

The Demise of *Insight*: What Killed Adventism's Youth Magazine, and What We Should Do About It | BY TOMPAUL WHEELER

Young people are a problem. Toddlers in Beginners Sabbath School are fun and cute. The elementary age kids in Primary learn like a sponge. High school-age youth, though, are “difficult.” They require the most investment. They are ungrateful. They question everything you do. They’re apathetic. They push boundaries, and you see no return in your investment for decades. But their spiritual growth and involvement are an investment we must make.

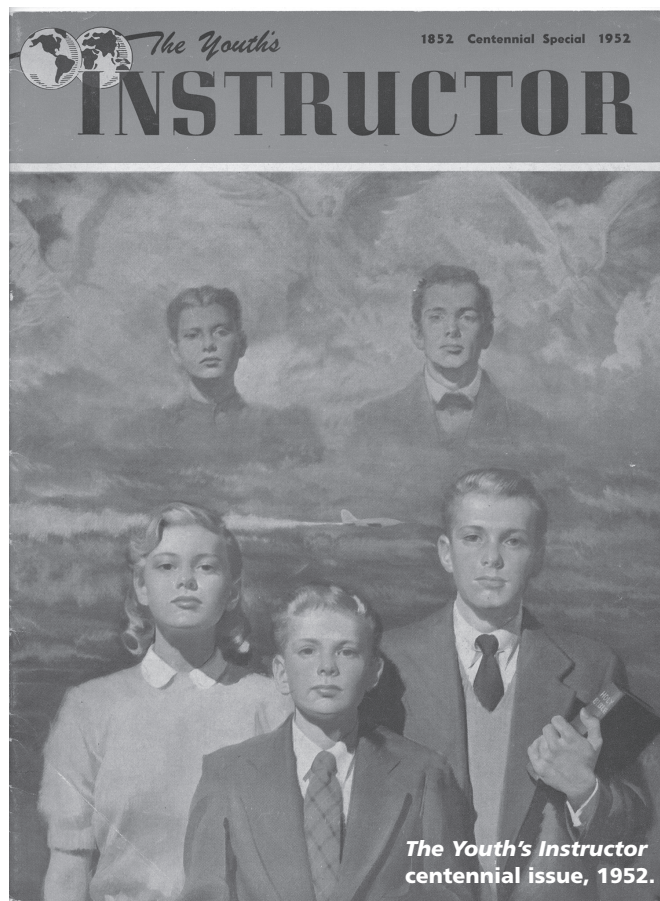
In August 1852, the fledgling Adventist believers started their second magazine, for young people: *The Youth's Instructor*. (Adventism's first magazine, *The Present Truth*, launched three years earlier, is now known as *Adventist Review*.) By the late 1960s, *Instructor* had grown far out of touch with young people, so, in 1970, a new magazine was launched: *Insight*. *Insight* aimed to meet youth where they were, addressing their issues with openness and honesty. It lasted forty-seven years. Its last issue was July 1, 2017.

Subscriptions had steadily declined for years. Pacific Press Publishing Association acquired *Insight* in a merger at the same time it became a North American Division (NAD) institution, in 2014, but deferred to the NAD as to the magazine's fate. The consensus of representative youth leaders was to discontinue the publication and, in January 2017, the NAD voted to end it. As of this writing, there are no concrete plans for anything to fill its void.

What Killed *Insight*?

Fear

I recently read an Adventist blog¹ that stated, “you have to feed the culture you want to grow in a church. You don't make healthy churches by jumping through hoops for unhealthy people. Instead, you encourage



and support healthy people.”

When it was launched, aimed at high school and college-age youth, *Insight* was perhaps the most thought-provoking publication in the church. Over roughly the past fifteen years, however, I repeatedly witnessed an attitude of “Let's be careful about including this or that because the ‘gatekeepers’ may not approve (and then they'll stop subscribing for their youth).” That attitude took for granted that teens would keep reading a cautious magazine. The result, I believe, was a stale publication that teens increasingly tuned out of, and since they weren't taking them out of the classroom, the gatekeepers—individual churches—stopped

subscribing for their youth.

"It's fear morphed to cowardice," reflects recently retired Union College humanities professor, Chris Blake, who edited *Insight* from 1985 to 1993. "People who claim to be followers of the One who took constant criticism from the ultra-religious will now, to avoid criticism from the same type of people, balk and veer and cease and desist. It's so bizarre. Cowardice owns the day."

Blake sees a parallel in the unreleased General Conference video production *The Record Keeper*. A retelling of Adventism's Great Controversy narrative targeted at young adults, *Record Keeper* garnered over 23,000 likes on its Facebook page based on just a trailer and short pilot episode, signifying a vast, untapped audience. Reflects Blake, "*Record Keeper* typified exactly the problems with the church trying to be creative. If all you care about is being right, then creativity will wither on the vine."

In 1970, the Adventist church axed *The Youth's Instructor* because, as Charles Scriven remembers, "the magazine was drab in appearance, highly conventional in outlook, and wasn't reaching the kind of young Adventist that was beginning to have an impact in the sixties." Scriven, who would go on to serve as president of Columbia Union College and Kettering College, served as part of *Insight's* first editorial team. *Insight's* first issue started with what passed for a bang on May 5, 1970—a cover image of a classical guitar, and the headline, "The Church and Huckleberry Finn." The cover story, by merikay, "was about a kid who didn't look quite right coming to church, getting a chilly welcome," Scriven recalls. "It was a statement of identification with younger, more intellectually adventurous Adventists."

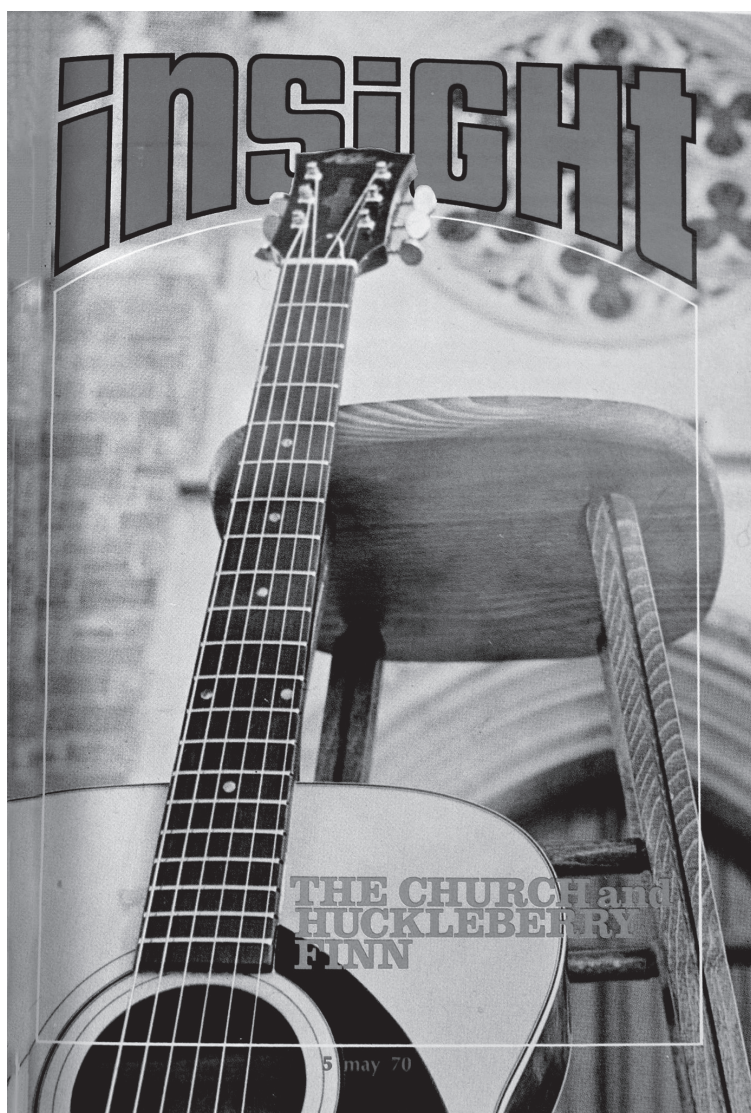
Insight's early years didn't shy away from the era's controversial issues, from long hair and beards to racism, war, and abortion. It dug deep into hard-hitting subjects like sexual harassment and date rape. A 1970s issue featured an interview with Pastor Josephine Benton. In

MAY WE SUGGEST

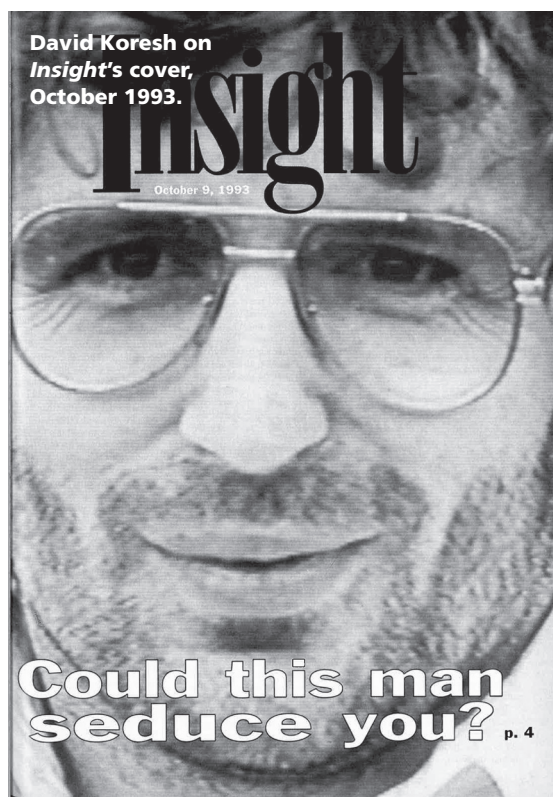
to all YOUTH'S INSTRUCTOR subscribers that the future is bright! Even though your magazine will cease publication soon, you will not go un-nourished by vigorous Christian journalism. The publishers of **INSIGHT**, a new magazine for young Adventists, announce with pleasure that, beginning on May 5, you will receive **INSIGHT** in fulfillment of your present subscription. We think you will be pleased by the unflinching candor and daring Christian commitment that will characterize the pages of

INSIGHT

Launch ad for *Insight in Youth's Instructor*. Below: the first issue of *Insight*, May 1970.



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September 1980 she was interviewed again, alongside two others, for the article “Three Women in the Pulpit.”

Insight frequently tackled contemporary culture and current events. A 1980s piece explored the question “Would Mork like Adventists?” while other articles touched on such topics as Kurt Cobain and Princess Diana. A groundbreaking 1992 issue addressed homosexuality. The October 9, 1993 cover featured a grainy close-up of cult leader David Koresh and the headline, “Could this man seduce you?”

Author Trudy J. Morgan-Cole remembers the *Insight* of her youth as one which showed her how to “engage thoughtfully with popular culture, to use faith as the lens through which I could view and learn from the broader culture. It’s what I mainly associate with the *Insight* magazine of the late seventies and early eighties—thoughtful, critical engagement with the wider worlds, with political and social issues and questions of culture—that I didn’t see anywhere else in the church when I was growing up. It had a huge influence on the kind of Adventist I grew up to be.”

Under the editorship of Lori Peckham (1993-2001), *Insight* featured reviews of contemporary Christian music. Given the centrality of music to teen’s lives, it was a feature with great appeal, while helping to extend and build readers’ spiritual lives beyond Saturday morning. After Peckham’s tenure, wishing to avoid controversy, *Insight* ended columns reviewing music and highlighting artists, and readers had one less reason to turn its pages. In its last decade and a half, *Insight* explored real world issues less and less, gravitating instead to a more moralistic focus.

Neglect

Alongside fear of criticism was the fear of the new and the unknown, even as the publishing world hurtled through change.

Chris Blake remembers an early attempt to get *Insight* ahead of the trends. “What I wanted was people on computers communicating with us, to make it interactive. So we had some interactive stuff and pages dedicated to what we heard from [our readers]. In 1992 Lori Peckham and I proposed to change *Insight* to an expanded format (32 pages) every other week and a more online presence (8 pages print) the other weeks. I was informed, after eighteen months of hopping through committee hoops and on the eve of our new launch, that this arrangement ‘wouldn’t work.’”

Insight’s demise came just three years after its former publisher, the Review and Herald Publishing Association, was merged with the Pacific Press Publishing Association. At the time of the RHPA’s dissolution, Pacific Press’s annual sales were about \$2 million lower than those of the RHPA. Though the RHPA was in debt, its financial woes hardly needed to be fatal. It produced a standout lineup of books year after year. The problem was, the church didn’t know what to do with it—and that doesn’t bode well for the future of church publishing, period. Until Adventist media is empowered at all levels to innovate, it will stagnate.

“Many good people worked at the Review

and Herald Publishing Association, but that wasn't enough, obviously," Blake reflects. "Despite some bright lights the RHPA was a dim labyrinth of hubris and mediocrity. Motivated mostly by fear, mired in the past and incompetent committees, lacking vision and accountability, the Review's most telling trait continued to be a dearth of fresh courage. Other than that, it was fine. Seriously, we can do better, but it will take brains and heart and backbone."

Insight finally launched a webpage in 1998. Over nineteen years, its look, format, and content barely changed. (Its most recent video content is from 2012.) In contrast, *Guide*² magazine, the Adventist church's magazine for ten to fourteen year olds, has regularly invested in fresh content for its website. In June 2017, *Guide* had about 11,000 visits to its site. *Insight* had 2,200. Over the years, *Insight's* editors made repeated attempts to increase their online presence, but were never given the support to do so.

For several years in the late 2000s, *Insight's* editor was simultaneously the vice president of the Review and Herald Publishing Association Editorial department. While that may have saved money at a time of tight budgets, it came at a great cost to *Insight's* quality and connection to its audience. *Insight* began to regularly reprint old articles rather than dream up fresh themes and content in tune with the times.

Quality

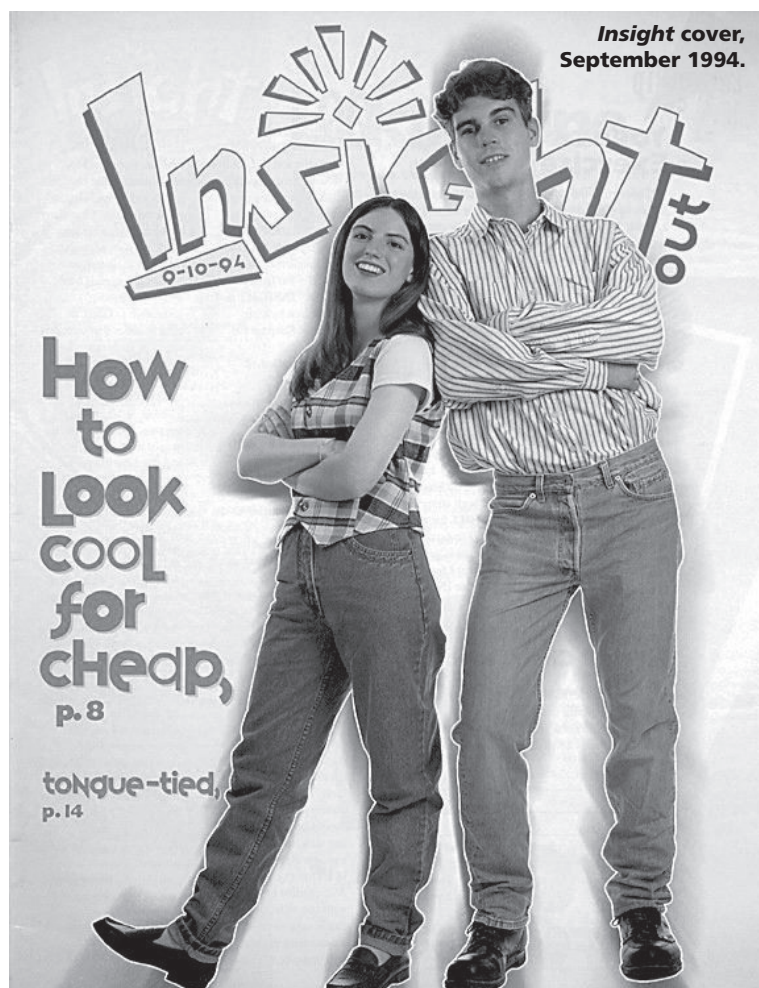
At its peak, *Insight* became a literary hub for Adventists. *Insight* featured the best short-story writing in Adventism, with exceptional and engrossing pieces by such authors as Joan Marie Cook, Arthur Milward, and Gary Swanson. It cultivated writing talent, particularly through its annual writing contest. Winners included future best-selling author Trudy J. Morgan-Cole, and Randy Fishell, who served as an editor for *Guide* magazine for over twenty-five years. The Review and Herald printed two book collections of "*Insight's* Most Unforgetta-

ble Stories." In the magazine's final years, such sharp, engrossing short stories became a thing of the past.

Ignorance

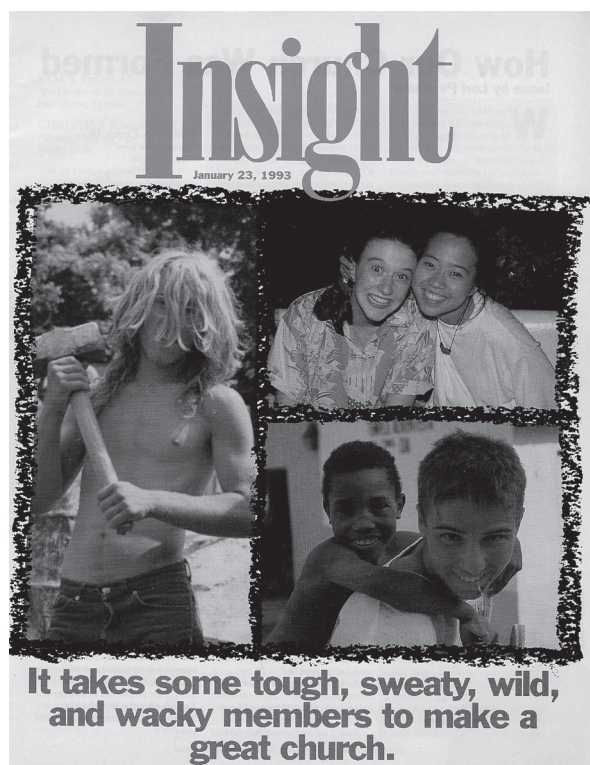
The church has long struggled with marketing (and the reality that its built-in market no longer takes a week's vacation every year to go to camp meeting and buy its wares). *Insight* faced its own challenges of a shifting market. For whatever reason, whether money, culture, or marketing, *Insight* never gained traction in areas where the church was growing. Of the approximately 1,000 Spanish-language Adventist churches in the United States (about one church out of five), only a single one subscribed to *Insight*. The reason churches gave for not subscribing? Because *Insight* was in English—despite the fact that nearly 100 percent of Hispanic teens in the U.S. can read English. First-generation immi-

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Insight cover, January 1993 (left). Charles Haddon Spurgeon on *Insight*'s cover, December 2015 (right).

grant Adventists in the U.S. had not grown up with *Insight*, and didn't know what their youth were missing.

Disconnect

When I first saw the December 12, 2015 issue of *Insight*, with a sepia-toned cover image of nineteenth century "Charles Haddon Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers" looking like Ulysses S. Grant just awakened from a nap, I about hung my head. Somehow, *Insight* had morphed right back into *The Youth's Instructor*. The circle was complete.³

In an era of endless stimuli beamed straight into teens' hands and eyes through their smartphones, *Insight* needed to be both contemporary and timeless. For decades it had broadened minds and encouraged critical thinking. Somehow, in its final years, it simply withdrew into itself.

If you pick up a copy of *Guide*, you'll see a magazine that's both in tune with its audience and constantly reinventing itself. If that were still true of *Insight*, with a strong digital and

audio-visual presence bolstered by a healthy budget, I believe it would still be going strong.

What now?

An Adventist hospital closes, and the story gets lots of publicity. A magazine/ministry that's been in production for 165 years folds, and . . . crickets.

Meanwhile, the church has spent untold millions over the past several decades propping up its media ministries aimed at adults. After all, no one wants to be the guy who killed "It Is Written." Literature for youth, apparently, is much more disposable in Adventism. Audio-visual media for young people in Adventism scarcely exists.

In his 2008 memoir, *Embrace the Impossible*, retired *Adventist Review* editor William Johnsson recounts the quarter century he spent trying to reverse the slide in subscriptions for the church's flagship magazine. Having peaked at over 100,000 in the early 1960s, when the church had just reached a million members worldwide, it had endured a slow but steady

decline, as the generation that once read it cover to cover died. In the mid-1980s, with worldwide membership at five million, Johnson dreamed of getting subscriptions back to 100,000. He tirelessly tried one thing after another to breathe new life into the magazine, but his creative triumphs had only limited impact on subscription numbers. Johnson ends his memoir with a surprise development: the General Conference request to publish a monthly magazine for worldwide distribution, *Adventist World*. Provided free to church members, *World* launched in 2005 with an initial press run of 1.1 million copies.

The Adventist church could have let its leading periodical die. Instead, it has continued to invest in it, believing it a vital resource for connecting and nurturing its community. For its last few years, *Insight* had one full-time employee. Today, *Adventist Review* has about a dozen, including a digital media director, who oversees regular fresh video content, available through its Apple TV app, AR TV. *Adventist Review* receives \$5.5 million in funding from the General Conference each year. The church has decided that's an investment worth making, and I applaud it—but surely we can spare a few dollars for media for young people.

The church needs to put its money where its mouth is. We talk about the parable of the sower, but we aren't willing to wait for the seeds to grow. We find millions for evangelistic series that bring in a handful of new members quickly, but we aren't willing to invest in the young people we already have—even when today's technology makes it easy to reach millions of young people outside the church while we're at it.

Here's my modest proposal. My conference, Kentucky-Tennessee, has roughly one percent of North American Division membership, and spends \$125,000 a year on evangelism. Assuming that's fairly representative, why don't we take a tithe of church evangelism funds—say, \$1.25 million a year—hire a team, and give them a budget to create media—magazines,

music, movies, and more—targeted at young people? It could easily become the church's most prominent outreach.

It's a matter of priorities. We find money for what we care about. In truth, we should invest far more. Right now, though, we spend essentially nothing on media for young people, and that must change.

Frankly, I don't understand how the church can have seen this coming from so far off and still not have done anything about it. *Insight* drifted for years without anyone saying, "Hey—What's happening? How can we better reach young people?" But now is the time to move forward. Hire a team. Give them a budget. Let them loose.

The Adventist church needs young people. Young people, I believe, need the church. Today's youth are plugged into media essentially non-stop, and the church has nothing for them. We must meet them where they are. The trouble is, if the church doesn't produce media that speaks to them, youth won't come looking for it. ■



Tompaul Wheeler is the author of the Adventist church's official 2018 teen devotional, *God Space*, and *Guide* magazine's weekly comic strip, "Bible Sketches,"

soon to be compiled in book form. When he was sixteen, he wrote and photographed a special edition of *Insight* that won third place for journalism from the Evangelical Press Association. A filmmaker in Nashville, Tennessee, he has a Master of Fine Arts in Film from Lipscomb University. He directed the documentary *Leap of Faith: The Ultimate Workout Story*, which tells the story of the Maranatha short-term mission trip for teens *Insight* magazine founded.

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3. <http://www.insightmagazine.org/cover/index.asp?issue-ID=20151650>.

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