

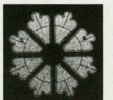
Future Church: Young People and Their Commitment to Adventism

By V. Bailey Gillespie

When I was much younger, I loved everything about space. I would go to the movies on Saturdays before I became an Adventist and wait in line with my friends for the weekly serial. The future fascinated me, and movies that featured Flash Gordon would always end each segment with a cliffhanger. He could solve the problems of the world in one brief half-hour every single week, right on schedule. I would watch his spaceship, which was actually a model suspended by wire, its engines burning, the rocket trailing smoke, and just knew there was an actual starship beyond.

When I got older and became a church member, I realized that those movies were, in essence, a microcosm of the world. When I finally learned the Great Controversy story, I understood that the macrocosm of the battle between good and evil would only be resolved by the good grace of God through Christ and that the problems of this world would eventually be negated only through the action of God. There never would be enough time for Flash Gordon to solve it all. This hero was good, but not really great.

I learned that, to fix local problems, I needed to make good choices and get involved with God. Change for the good would happen only if I implemented my understanding of God's plan in my life. Change in general happens anyway, but good change is intentional. God proved that by coming to earth the first time and will guarantee it through his next appearance. I realized that if change were going to happen in my lifetime, it would take more than me wishing for it; I needed to do something.



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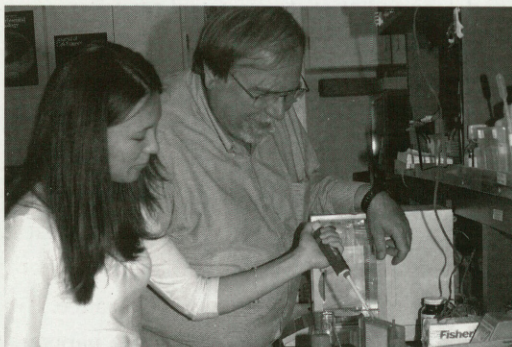
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Long before Valuegenesis research began in the 1990s, we had decades of excellent studies that identified which strategies for change might work and which would probably fail. We have all experienced the folly of bandwagon solutions, reactions, and technological panaceas, and we should have learned by now about how to bring about change that persists. But all too often we haven’t.¹

The most recent Valuegenesis research concluded in 2000. It studied young people in Adventist schools, grades six through twelve, and focused on faith, values, and commitment in three important venues of experience: home, church, and school. Since then, we have given our findings to conference groups, pastoral meetings, churches, and school boards. Toward the end of our statistical presentations, I often get two questions: “So...just what did you find out?” and “What do we really need to do to make a difference?”²

If we truly want to make a difference, we should listen to the young people of the Church. What they say and how they have reacted to our denominational presence may give us a glimpse of how the Church today is becoming their church of tomorrow.

What Did We Discover?

First, we discovered that the young people we surveyed claim a relationship with Christ. Fifty-nine percent had tried directly to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ during the past year; two-thirds had shared with others the work of God in their lives; and 40 percent had encouraged someone to join the Adventist Church.

We also learned that religion plays a major role in their lives. We asked the question, “How important is religious faith in your life?” Whereas ten years ago about half (50%) responded positively, ten years later, more than half (58%) gave the same testimony. Only a stark 2 percent said that religion was not an important influence in their lives at all.

If one looks at personal piety as an indicator of commitment, the youths we studied do well. Ninety-one percent prayed privately on at least a weekly basis; 73 percent prayed at least once a day; and only 2 percent never prayed at all.

Compare this with ten years ago, when 53 percent prayed at least once a day and only two-thirds prayed privately on a weekly basis. To say that this generation is more “spiritual,” no matter how one defines this term, is an understatement.

Good News about Grace

One critical area in the 1990 Valuegenesis study involved the process of salvation. Although the Adventist position on this issue is clear—we are strong advocates of salvation through grace by faith—we noticed then that over two-thirds (67%) of young people were confused about it. In our new research, these concerns were explored further and a number of additional questions were included to clarify this confusion. In addition, we identified a “Love of God” scale.

Our youth demonstrate a clear understanding of God’s rich love. Some 95 percent understand God’s love and are sure that “God loves them no matter what”! But what two-thirds of our subjects saw in 1990 as confusion over the process of salvation is currently reflected by slightly over 50 percent—a decrease in ten years of more than 17 percent.

The Importance of Being Adventist

In our 2000 study, respondents seem to feel strongly about being Adventists. Seventy-one percent believe it is important or extremely important to attend a church of their own denomination. However, the percentage that claim it is not important has risen markedly over the past decade—from 9 percent to 26 percent. It seems that loyalty to God is strong, but that specific denominational loyalty is waning. Still, in 2000, 74 percent indicated that there was a “good” or “excellent” chance that they would be Adventists at age forty. Only 6 percent saw no chance at all.

We also see strong commitment to Adventist beliefs. On a five-point scale of orthodoxy, which reflects all beliefs traditionally held in Adventism, the average value was 4.23 at the sixth-grade level and 4.44 in the twelfth grade. Again, Valuegenesis points to strong adherence to the core of Adventist beliefs. Furthermore, it seems clear that students are better able to understand some of the more complex doctrinal statements as they grow older. For example, in response to a question that explores the millennium, 40 percent “definitely believe” in it in the sixth grade, whereas 64 percent do in the twelfth.

Faith Maturity

A significant change has occurred in faith maturity scores when we compare findings from the 1990 study to those in 2000. In 1990, we balanced the vertical faith experience

(prayer, personal religion, meditation, Bible study, and so forth) with the horizontal (sharing, caring, witnessing, and so forth), only to discover that only one in five students had a rich and growing faith.

What was the problem? we were asked. We attributed the low level of faith maturity to such problems as lack of youth ministry in local churches, emotional coldness, and thinking climates unfriendly to youth.

But now we have better news in regard to this part of our study. In recent years, mature faith scores have increased 100 percent. This means that something significant has happened since our first report. However, we need to evaluate our satisfaction with the fact that only about 50 percent of our youth understand our grace orientation in the process of salvation.

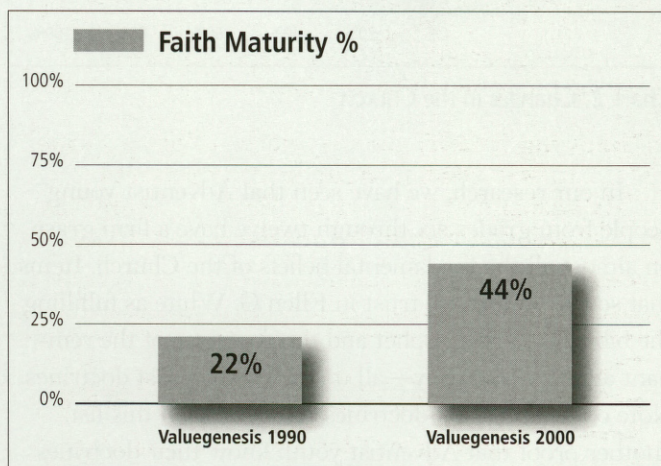


Chart 1. Faith Maturity Scale Percentages

From 1990 to 2000, the Adventist Church has experienced an 8 percent decrease in orientation toward law, too. The movement is in the right direction. However, it is obvious that some confusion still exists as to the proper role of works in God’s plan for these young lives.

So What Should We Conclude?

Much can be learned from this research, but there is not enough space here to share all the details of the survey, which included 369 questions. However, it is clear that some trends can be detected. For example, we wanted to know what it would take to change the Church into a place where faith would grow and members would consider themselves a part of the church of Christ. So we asked: “To feel com-



fortable bringing a friend to church, what needs to happen?" Students could choose as many answers as they felt appropriate. Their responses are seen in Chart 2.

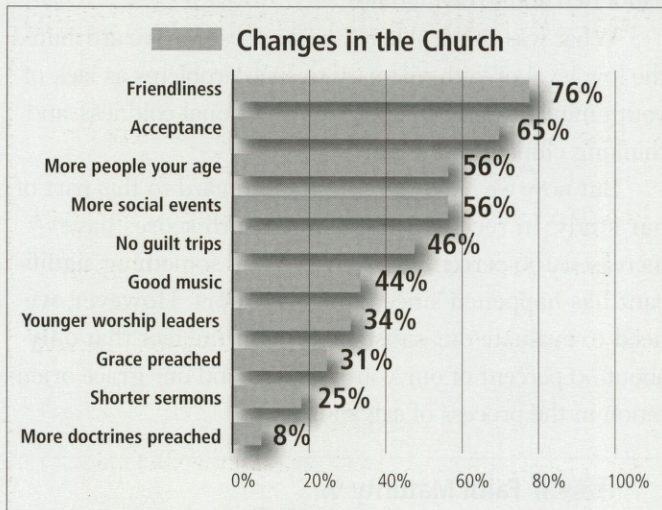


Chart 2. Changes in the Church

In our research, we have seen that Adventist young people from grades six through twelve have a firm grasp on almost all the fundamental beliefs of the Church. Items that scored lowest are trust in Ellen G. White as fulfilling the biblical role of prophet and the doctrines of the remnant and the sanctuary—all uniquely Adventist doctrines. Note on Chart 2 that doctrines scored low on this list, another proof that Adventist youth know their doctrines and don't need to be reminded of them continually.

Items that scored highest involved personal climate issues such as friendliness, acceptance, social events, and attendance at a church relevant to one's age group. These crucial issues continue to rise to the top of students' concerns about the Church. Each is extremely important in building a sense of commitment and loyalty to it.

Is There an Adventist Attitude?

Belief and behavior go together. Understanding and making decisions are closely related. Attitudes that young people have toward their church are also important. All too often these attitudes are connected to the methods used to enforce Adventist lifestyle issues. How youth perceive their church is important for feelings of acceptance and pride taken in ownership.

We have identified an "Adventist Attitude" scale that contains eight statements concerning standards and their enforcement. Students could respond on a scale that ranged from "never true" to "always true." Using factor

analysis, we discovered a strong relationship between them, and we formed a reliable scale that helps us see how the enforcement of Adventist lifestyle standards affects the attitude of youths toward the Church in general. The sidebar provides a close look at each of these statements.

Slightly more one-third of the respondents said that the Church emphasizes rules and standards so much that the essential message of Christianity seems to get lost. Almost one-half of the respondents suggest that adults don't "walk as they talk." So hypocrisy among older generations causes some concern for this group.

This scale provides us with a particularly useful insight into these attitudes among youths in the Church and how to lessen their impact on them. When we look at the total number of students who have an Adventist Attitude, we note that 19 percent of group have a negative outlook and that three out of ten are in the middle of the scale. Fifty-two percent of them reject this attitude altogether.

As one looks at the development of this Adventist Attitude through the grades, it is interesting to see that the percent that rejects it decreases from 70 percent in the sixth grade to 44 percent in the twelfth. Persons who have this negative outlook are more likely to declare that they will not be Adventists when they are forty years old.

Youths and an Adventist Attitude

- Non-Adventists laugh when they hear what Adventists are forbidden to do (39%).
- Some adults insist on certain rules or standards for younger Adventists that they do not observe themselves (46%).
- The feeling is conveyed in the Adventist Church that how one behaves is more important than what one believes (44%).
- Emphasis on Adventist rules and standards is so strong that the message of Christianity gets lost (38%).
- Adventists are loaded down with too many restrictions (29%).
- Students breaking a school standard or rule in Adventist schools are punished too harshly (27%).
- Adventist rules and standards just don't make sense (18%).
- People respect Adventists for their high moral standards (41%).

The correlation between this attitude and support for Adventist standards is negative, except for health and sports issues. Conversely, the more youths like their church's services, the less they demonstrate this attitude. Also, exhibition of this attitude decreases the more one perceives attendance at an Adventist school as important for faith development.

What Can We Say Then?

In summary, if you want your children to build a deep, personal relationship with God, one that is both devotional and compassionate, positive warmth and a thinking climate in school and church are crucial. Stated differently, the initial evidence is that positive climate scores reduce the negative Adventist Attitude.

More than any other factor, a warm and thinking climate assists in developing a more positive attitude toward the Seventh-day Adventist Church among students. Also, if students say that they like their school, they are less likely to see hypocrisy in their church. In other words, do your job well and nice things will happen.

A more mature, intrinsic faith coupled with a positive view of Adventist culture has the ability to generate less hypocrisy and a closer relationship with the Church when it comes to commitment to God and the Church's mission.

Notes and References

1. This article and synopsis of the Valuegenesis research is taken from our latest book, *Valuegenesis—Ten Years Later: A Study of Two Generations*, by V. Bailey Gillespie, Michael J. Donahue, with Ed Boyatt, and Barry Gane (Lincoln, Nebr.: AdventSource and Hancock Center Publications, 2004).

2. The findings reported here are based on more than sixteen thousand Seventh-day Adventist youths in Seventh-day Adventist schools throughout the North American Division during the 2000 school year. The research was contrasted with the findings of the 1990 Valuegenesis research report in Roger Dudley and V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992).

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—Norman Cousins

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