

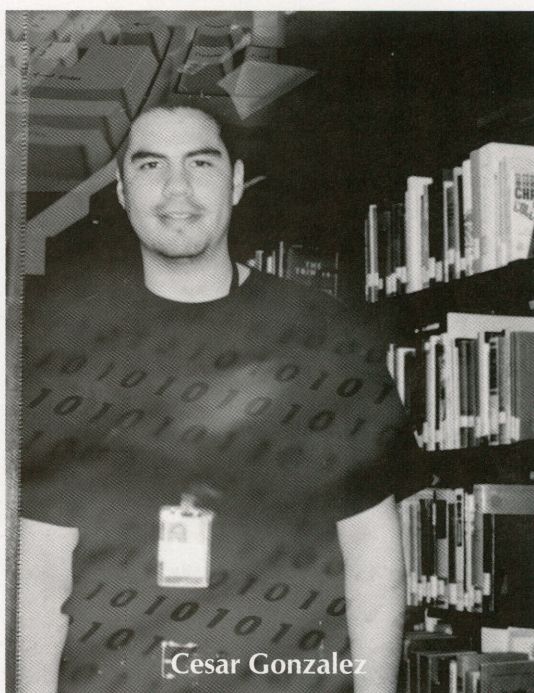
The Technology Tipping Point

by Bettina Krause

Giving young adults “a place at the table” or “a piece of the pie” still dominates discussions about the role of young people within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This model gauges youth power in the Church by the number of seats administrators have allowed under-30s to occupy on church committees or think tanks. But this top-down view of power relations within the Church obscures how far young adults are already transforming the culture of the Adventist Church.

In a practical sense, it is under-30s who are in a position to empower and equip the Church, not just the other way round. In the media-saturated, technology-driven society of the West, young adults are custodians of a language that the Adventist Church must learn in order to effectively communicate the gospel of Christ to a new generation.

For under-30s, postmodernism is not an academic theory, it's a worldview. They don't have to read Foucault or Derrida to know that their peers distrust concepts presented as absolute truth. They may not have heard about “deconstruction,” but they're unlikely to accept authoritative pronouncements—political, religious or



Cesar Gonzalez

moral—on face value. And they're quick to understand emerging technology and sense its potential.

At the Church's North American and world headquarters, leaders are recognizing, in ways that go beyond mere tokenism, the unique contribution of young adults. Technological expertise and media savvy are propelling more of those under thirty into positions of influence. The process may not necessarily be intentional, but as the Church ventures further into the fields of media technology and communication, under-30s are playing an increasingly important role as guides through society's new, postmodern landscape.

"The church is changing; there's no way around that," says Cesar Gonzalez, who at twenty-seven years describes himself as a "mid-pack Gen X-er." Gonzalez, an assistant in the North American Division youth department, was a participant in Roger Dudley's study, filling out two surveys before leaving the Church in his late teens. ("I was one of the ones they lost track of.") In his early twenties Gonzalez came back, convinced that the Adventist Church was on the road to irrelevancy among his peers unless it could start to communicate more effectively with young adults. After peddling the idea of an online youth magazine to a number of different church leaders, he was talked into heading up the project himself.

It's not always an easy work environment, admits Gonzalez. The often hierarchical administrative structure he encounters at the church headquarters is the opposite of the "very decentralized, grassroots-based method of leadership" favored by people under thirty.



Celeste Ryan

"You go into a meeting and you're sitting there with a group of people whose children are older than you are," says Gonzalez. "Suddenly you represent, embodied in one person, an entire generation. And you have that weight on you. At the same time, however, the generation that you're representing has trouble really trusting you because they see you as part of the establishment simply for working in this building."

Gonzalez believes, though, that the Church in North America is making real progress and is moving beyond a head-in-the-sand approach to the challenges of reaching out to a postmodern generation.

Gonzalez has helped construct The Connect Network—a Web site-based network of 170 young adult ministries, more than 350 ministry individuals, and an e-mail list that serves more than 1,700 Adventist young adults across North America (Web address: www.saltyfish.net). Gonzalez says that another breakthrough project in the works is a video series, "Seven Nights," aimed at educating local churches and leaders about how to effectively communicate church teachings, like tithe-paying, to postmodern kids.

Despite the challenges he sees, Gonzalez is allowing himself some cautious optimism. He cites Impact Toronto 2000, the youth-initiated program of community service and outreach that ran simultaneously with the recent General Conference Session in Toronto, Canada, in July this year, as an example of continuing youth engagement with the Church. "Yes, there is hope," says Gonzalez. "More and more we're



John Beckett

being asked to be at the table where decisions are being made and plans are being made.”

A quarter of all people who work in the both the General Conference and the North American Division headquarters are under thirty-five. In the Information Systems Services of the General Conference—the computer support department—those under thirty-five fill 40 percent of the positions.¹

John Beckett, 23, is the youngest departmental assistant director at the General Conference. Working in the communication department as webmaster for the Adventist Church’s Web site, Beckett is largely responsible for the image of the Church received by the 12,000-plus people who visit the site each week. He started work with the General Conference in mid-1999, and says he came from the corporate sector, where there was “a tendency to micro-manage.” In contrast, Beckett says, the high level of autonomy and trust invested in him at the General Conference “took a while to sink in.”

“It was amazing how much freedom I had, and continue to have, in developing the site,” Beckett says. “The management style here assumes that people are going to use their common sense and do the right thing most of the time.”

Beckett, who keeps an eye on the Web sites of other Christian denominations, believes the Adventist Church is “definitely forward-looking” when it comes to using new technology. “Because of this, there seem to be more and more young people working in this building who have jobs relating to computers, or video

and media technology.” Beckett also speculates that the “fairly flat pay scale”—with no huge differentiation between starting and senior salaries—is attractive to younger people who start out in tech-related fields.

If there’s any truth to Marshall McLuhan’s old adage that the medium is the message, then young adults are helping to shape the Adventist message to society in more ways than one. Media relations—developing a proactive, ongoing relationship with the media—is a field that is just being revived for the Adventist Church, says Celeste Ryan, who was 28 when she was named media relations coordinator for the Church in North America. “In the past we’ve been primarily reactive; concentrating on putting out media fires when they flare up, rather than giving the media a consistent stream of good news about the Church and its activities.”

Although Ryan believes that the qualities of a good public relations professional remain the same regardless of the age factor, she agrees that the sound bite generation may be more aware of the untapped potential for furthering the Church’s mission through the media.

Like Gonzalez, Ryan fell into church work while chasing a big idea. In 1991, at 21, she founded the youth-orientated magazine *The View*, using the only computer in the North American Division Youth Department during the youth director’s lunch breaks. Now, in her role as a media liaison and spokesperson, Ryan, 30, is very often the voice of the Adventist Church in North America for the secular media.

“In a number of departments here, there’s an increasing tendency to give young adults a chance; to trust them with more responsibility,” says Ryan. In return, Ryan believes under-30s contribute enthusiasm—“We can’t help dreaming big”—and, in the communication field, a knowledge of media that has been imbibed since childhood rather than learned from a book.

Notes and References

1. Statistics as of August 2000, from the human resources department that serves both the General Conference and North American Division church headquarters.

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