

Have You Hugged Your Kids Today?

Love, understanding, and a sense of belonging are the keys to keeping your children in the church.

by Gail Taylor Rice

I WAS EAGER TO MEET ISABEL, MY WALKING partner, one morning last year. The night before had been her son's senior prom. The church they attended, she had told me, was quite concerned about what could happen on prom night to her boy and three other seniors in their congregation who went to the local high school. Their denomination did not frown on dancing, but drinking and premarital sex were unacceptable, and the church members were determined to do what they could to reduce the temptations.

As we rounded the track, Isabel described the special evening a number of their friends in the church—none of them parents of the seniors—had provided. They hired a stretch limousine to drive the kids to one of their

homes. There, on a decorated patio overlooking the city, the students enjoyed a nine-course dinner, elegantly served by tuxedo-clad church-member waiters. After dinner, their chauffeur drove them 30 miles to the hotel where the prom was held, waited until the dance was over, and returned them to their homes, safe and sound.

As we completed our customary laps, I marveled at the care shown by Isabel's friends. And I wondered if members of my own church would do as much for our young people. What do we do on prom night for Adventist students who attend local high schools? Do we look for creative ways to help our teenagers avoid temptation? Are we willing to get personally involved in planning and preparing special activities for them? Would we put up the money for a limousine? Do we even know just who our young people are, and where they go to school?

I also wondered if I was asking the right sort of questions. Is it necessary to spend vast amounts of time and effort on inconsequential

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things—nonspiritual activities—in order to keep youth in the church? Is this what young people want from their church? And does it really make a difference? Isabel would say it does. She told me that virtually all the young people in her denomination remain active church members. Lifelong commitment is the norm.

I suspect that many young people lose interest in Adventism because they have not experienced warmth and acceptance from adults in their homes, schools, and churches. They do not feel that they are a significant part of their congregations. They are not convinced that they belong. And they don't feel they would be missed if they left. In the following paragraphs I want to explore this pressing need and look for ways to meet it.

Research clearly shows that a climate of warmth and openness provides powerful encouragement for faith development in young people.¹ A number of studies have evaluated the relationship between warmth young people feel in the institutional environment and the probability that they will develop a commitment to Christian faith and church membership. Charles Shelton,² a noted researcher on the development of youth values and morals, insists that acceptance, along with tolerance and patience, is essential if youth-adult relationships are to encourage spiritual development. Showing acceptance toward an adolescent, he states, does not necessarily indicate approval, but it does involve an element of understanding and unconditional love.

According to Merton Strommen, self-hatred is one of the "five cries of American youth."³ From survey responses of churched and non-churched young people over a period of 14 years, Strommen discovered that many young people in our society have very low levels of self-esteem, while young people who are active in their churches have a sense of feeling good about themselves. Strommen considers

warmth and concern to be key factors in overcoming self-hatred, an essential step toward mature Christian faith and practice. To achieve self-esteem and identity, he states, a person needs "the emphatic and warm relationship of a concerned person. . . . The essentials in helping youth to a sense of personal significance are empathy, warmth, and genuineness."

The Adventist Church is also asking about faith development and denominational loyalty. Roger Dudley looks at these issues in greater detail in *Passing the Torch*. In Romania, he notes, where young people comprise a large percentage of Adventist congregations, warmth, belonging and involvement are evident.⁴ The church makes plans with younger members in mind and involves the youth in activities that go on most of the day on Sabbath.

Adventists, in Romania and elsewhere, have come to see that caring churches are not enough. Graduate students at various institutions have studied the relationship between attendance at Adventist schools, for example, and continued commitment to the church.⁵ These studies do show positive correlations between Adventist school attendance and church membership as adults. However, they have not examined students' views about which attributes contributed positively to their spiritual development. Recent research suggests that our young people must feel accepted, affirmed, and loved by their families and teachers at home and at school, as well as in the church. Schools, as well as churches, need to commit time and resources to provide youth with a positive caring atmosphere. According to Robert Folkenberg, president of the General Conference, "Our educational approaches should include, 'First, the purposeful creation of caring environments.' . . . You can't teach a student to love if you don't

love that student. Students must experience a warm supportive environment."⁶

Two recent Adventist studies utilizing non-Adventist consultants have taken an in-depth look at issues surrounding the future of the church. Both of them underscore the importance to young people of a caring school environment. The Seltzer-Daley study,⁷ commissioned by the General Conference in 1987, concluded that the future of the church was closely tied to the success of Adventist schools. According to this study, the Adventist Church has entered a "window of time" when appropriate decisions for change and improved communication within the church can make the difference between a dying church and a growing one.

The Seltzer-Daley report provided much of the impetus for a major attempt at planned change, Project Affirmation,⁸ which, in turn, spawned Valuegenesis—a study of contemporary Adventism "unprecedented in size and scope" in the United States.⁹

The Valuegenesis study¹⁰ has led concerned parents and youth leaders in the church to seriously consider the issue of warmth and acceptance in Adventist homes, schools, and churches. Researchers collected data from nearly 12,000 Adventist young people attending sixth through 12th grades in Adventist schools throughout the United States and Canada. Approximately 2,600 additional questionnaires were filled out by pastors, school administrators, teachers, and parents. The

respondents addressed more than 400 questions regarding support of Adventist doctrinal beliefs and Christian tenets of faith, commitment to the Adventist Church, and life-style preferences, as well as general perceptions regarding their church, school, and family life. V. Bailey Gillespie, principal investigator of the Valuegenesis study, and other researchers, have published generally encouraging news about Adventist youth, their homes, churches, and schools.¹¹ Researchers, using consultants who have been involved in the study of youth

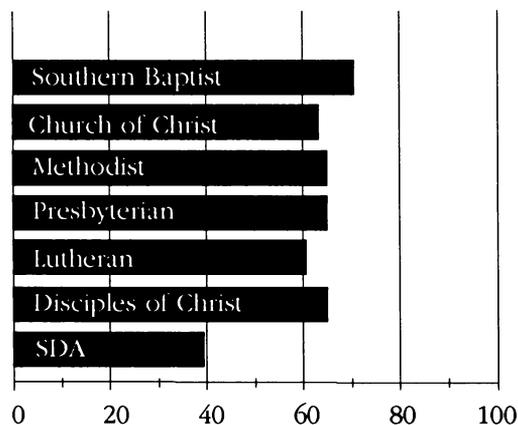
in American churches for many years, discovered, for example, that Adventist youth have higher levels of faith maturity and denominational loyalty than the young people in five of the major Protestant denominations.¹²

Of particular interest is the attempt to discover what items in the young persons' environments seem to accompany high faith maturity and denominational loyalty. Statistical correlations resulted in the identification of

41 "effectiveness factors" as predictive of mature Christian faith and denominational loyalty.¹³ A significant number of these factors are closely associated with belonging, warmth, concern, and support.

Further analysis attempted to identify to what degree these 41 factors were present in the respondents' environments. Valuegenesis researchers isolated six dominant themes in "missing" effectiveness factors. One of the six elements considered to be missing in Adventist young people's lives was the experience of

Table 1: Warmth of Congregational Climates*



* The graph shows the percentage of young people who gave their congregation a climate score of 4.0 or higher out of a possible 5.0 on a four-item measure of warmth in the congregational climate.

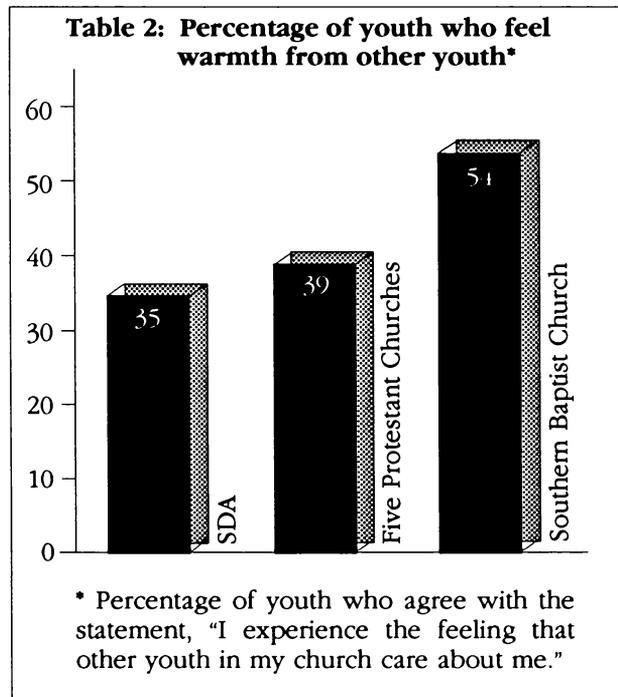
warmth and support in schools and congregations.¹⁴ A majority of young Adventists said that acceptance, warmth, caring, and belonging were absent in their schools and churches.

Karen's experience illustrates the kind of thing that often happens to Adventist young people. She had her ears pierced one day during a shopping trip with some of her friends. Her parents were disappointed to see what Karen had done, but decided to minimize it. Her dad jokingly asked her if she needed a neck brace to hold up her now heavier head, and her mom informed her that she would never get through the airport security check, now that she was carrying so much metal with her. Her parents' teasing and continued acceptance of her helped reassure her that she was still loved, even if her behavior had been less than desirable. Her family remained supportive of her, but Karen wondered how the people at church would act when they saw her wearing the earrings.

Karen was afraid that they would not approve, but she was not prepared for the reaction she received. The older woman who usually handed out materials in the youth room glanced coldly at Karen when she entered the Sabbath school room. Not one of the adults at church hugged her or spoke to her that day. After the sermon, the pastor's smile quickly changed to a serious look as she shook her hand at the door. When her grandparents came over to her house after church for lunch, they told Karen that they

were worried about her spiritual condition now that she was wearing jewelry. For the first time, Karen understood why many of her friends had stopped coming to church. The responses of her older friends that day made her feel that she no longer belonged if she wasn't willing to conform totally to their image of what she should look like.

The lack of warmth in Adventism contrasts with the experience of young people in other denominations. Table 1 shows the percentage of young people from seven different denominational groups who rated highly the congregational warmth at their churches. Agreement to statements such as "My church feels warm," "My church accepts me as I am," "My church is caring," and "My church is friendly," were tabulated to provide a warmth index for the congregation. The graph shows the percentage of young people who gave their congregation a warm climate score—one of 4.0 or higher out of a



possible 5.0 on a four-item measure of warmth in the congregational climate.

Note that only 39 percent of the Adventist youth found their church congregations to meet selected warmth criteria, as compared to 60 to 71 percent of the other church youth groups surveyed. Examples of youth statistics indicating lack of warmth in interacting with adults include the following:

- Only 44 percent of Adventist youth agree, "My church feels warm." Compare that with

63 percent of mainline Protestant youth and 74 percent of Baptist youth.¹⁵

- Only 59 percent of Adventist youth say they have a good conversation with their parents more than three times a month.¹⁶

- Only 41 percent of Adventist 10th, 11th, and 12th graders agree that “I can be myself when at church.”¹⁷

- Only 28 percent feel that the Adventist church encourages their questions (in contrast to 45 percent of mainline Protestant youth and 58 percent of youth in the Southern Baptist Church).¹⁸

Adventist youth don't feel much warmth from their friends, either. Table 2 shows how Adventist youth compared with youth in other denominations in terms of peer concern.

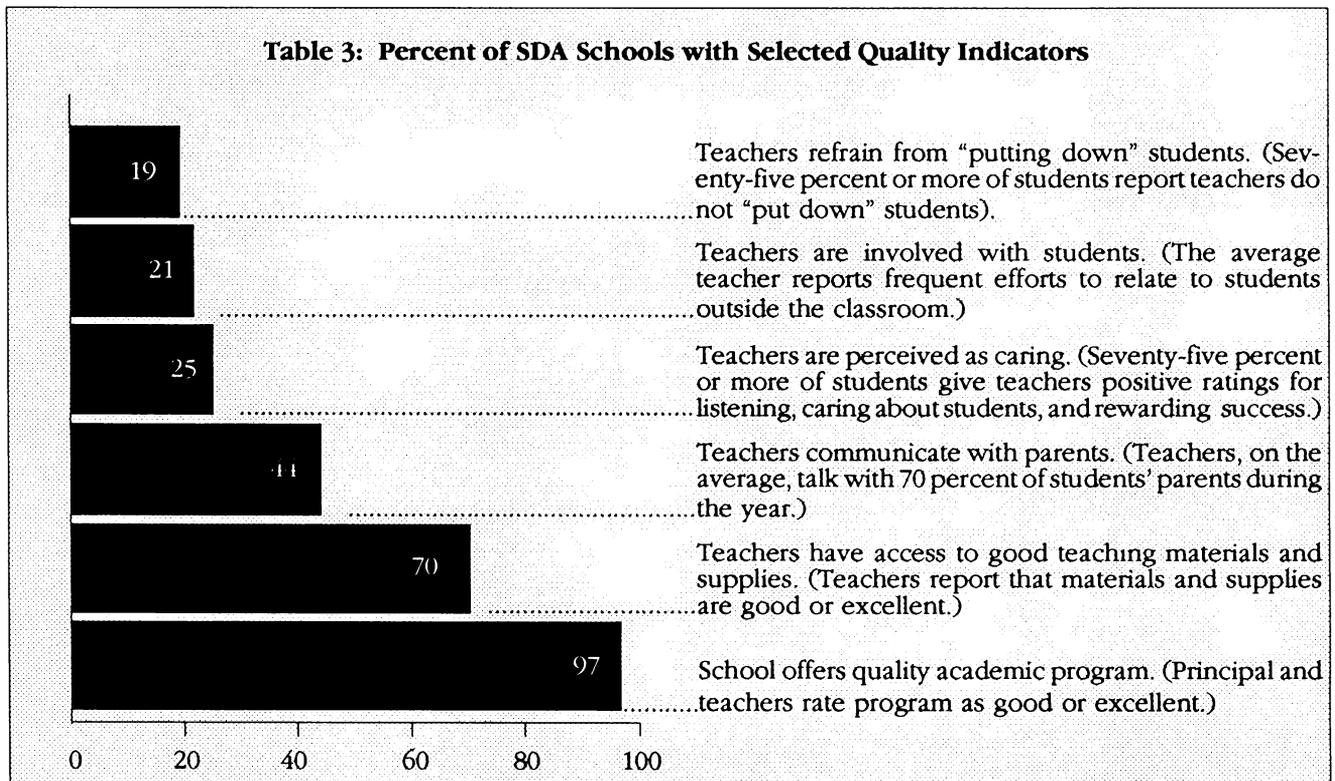
Table 2 indicates that the perception of a cold church seems to continue beyond the adult or corporate church climate. Adventist youth perceive less care and concern from their peers than do other groups of church

young people. Only 35 percent of the Adventist youth agreed that their peers cared. The five mainline Protestant denominations averaged 39 percent agreement. Fifty-four percent of the Baptist youth agreed that “other youth in the church care about me.”

Not only do Adventist youth experience little warmth in their church setting, but it also appears that they do not perceive warmth in their schools. Thirty-two school quality indicators were evaluated in the third Valuegenesis research report. Adventist schools fared well in many measures, particularly those related to competence and excellence. However, in contrast, warmth, concern, and belonging rated low.

Table 3 shows the percentage of all Adventist K-12 schools that meet criteria for selected measures of high quality. Note in particular the top three items—measures that related to warmth, concern, and caring. Only 19 percent of the schools, for example, could boast that 75 percent of the students agreed that teachers

Table 3: Percent of SDA Schools with Selected Quality Indicators



refrain from putting down students.

It is sobering to see that in Table 3 fewer than one-third of the Adventist schools in North America meet suggested criteria for warmth and caring. This means that students see most teachers in Adventist schools as uncaring, uninvolved, and ready to put students down.

Happily, there is a growing recognition that warmth and care are extremely important. Project Affirmation, in addition to sponsoring the Valuegenesis research project, has spearheaded an intensive effort to include church members at all levels in planned progress. "Visioning Sessions," conducted by trained lay leaders throughout the North American Division, have allowed hundreds of church members to look in depth at the realities facing the Adventist church, with a particular focus on the youth and Adventist schools. Recently, some of these participants responded to the question of where our priorities should be placed.¹⁹ Table 4 shows selected items and the level of support for them.

As adults look for strategies to strengthen the ties of our youth to the church, it is imperative that they recognize the need to increase communication between generations, improve the sense of belonging among all members, and raise the level of Christian concern within our institutions.

We have seen that a caring, supportive

environment is essential to Christian nurture. Adventist youth with high faith maturity and denominational loyalty are those who perceive they are surrounded with several caring environments—home, church, and school. Valuegenesis research also shows that one of these is not enough. The chances for high maturity and loyalty increase dramatically as the number of positive environments increase.

- If sixth through eighth grade students experience no environments that are effective

(combining support, warmth, and high-quality religious instruction), their probability of demonstrating high faith and church loyalty is only seven out of 100.

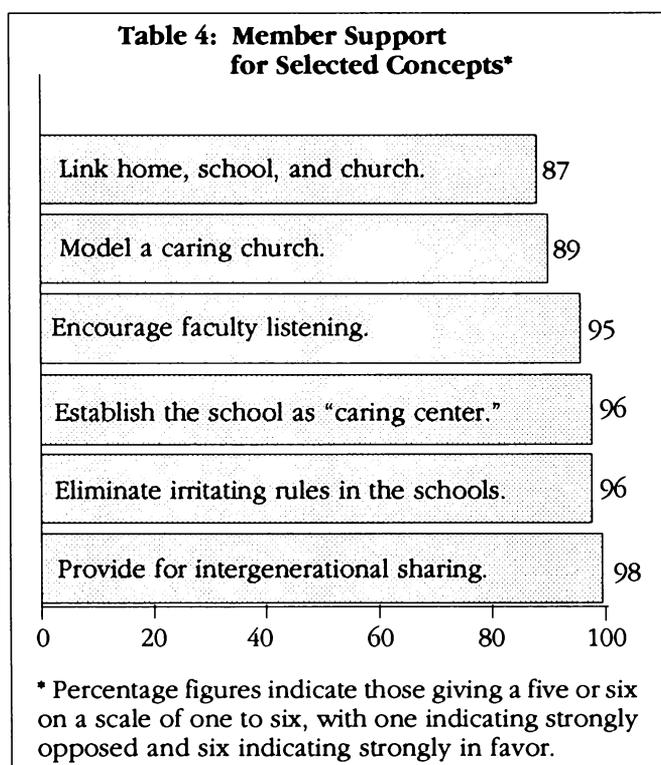
- If those same students experience all three environments as effective (home, church, and school), the chances increase to 56 out of 100—an eight-fold change.

- With secondary students, the faith-loyalty chances have a 10-fold increase—rising from five out

of 100 to 53 out of 100.²⁰

These statistics greatly increase our commitment to place our youth in not one, or even two, but three effective environments. If parents want their children to have a strong commitment to Christianity and Adventism, they have a responsibility to provide them with care and love in their homes. They must do what they can to help Adventist young people see their homes, schools, and churches as caring.

Table 4: Member Support for Selected Concepts*



How can we improve? As a result of their findings, Valuegenesis researchers recommend that families, congregations, and schools strive to create a greater spirit of warmth and openness. They suggest providing more opportunities for youth to discuss differing ideas openly, with the knowledge that they will not be judged or disapproved. Researchers further encourage us to create a climate of openness in our homes, schools, and churches that welcomes people who are different from us. Congregations should involve children and youth on a regular basis in planning, preparing, and presenting church programs.

One reason people fail to express concern is that they have not thought about good ways to do it. It isn't "phony" to plan strategies to communicate caring and concern. Adventist youth need to hear that they are loved. They need to be overwhelmed with positive messages from their homes, schools, and churches. A number of books contain helpful suggestions, such as *52 Simple Ways to Tell Your Child, "I Love You."*²¹ This little book, in its 52 short chapters, talks to parents about sharing love in very tangible ways. It suggests telling your children you love them, praying for the child and with the child, using sign language and nicknames to communicate that they are special, and sending cards to convey messages of love, appreciation, and concern. Many of these ideas can be used by groups of caring adults in church congregations, youth leaders in the Sabbath school, and teachers and administrators in the schools.²²

The following suggestions for adults come from Adventist youth. In private interviews and focus groups, the youth answered questions such as, "When did you feel cared about in your churches and schools? What did others do to communicate that to you? What would you suggest to teachers and church members who want to help young people feel

that they are accepted and that they are an important part of the congregation? Is it important?" Here is what they said:

- Take time to be with us. Teachers should hang out in the halls between classes. Don't rush us away all of the time. Look us in the eyes when you talk to us.

- Ask us questions about our homes, jobs, and lives. The adults who know something about us are the ones who give us a chance to talk. Parents should try to be around as much as they can when we're at home.

- Involve us. Invite us to take positions of responsibility in our homes and at the church and the school. If we feel that we are needed, we feel that we belong. If we feel that we would be missed, we are inclined to value our participation.

- Don't be quick to look disapprovingly at our choice of clothes, hairstyles, or jewelry. We are struggling to work out these issues for ourselves. We are very sensitive to your approval. When you give us sideways glances, we feel as if you're judging us and we're not meeting your approval.

- Look for the good in us. Don't worry about embarrassing us when you mention something positive about us to a group of people. We need it desperately. Brag about us all you want. Find ways to tell us we are important and that you love us as often as you can.

- Keep on hugging us and patting us on the back. When we look embarrassed, it's because we are expected to look that way, because we like to think of ourselves as having outgrown all that stuff. That doesn't mean we don't like it. Keep it up. We still need it.

- Come watch us perform. Come to our athletic games at school, come hear our musical groups, come to our practices. We love it when lots of people are there. Organize ways for parents and adult friends to be more involved with our classes at school, our social

events, our Sabbath schools, and our church youth activities. As hard as it is to admit, we really like to be with the adults in our lives.

My husband²³ had a memorable conversation with a Jewish rabbi in Jerusalem one summer several years ago, which highlights the importance that his religion places on warmth and concern in the church. The rabbi described three elements in religious commitment—believing, behaving and belonging. In the Jewish tradition, he said, belonging is the most important of these. As Jewish children grow up, they receive constant reminders that they are valued, loved, and cared about. Very little separation occurs between young and old in worship services. They are hugged and encouraged whenever they are together. Like most religions, Judaism involves some pretty specific behavioral considerations and a number of doctrinal beliefs. But when belonging receives primary emphasis, proper understanding and correct actions usually follow.

This fact is illustrated by Brian, an Adventist teenager in the Midwest. Brian grew up in a large family. At the age of 17, he got caught

shoplifting golf balls in a local sporting goods store. The police were called, and Brian found out that he had made a very big mistake. In no time, everyone found out about the incident. However, his parents, teachers, church members, and pastor did not lecture Brian about the evils of stealing. They simply let him talk when he wanted to about what he had learned through the situation. They continued to hug and affirm him. When it was time for Brian to appear in court, 15 of his parents' friends and church members went with him. With that kind of support, the judge was quick to give Brian a light sentence. His final comment to Brian was, "No teenager who has this many supportive adults in his life will make the same mistake twice."

To summarize, recent research shows that Adventist youth hear much more about their behavior and their beliefs than they do about the fact that they are loved and needed in the fellowship of the church. If we are to thrive as a church, we must pay attention to this missing element in the Adventist young person's world.

So hug your kids today.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Elkin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Search Institute, 1990).

² Charles M. Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983), p. 18.

³ Merton Strommen, *Five Cries of Youth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 38.

⁴ Dudley, Roger, *Passing On the Torch* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1986), p. 133.

⁵ For example, see Warren Earl Minder, "A Study of the Relationship Between Church Sponsored K-12 Education and Church Membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," 1985; Robert Rice, "A Study of the Relationship Between Attending Seventh-day Adventist Academies 9-12 and Subsequent Commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist Church," 1990; and Kenneth Epperson "The Relationship of Seventh-day Adventist

School attendance to Seventh-day Adventist Church Membership in the Southern Union Conference," 1985.

⁶ Robert S. Folkenberg, "Nurturing Our Next Generation Through the School," *Adventist Review*, (January 3, 1991), p. 17.

⁷ Eliot Daley and Mitchell Seltzer, *Seventh-day Adventist Planning Research: A Survey of Church Members and Special Constituencies* (Princeton: Seltzer Daley Companies, 1987).

⁸ Project Affirmation encompasses taskforces, vision-to-action planning, and the involvement of hundreds of church employees, professionals, and trained lay persons in its on-going assessment and change process to bring about revitalization of the church. Headed by Dr. Charles T. Smith, it is considered to be an ambitious and creative attempt to bring together major resources and personnel for church revitalization.

⁹ Peter L. Benson and Michael Donahue,

Valuegenesis: Report 3: A Study of School Quality, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Search Institute Publications, July 1991), p. 4.

¹⁰ An unabridged copy of the Valuegenesis report and all four Project Affirmation task force reports can be obtained for \$5, including postage, from the Office of Education, North American Division, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600.

¹¹ The Valuegenesis project committee included C. Thomas Smith, Steve Case, Stuart Tyner, Peter L. Benson, Michael Donahue, Melvin Davis, Roger Dudley, Edwin Hernandez, Jan Kuzma, Marvin Nygaard, Gail Rice, and Won Kil Yoon.

¹² See table 1 for the five denominations that were studied. (Whenever the five are grouped together, they do not include the Southern Baptist Church, which is cited freestanding).

¹³ See the Valuegenesis reports for a complete list of all 41 effectiveness factors, divided into church, home, and school categories.

¹⁴ Peter L. Benson, and Michael J. Donahue, *Valuegenesis: Report 1*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Search Institute Publication, 1990), p. 32.

¹⁵ *Risk and Promise: A Report of the Project Affirmation Taskforces* (North American Division, 1990),

p. 13.

¹⁶ Summary of responses of 11,954 youth to item 286 on youth questionnaire.

¹⁷ *Risk and Promise*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Project Affirmation Survey Results: Values, Faith, and Commitment," Unpublished document, January 23, 1990.

²⁰ Benson and Donahue, *Valuegenesis: Report 1*, p. 24.

²¹ Jan Dargatz, *52 Simple Ways to Tell Your Child "I Love You."* Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, Tenn., 1991.

²² Valuegenesis researchers are in the process of developing a series of three books designed to provide concrete suggestions to improve the home, church, and school environments. The "Making a Difference" series will incorporate suggestions received from young people and adults as they study the research findings. For more information, contact Dr. V. Bailey Gillespie from the John Hancock Youth Center at the La Sierra University Press.

²³ Richard Rice, "Believing, Behaving, Belonging—Exploring a Larger View of Faith," *Spectrum*, 20:3, (April 1990).