

Conversations Across the Generational Divide | BY BONNIE DWYER

It was one of the most difficult conversations I ever witnessed. It was immediately after the 2016 U.S. election, and a month after the General Conference Annual Council session in which there was consideration of the General Conference taking over the unions that had voted to ordain women. The surprise element of both events had been unnerving. When the Adventist religion scholars gathered for their annual conference, six young scholars were invited to address the question “Does Adventism Inspire Young Adventists?” for a panel discussion on Sabbath morning. Their responses were honest, direct, and heartbreaking. Yes, they had been inspired by specific individuals within Adventism and blessed by the support of the community. But there was more to say. They also addressed the racism, misogyny, and problems within the church that were driving their peers out the back door. When it came time for the audience to respond and ask questions, the difficulties took over. First, there were apologies. “You are our best and brightest. We are sorry for the bad experiences that you have had.” There were questions, “What is your problem, you all have jobs?” There were reminiscences from older faculty about enduring through past institutional conflicts with the implicit idea that they had put up with bad stuff, too, why couldn’t the younger generation just tough it out. And there were long pauses after each question with no one exactly sure how to answer.

At the 2017 meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, the Sabbath morning program again involved a panel of young scholars. This time they had been asked to review William Johnsson’s recent book *Where are We Headed? Adventism after San Antonio*. Again, the responses were honest and thoughtful. Because their questions were addressed to the book, perhaps

it was easier on the audience. But the divide was still there. “Millennials are not likely coming back any time soon (short of a miracle),” Matthew Korpman said. “There will not be a revival which we can plan to accomplish this. The damage has been done: spiritually, theologically, and personally.”

In this issue of *Spectrum*, we feature the words of these young scholars to lead our section on Looking Forward with the hope that we can keep this important conversation going. We also consider other difficult topics of the day such as guns in church and thank Terese Thonus for helping us think about the unthinkable.

“One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears—by listening to them,” the statesman Dean Rusk famously said. We hope that reading and listening to the voices of the authors in this issue will enhance the generational conversation now ongoing within Adventism. There are very real divides over what should or should not be an issue. The one thing that I know is that we need each other. Listening to each other is crucial to staying in conversation together, whatever the topic and whether we like the topic or not.

Donny Chrissutianto concludes his response to Johnsson’s book optimistically, and I share his hope. “All of these conflicts in the history of the Church, whether doctrines or practices, could be settled by allowing unceasing discussion in a Christ-like spirit and through Bible study. From these facts, when we face the challenges that Johnsson has identified in this book, by showing the love of Jesus in our discussion and unending study of the Bible, I am confident by God’s grace, we also can have consensus in solving our differences today.” ■

Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.