” measures how much a church is felt to be friendly, caring and an accepting environment. Both areas are of crucial importance in determining young peoples’ commitment to the church.

There are a number of key points that can be seen from this and other studies. Here I will highlight just three.

- The church needs a clear and effective discipling process for young people. This is as referenced in point 6 above. This year, being the Year of Discipleship, gives a window of opportunity to address this need for the Ambassador age group (16-21) through some pilot programmes in the TED territory. Additionally we will hold the first Youth Matters Symposium with the title “Discipleship that Lasts”, aiming towards establishing good discipleship models for Student-age Ministry.

- The Church Warmth and Thinking Climates are very important. This is as referenced in point 5 above and is powerfully backed up by the European Valuegenesis Survey. (see graph)

Key Points

- 6. There exists a disconnect between dedicating young children and baptism. Only a third of the group were baptized. We are clearly not discipling enough of our own young people while they are actively with us in the church.

- 7. Some young people may be very sporadic in their church attendance but do not consider that they have cut all ties with the church. Church attendance does not seem to be a major priority for some during their early twenties or period of tertiary education.

- 8. Virtually half of the group felt they would return to church one day. This provides hope in so many cases that all is certainly not lost.

- 9. Overwhelmingly the young people surveyed showed that they still felt that Christianity was relevant in their lives.

- 10. Each young person is unique and has their own story to tell. We must never treat them as merely statistics.
circumstance into a developmental experience? She sheds light on the topic from written life narratives and interviews with four leaders, one female and three males. A model of the relationship between hardship and resilience is presented as a means of understanding the results of this exploratory study. (From author’s abstract.) The model on page 61 shows how “Lessons learned from hardship”, that is, Self-Knowledge, Sensitivity and Compassion, Limits of Control, and Flexibility, interact with “Resilient characteristics”, that is, Faith, Purpose and Meaning, Cognitive Strategies, Improvisation, and Social Support.

ISSUES OBSERVED IN THE FIELD—FROM THE DIVISION PRESIDENT’S DESK

1. Cooperation between the Administration and the Committee: An important area of leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church concerns the fruitful cooperation between the Administration (usually the three elected officers) and the Executive Committee. Recently, in some unions in our division, issues have arisen regarding the duty of the administration to inform the executive committee regarding decisions taken in the day-to-day operation of the matters of the Church. Especially when it comes to decisions with a financial impact, it is essential that there are clear rules for what kind of decisions and actions the three officers (the Administration), the Administrative Committee (if such exists), and the Executive Committee are allowed to take, what the officers’ duty of information to the Executive Committee entails, and up to what amount the Administration and the Administrative Committee can spend church funds with the in-principle and prior approval of the Executive Committee. The decision on such rules and procedures must of course be taken by the Executive Committee, which is the supreme authority and directly responsible to the Union or Conference General Assembly. However, the Administration may need to remember to place this matter on the agenda at some of the first meetings in a given term of office, because it protects the smooth cooperation between the Administration and the Committee.

2. Adherence to Working Policy: Another important area of leadership concerns the adherence to the Working Policy of the Church. I hear people joking about or even “ridiculing” the policy book. I have even heard it from the pulpit in spiritual sermons on the Word of God on an Annual Council Sabbath in the General Conference Headquarters. It is my view that such people either have no experience of carrying leadership responsibility in the Church or they are ignorant about the role and function of the policy. There is no doubt in my mind that the church policy is helpful and needed. I have seen leaders, who for some reason ignored policy, getting themselves into deep trouble. True, the policy is not an authority comparable to the Bible, but it is voted by the worldwide Church, includes a lot of wisdom, and is based on long experience in every corner of the world. It is both an authoritative guide in our work (read WP B 151) and a great help in avoiding friction and safeguarding unity. At the same time, it needs to be said that the policy is a tool to assist the church in pursuing its mission effectively, and there are times when it needs to be adjusted to various local, cultural conditions – but let us counsel with each other when such a situation arises!

3. Adaptations of Working Policy: The General Conference issues annually the General Conference Working Policy for the operations of the world church. The Trans-European Division being the General Conference in its assigned territories, then issues annually the Trans-European Division Working Policy, which is binding for all church organisations in the TED. It follows closely the General Conference Working Policy, but in some areas the General Conference has asked the divisions to develop their own regional policy, for example, regarding Conciliation and Dispute Resolution.

Point 8 highlights this and the reasons, I believe, are centered in a number of issues involving the positive legacy of past church teaching, warm memories and a search for past identity. As one of the respondents to the pilot survey stated “I still carry and remember a lot of what I was taught every day.” Another reflected about a return one day and stated, “My departure from the church was a gradual one, if there is going to be a return, it’ll also be a gradual one.” This was also found to be true in another study of returning Adventists who definitely expressed that they still had warm memories from their childhood. “Eight out of ten persons interviewed expressed memories of early Adventism that reminded them of happy times in the church.”

Roots and identity are a very powerful combination. The search for identity is not static and just as it is part of finding one’s own identity that pushes young people to challenge their value systems, and sometimes push them away, so too the reverse search for identity may well bring them back one day to their roots. Many young people who question their parents, values and beliefs ultimately accept them as their own.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Reinhold Niebuhr
Issues Observed in the Field

Procedures (B 45), and there are local cultural and legal issues which prompt an adaptation of the general rules.

4. Review and Update Union Policies: The unions in the Trans-European Division are in principle bound by the division policy but may develop their own policies in consultation with and approval by the GC/TED. It is vital that these union variations are constantly reviewed and updated. A recent case in one of our unions has led to an ordained pastor being dismissed by the conference committee after 29 years of service, resulting in grief and confusion. The reason for dismissal was “uselessness at work”, and such a reason was included in the union policy book. That policy did not specify, however, how the administration and committee should proceed, if an allegation of a pastor being “useless” surfaced. There were no duties placed on the administration for guiding, evaluating and developing the pastor, and there were no procedures for establishing the basis upon which a decision to terminate a pastor should be made. In fact, there was no provision that safeguarded the pastor and guaranteed him fairness and justice (which is required by policy – see WP B 45 30 and the GC Guidelines for Employer and Employee Relationships, October, 2003). A constant review and updating of policies and procedures is needed in order for the Church to act fairly and with justice. We all know the beautiful passage in Micah 6:8 where what the Lord requires of us is that we “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God”. When that is achieved not only by individuals but by a church organisation, the God we serve turns his face towards us and lets it shine upon us. And how can we lead and manage without his blessing? — Bertil Wiklander

TO THINK ABOUT...

Whole-Hearted Devotion

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.” Colossians 3:23.

Experts spend a lot of time trying to figure out what makes people successful. They often look at people’s credentials, intelligence, education, and other factors. But more than anything else, passion is what makes the difference. Take a look at four truths about passion and what it can do for you as a leader:

1. Passion is the first step to achievement—Your desire determines your destiny. The stronger your fire, the greater the desire—and the greater the potential.
2. Passion increases your willpower—There is no substitute for passion. It is fuel for the will. If you want anything badly enough, you can find the willpower to achieve it.
3. Passion changes you—If you follow your passion—instead of others’ perceptions—you can’t help but become a more dedicated, productive person. In the end, your passion will have more influence than your personality.
4. Passion makes the impossible possible—Human beings are so made that whenever anything fires their soul, impossibilities vanish. A fire in the heart lifts everything in your life. A leader with great passion and few skills always outperforms a leader with great skills and no passion.

Brad Lomenick (Catalyst West)

Leaders age 35 and under in general are more about projects than they are about careers, more about movements instead of organisations. So if you want to keep us around in your organisation, you’re going to have to pursue us. Show us you are approachable and connected to where we are in life.

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