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BURST THE BYSTANDER EFFECT: MAKING A DISCIPLING DIFFERENCE WITH YOUNG ADULTS

I first learned the term in my undergraduate social psychology class: *bystander effect*. For the sake of the exam, I just kept in mind that it is not a good idea to be drowning in a lake with a crowd looking on from shore; likely each person is thinking someone else is going to save you. *Wikipedia* (2007) does a better job of defining the effect as “a psychological phenomenon in which someone is less likely to intervene in an emergency situation when other people are present and able to help than when he or she is alone.” The article goes on to reference a variety of horrific incidences where homicides occurred while dozens of “bystanders” just let it happen.

My collegiate years are long gone, and now I give exams instead of taking them, but recently this “phenomenon” has come back to my mind. Preparing to teach a young adult ministry course here at the seminary, I found myself perplexed by how the bystander effect may be impacting you and me, allowing new generations to drown, disappearing from faith life as part of our church.

DISENGAGING, DISENFRANCHISED, DISAPPEARING—DROWNING

In light of his landmark longitudinal study of Adventist adolescents, Roger Dudley (2000) of the Institute of Church Ministry noted, “It seems reasonable to believe that at least 40 to 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s. This figure may well be higher” (p. 35). “This is a hemorrhage of epic proportions,” warned Dudley as he suggested that “the decline in membership of many mainline Protestant churches has been shown to be largely traceable to the shortage of young adults in their congregations” (p. 22).

This young adult exodus is not exclusive to Adventism, as Christian demographer George Barna notes:

The most potent data regarding disengagement is that a majority of twentysomethings—61% of today’s young adults—had been churched at one time during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying). (Barna, 2006, para. 6)

David Kinnaman of the Barna Group elaborates:

The current state of ministry to twentysomethings is woefully inadequate to address the spiritual needs of millions of young adults. These individuals are making significant life choices and determining the patterns and preferences of their spiritual reality while churches wait, generally in vain, for them to return after college or when the kids come. (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2006, para. 8)

It is this disengagement that threatens the present and future of the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America. North American Division (NAD) President, Don Schneider, said the following:

We must [also] concentrate on the young adults of our Church. . . . Young people need to become more fully integrated into the Church. . . . Is there some way of allowing young people to worship in a way that is meaningful while making it safe for them to do so? Young adults must be heard at leadership levels, and their feelings must be given validity” (North American Division, 2005, para. 6).

Compared to the median age of 36 and 37 in the United States and Canada respectively, Paul Richardson of the Center for Creative Ministry reported, “The median age for the Seventh-day Adventist community in North America, including the unbaptized children in church families, is 58. . . . Among native-born White and Black members the median age is even higher” (Center for Creative Ministry, 2006).

Richardson warns that these trends have serious implications:

There are more than 1,000 local churches in the North American Division that have no children or teens at all. . . . Fewer and fewer congregations have enough teens, young adults or even young couples to provide the critical mass necessary to conduct a youth group and other activities that have always been the life beat of Adventist churches. (para. 2)

The departure of young adults from the local faith community has not gone unnoticed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church General Conference (GC) President, Jan Paulsen, who has spent the past several years in broadcasted conversations with new generations (<http://letstalk.adventist.org>). Most poignantly, Paulsen noted at the 2006 Annual Council that “they [young adults] have perspectives, they have hopes, they have dreams, and they have visions for the church which need to be considered seriously. If we don’t, they will feel disenfranchised, as many of them already do.”

It is disturbing. It would not be as perplexing if it could be said that we have promptly identified this trend and addressed it with all the immediacy it deserves to rescue and embrace new generations. It would be laudable to share that urgent interventions have been implemented and the attrition statistics have been reversed. However, that is not the case.

Over a decade ago in research on Generation X, I found comparable statistics of young adults disappearing from local faith life (Martin, 1995). Dudley’s (2000) research reflects over three decades of scrutiny regarding the departure of new generations from the church. His book, *Why Teenagers Reject Religion*, was published in 1978.

Beyond the statistical analysis, I suspect both you and I can think of a young relative or a young friend who has parted ways with our church. I imagine we could exchange stories of peers or grown grandchildren who no longer participate in Adventism. We have known that young adults have been leaving our church for some time now. That is why the phenomenon is glaringly back in my mind. We have become bystanders.

Might it be that the bystander effect has immobilized us into thinking someone else will help (Wikipedia, 2007)? We have watched with the crowd from the shore as new generations disappear beneath the surface.

STRUGGLING TO STAY ABOVE WATER

As odd as it may seem to the metaphor, researchers and church leaders ask young adults why they are drowning: “Why are you leaving the church?”

Dudley (2000) found that young adult perceptions of the quality of relationship with religious authority figures played a significant role in their decision to disengage from church life. Leadership across Adventism concurred, stating that “the reasons most frequently cited by persons who leave local church fellowship are found in the realm of relationships, the absence of a sense of belonging, and the lack of meaningful engagement in the local congregation and its mission” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee, 2007, para. 5).

Young adult and writer Kimberly Luste Maran (2000) noted the following:

Too often the negative words and actions of more mature church members push the younger set to feelings of anger, resentment, bitterness, and fear. . . . Satan will employ any methods, including the use of church members, to tear us away from our loving Father. (para. 23)

As part of Paulsen’s Let’s Talk broadcasts, 25-year-old Kadene offered this insight:

I think the best thing that church leaders can do for the youth of our church is get acquainted with them. Too often, church leaders sit on their high horses and judge our youth without having the slightest idea of what they are going through. (Let’s Talk, 2007)

Paulsen (2006) made the following observation:

We [church leaders] need to hear and understand what they [young adults] are saying, for it comes across clearly and strongly from those who are under thirty in our church. The point they are making is this: Being included, being trusted, being considered responsible, for elders to be prepared to take some risk with inexperience, are sentiments and attitudes which senior leadership must be willing to show, or we are gone! We are gone simply because we have no ownership responsibility in the life of this church. (para. 14)

Research beyond Adventist cohorts offers some additional perspective. Robert Wuthnow (2007), professor of Sociology at Princeton University, noted various trends that are impacting young adults, contributing to the fading American religious landscape. “My view is that congregations can survive, but only if religious leaders roll up their sleeves and pay considerably more attention to young adults than they have been” (p. 230).

Noting a 70 percent attrition from church life among Baptist young adults, Scott McConnell, associate director of LifeWay Research (2007), said this:

Clearly the reasons young people leave are a reflection both of their past experience in church and the new opportunities they have as young adults. . . . To remain in church, a person must have experienced the value of the teaching and relationships at church and see the relevance for the next phase of life. (para. 19)

Why are young adults drowning? Although the responses may be as diverse and personal as each young adult, clearly the lack of mutually-valued relationships that engender trust and shared support has left both parties, young adults and Seventh-day Adventism, at risk of going under.

POINTING OUT HEROES

So what is the solution? The *Wikipedia* (2007) article on bystander effect made a fascinating recommendation:

To counter the bystander effect when you are the victim, a studied recommendation is to pick a specific person in the crowd to appeal to for help rather than appealing to the larger group generally. If you are the only person reacting to an emergency, point directly to a specific bystander and give them a specific task such as, "You. Call the police." These steps place all responsibility on a specific person instead of allowing it to diffuse. (para. 5)

To burst through the bystander effect, I'd like to point out several potential heroes in the lives of young adults.

Parent. During the important transitional years of young adulthood, parents play a vital role not only in the life of their children but also within their sphere of friends. Parents should make certain their home and presence engenders hospitality, safety, and wisdom.¹

Connie Vandeman Jeffery (2003) shared a simple formula of food, friendship, and follow up that made her home a safe harbor for young adults. Adults without children can make the simple effort of building an authentic relationship with a single twenty-something. A friendship like this is as simple to start as a lunch invitation.

Pastor. If the statistics are correct, the pastor's positive influence and impact on the climate of churches is desperately needed. Setting the culture of young adult inclusion is heavily dependent on the pastor's vision and leadership.

Bill Bossert (2007) described how his dying church recognized their fate and took heroic steps to turn the tide. With careful self analysis, practical research, and courageous yet inclusive change steps², the Shepherd's House reversed the attrition tide, resulting in a 60 percent increase of young adults in their church (para. 27). Change did not come without challenges and discomfort, but in order to break through the bystander effect, pastors need to be heroic so as to inspire their congregations to be likewise.

Professor/Teacher. Educators have a profound influence in the lives of young adults. Beyond academic or professional prowess, professors and teachers are called upon to invest in young adult spiritual development as well.

Teaching at Spicer Memorial College, Falvo Fowler (2002) found that his simple initiative to start a Sabbath School with his students made a profound impact on what was once a “nominal” Adventist experience (para. 16).

Jimmy Phillips (2007) noted the “invisible majority” of coeds in the schools outside of our Adventist system. Committed faculty and staff in these institutions can have an influence on thousands of Adventist young adults who will benefit from their efforts to collaborate with local churches and institutions to establish student groups, faith fellowships, and discipleship communities.³ Adventist Christian Fellowship (<http://www.acflink.org>) is a great resource to support such an initiative. Faculty advisement and mentoring are key to battling the bystander effect rampant on secular campuses and in the churches adjacent to these colleges and universities.

President/Administrator. Vision-casting leaders offer momentum towards constructive change. Exactly what form this leadership takes depends on the denomination. Within the Seventh-day Adventist church, organized by conferences, unions and divisions, the president of each administrative level is instrumental in casting the vision for change. Mike Cauley (2007), president of the Florida Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, challenged his constituency:

Do we care enough to learn the language of kids [young adults]? I’m as serious as a heart attack. We have a broken world. We have a society of Millennials [young adults] who are hungry for the gospel, and we aren’t cutting it. Now, I haven’t talked to the Conference Executive Committee about this, so don’t tell anybody. But I’m going to be asking them to begin to plant churches to reach kids under 25. I’m going to be asking them to help us figure out how to become churches in the biblical, New Testament sense . . . somehow we have got to bring those kids, not to a place of entertainment, but to be fully committed disciples. . . . We need to give them the Church. (para. 48)

Jan Paulsen (2006) further endorsed this idea:

In order to be effective in looking after the united church and keeping it strong in mission, it is critical that the men and women who are young today be invited to sit next to you and me; that they be invited to think and plan with us, and that they are listened to as values are defined and the mission agenda examined. (para. 17)

It is not only the endorsement of high-level leaders, but also their conspicuous actions⁴ that will serve as a leadership catalyst to transform young adult attrition statistics into retention trends.

Peers. There are stellar young adults who have not only remained in the church but are faith activists where they are (Maran, Karimabadi, & Bourne, 2006). They are among the most influential and powerful—not only in taking heroic action with drowning peers

but also in rejuvenating Adventism, fostering a movement that will draw new generations.

Lynette Frantzen (2004) offered the reminder that Adventism began as a young movement:

Many of the Adventist pioneers first began their work when they were teenagers. Pioneers such as Ellen Harmon White, John Loughborough, J. N. Andrews, Uriah Smith, and John Harvey Kellogg were teenagers and young adults when they began making an impact in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They were young, vibrant, and on fire for God! (para. 2)

Cauley (2007) shared similar thoughts:

It was the same age group [young adult] that was passionate about the early Adventist movement. J. N. Andrews was 22 when he started on the publishing committee. 22! He was a kid. Ellen White was 17 when she had her first vision. She couldn't even have graduated from academy yet if she lived in our day. Uriah Smith was 21 when he joined the publishing work, and James White was 21 years old when he came upon the scene and began to preach the Advent doctrine. (para. 11)

We need a movement of that caliber right now. Those heroes from our Adventist heritage took valiant steps to save a drowning world. Today, young Adventists are just as essential in the embrace and encouragement of their peers. The church as a whole, and specifically parents, pastors, professors, and presidents, must build restorative relationships with young adults.⁵

ABC'S AND D OF HEROIC RELATIONSHIPS

Even when we realize the potential influence we can have in the faith of young adults, it can be difficult to pinpoint specific ways in which to help. The following relational building blocks are effective in reaching out to others, particularly to the younger generation:

Authenticity. Young adults are desperately looking for relationships that are real, honest, and transparent (Martin, 1998). Kinnaman and Lyons (2006) found young adults both inside and outside of the church to perceive it to be “hypocritical” and “out of touch with reality.” They advocate a corrective perception in which “Christians are transparent about their flaws and act first, talk second” (p. 41). Opposed to the faux facade of “having it all together,” young adults are seeking out genuine interaction with heroes that are human, willing to admit that they too are working through issues and challenges. Young adults want significant adults to be more relationally involved in their lives (Martin, 1995). Leaders who are willing to be authentic offer young adults a priceless opportunity for rich relationships.

Belonging. Dudley (2000) noted a contributing factor to young adult attrition being the “lack of inclusiveness for youth involvement in congregational life and leadership” (p. 206). According to Dudley’s research respondents, an ideal church is one where young adults are “active in the life of the group.” Young adults are of age and ability

where involvement and participation are vital to a sense of inclusion and importance. Contextualization occurs naturally when intentional efforts are made to integrate young adult leadership in the church (Martin, 1995). Leaders who are willing to minister collaboratively with young adults solidify their sense of purpose and significance as part of their faith community.

Compassion. Seventy percent of young adults perceive Christianity as “insensitive to others” (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2006). Social action is high on the priority list of young adults, and their perception of an attractive church is one actively involved in helping people in need (Dudley, 2000). Funding missionary endeavors in far off lands is fine but one-dimensional. Global is good, but young adults also gravitate towards ministries that meet local needs in their neighborhoods and communities. They are eager to align with causes and advocacy that transcend denominational and socio-political lines for the sake of making a good difference in the world. Leaders who are passionate about making a difference among the marginalized and who rally their community to action will find young adults joining them in the fray.

Discipleship. Bolstered by the rebellion of Boomers and the angst of Generation X, today’s young adults are different—they are looking to be discipled by adults and others. Elmore (2008) describes young adults as not seeking a “sage on the stage,” but rather, a “guide on the side.” Mentoring relationships foster life legacy and attachment, for both the young adult and the mentor (Dudley, 2000; Martin, 1999). When Christ’s followers “go and make disciples,” this impacts not only new generations but also the expansion of Christ’s kingdom. Leaders who disciple young adults fulfill the Great Commission. Further, they equip young adults to reach out to others.

Being authentic, fostering belonging, expressing compassion, and intentionally discipling launches the leader from the sidelines into heroic relationships with young adults.

BYSTANDERS NO LONGER

If the principles of social psychology hold true, readers may come to the end of this article and feel relieved and pleased that the issue of young adults leaving the church is being addressed. “It is good that someone is finally doing something,” they may think.

Sentiments such as these are the tragic reality of the bystander effect. This phenomenon has already seen generations of young Adventists drown, while potential heroes have stood by and watched. If the church is to continue to grow and flourish, if it is to make a positive influence in the lives of young adults, it is imperative that Christians take ownership of the problem of young people becoming disengaged with church. We must no longer be bystanders.

We can begin by taking a step today to start an authentic relationship with a young adult.⁶ Some ways of reaching out include serving as a mentor, engaging in social activities such as lunch, listening carefully, opening our homes, and offering our hearts. There are as many action options as there are young adults. If we each start with one action with one young adult today, we will soon make a difference (Martin, 1998).

Notes

1. North American Division Family Ministries (<http://adventistfamilyministries.com>) offers an array of resources and support to parents in the discipling of new generations.
2. Bill Bossert outlined the steps his congregation took at <http://adventistreview.org/article.php?id=1300>, offering further specificity to their strategy.
3. Ron Pickell, North American Division Adventist Christian Fellowship Coordinator, offers some insights into what college students are looking for in a church at <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=1372>.
4. It is conspicuous actions of leadership that reveal their most important values. A couple of local conference presidents have already instated young adult ministry directors at the conference level. The Christian Leadership Center (<http://www.andrews.edu/clc>) recently endorsed the development of young leadership training, challenging presidents and all church officials to mentor new generations of leadership.
5. For over a decade, dream VISION ministries (<http://www.dreamVISIONministries.org>) has offered training and resourcing in building authentic relationships with new generations. I offer a theological model for young adult ministry (<http://www.adventistreview.org/2000-1556/story2.html>), challenging young adults to see their role as ministers to their peers.
6. North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists Young Adult Ministry is committed to fostering the efforts of heroes, coaching their efforts to build authentic relationships with new generations. Find on the IGNITION blog (<http://ignitionblog.wordpress.com>), various local and division-wide young adult ministry initiatives. Contact amartin@GODencounters.org for further support, training, and networking.

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