Introduction

“How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?” (Matt. 18:12).

About a decade ago, as I was seated in a baptismal service next to a beautiful young woman, I heard her murmur to herself, “If I backslide and then get rebaptized, they might know that I am here.” A young woman about her age had just been baptized and was being welcomed into church fellowship with embraces and handshakes. Since then I have been collecting information on ways in which the church might better serve its young people, and I have found that the expressed needs have no racial polarization. Through this chapter I will share some of my findings and thoughts as I outline some of the challenges and opportunities that face us while we pursue our global mission.

We live in an expanding multicultural society, and according to current trends, few racially homogeneous societies are likely to survive. Because involvement is one of the key elements for retention of youth in the church, and because societies are becoming primarily heterogeneous, Black parents, teachers, pastors, and other leaders will need to focus on the goal of preparing Black youth to function as part of the decision-making of the church.

We need to explore ways of retaining or regaining our youth so that when we are faced with the question “Where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock?” (Jer. 13:20) we will have a ready reply. The youth born of Seventh-day Adventist parents who themselves become church members should not be overlooked or taken for granted.

Church leaders would do well to encourage members of this group to consider reasons they are Seventh-day Adventists. SDA young people fall into two categories: those who have chosen to become SDAs after having experienced “the things of the world,” and those of untried virtue who were born of Adventist parents and have experienced little outside of the Adventist community. Many in the latter category leave the church as soon as compulsory obedience in the home environment no longer exists. These young people have never internalized the meaning and love of Adventism. They know the behaviors they are not to participate in, but they don’t understand why. They also do not fully understand the love of God! Church leaders, therefore, have a dual task of retaining and also regaining our youth. Youth must be aided in developing the kind of lifestyle that will enable them to function effectively on earth as they prepare for Christ’s second coming.

In this chapter we will explore three dimensions through which this may be accomplished: educational, religious, and social. Within this framework we will become further exposed to the problems of our youth—from their perspective. We will then attempt to outline some means of resolution, with a vision for the future.

The Educational Dimension

If a common denominator for humankind exists, it is that Jesus loves us all and has gone to prepare a place for all of us (see John 14:1-3). However, in order for all of His children to occupy that same “home,” the church must have some common ground rules. Our lifestyle as Adventists should reflect our obedience to those rules (God’s laws). “Lifestyle” in this context is defined as “behavior in relationship to the society in which we live, as we prepare for heaven.”

Since we live in a multicultural society, the probability is high that persons of different races and cultures will live in the same neighborhood (distinct groups may not be completely homogeneous; for instance, not all Blacks have the same culture). Thus outreach strategies—educational, religious, or social—that we utilize will of necessity be diverse. Education must be multidimensional not only in terms of race and culture but also in terms of the “generation gap.” Changes occurring in society must also be reckoned with.

If as Seventh day Adventists we understand and believe in our church and its mission, then we must recognize that there is a constant passing of the torch from one generation to another. Therefore, preparing that next generation should be one of our major responsibilities.

Primary socialization occurs in the family; secondary socialization follows closely in the school and the church. It is in these settings that we give our children space to grow. For many young people the value system developed in the home, school, and church has been a savior, which is one reason that we cannot afford to withhold the “safety net” of
Christian education from our children. Our schools should be places where “the excellence of the past is blended with the promise of the future to meet the needs of the present.”

Since education does not take place only within the four walls of the church or school, we must be role models for our youth. For example, if you wish to teach your children about tithe paying, you don’t have to give a lecture about how Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20), or that the tithe of all of our increase must be used to support God’s work (Deut. 14:23, 28), or even to remind them of the blessing they will receive from tithe-paying (Mal. 3:10). Just develop a simple household budget with them, putting the tithe first, then free will offerings, then mortgage, tuition, etc. Character is caught, not taught.

Yes, modeling is a very important dimension. Adventist youth are well aware of the expected lifestyle, because many have enjoyed both primary socialization at home and secondary socialization in our academies. However, in areas such as dress, music, and health rules they still tend to look for role models. They want us to talk with them, listen to them, exchange ideas with them, understand how they feel, and at least try to appreciate the fact that they are attempting to give an explanation for their behavior. If we accept the concept that our actions might be the only yardstick for some youth grappling with a problem, we will want to be certain that we are providing the correct measurements—will we not?

Modeling often produces a desirable interaction with young people, creating a chain reaction of talking and listening. Listening is one of the best ways to retain our young people in our church. In my work as lecturer, counselor, and teacher I have talked extensively with young people and found that they have much to share. They clue me in to the latest fads and colloquialisms, and I clue them in on which of “the latest” are appropriate for us as Christians.

The longer we live, the more we think we have to say, and therefore we tend to want to do most of the talking. But when a young person gains the courage to “open up” and begins to talk, the best way to show concern and caring is to listen. This is not the time to match thought for thought; it is not the time to compare their experiences with those that occurred in “our day.” It is time to listen to them.

Some young people in serious trouble will normally talk only to other young people (for some, if you are over 30 you are old). So if you model the art of listening, you may not only be helping to retain youth in the church; you might also be saving lives.

In creating educational opportunities for our youth, we need to provide an environment conducive to preparation as well as practice for meaningful involvement. Although environment alone cannot complete the task of preparing our youth in such a manner that they not be lost to the church, neither should this important task be ignored. Any environment designed to promote growth should contain a “thinking climate.” We must not allow our youth to become caught in the quagmire of mediocrity.

Too often we function under the illusion that our youth are infants who must be spared the pain of reality. Many individuals interpret this attitude as love. Rather we must show them how to change obstacles into opportunities, to stop giving up and start growing up. Our youth are not helpless children. Let us help them to understand what is happening in the world and assist them in their preparation to choose wisely.

By virtue of our global mission and the changing society in which we live, we will need to teach our youth to develop organizational ability and to recognize hierarchical structures within organizations. Because we live in a democratic society, our Black youth will have some opportunity to participate in decision-making. We must train them to recognize the importance of leadership and to develop that kind of self-image that allows them to benefit from leadership training.

Part of educational preparation is to be aware of the context in which one must function. Our denomination is large in terms of membership, but small in terms of opportunities for participation in decision-making. But times have changed, and our denomination is also changing as it attempts to relate to an increasingly diverse and multicultural membership. Therefore, many minority groups—ethnic, gender, elderly, disabled, etc.—will compete for opportunities for involvement in our denominational decision-making. As a result, we must not rely on the likelihood that Black youth will be participants in decision-making, because less need is seen for minority representation.

No organization has to be concerned about being harassed for tokenism anymore; there are too many minorities from which to choose without ever including a Black individual. Therefore, in helping our youth to function ably within various settings, we need to help them see themselves as persons who are prepared to function as part of a multicultural organization. With this kind of strength and involvement, our Black youth will be able to respond to a multicultural, global governance as authentic participants. The gale winds of global involvement—therefore competition—should encourage us to prepare for our long-term future.

To ensure a strong generation to whom to pass the gospel torch, the semicongenital attraction for self-destruction that so many display can no longer be tolerated. With Christlike parents (caregivers) and with Christ-centered education we can blend the socialization processes necessary to produce youth who are prepared and willing to carry the gospel torch.

What kind of vision for educational preparation do Adventist youth have? Young people in the North
American Division have shared with me the following insights, some of which will be given in summary form, but in some instances in direct quotations.

Youth in the SDA Church are thinkers who express their ideas on different levels. From an educational perspective—since this is the segment with which we are dealing—our young people are very much interested in “Christian” education and feel that this is one of the best ways for retaining them in the church. Their major concern is the “financial situation” and the need for the church to invest in its youth through its educational facilities. Although young people recognize that education in general is costly, they feel that if the church cared for them and recognized that being educated in an Adventist institution would contribute toward their remaining members, the financial cost would not be seen as being so great. The denomination, many young people feel, should absorb more of the cost of a Christian education and provide more financial assistance. Currently our young people are forced to borrow large amounts of money to finance their college education and thus must attempt to find a high-paying job, generally outside of denominational service, to pay off educational debt. Many times that is the first step toward leaving the church.

Young people, of course, should understand that the denomination cannot provide positions for all of its graduates. This is one reason that internalization of proper behavior is important. Behavior that occurs only while one is being supervised is really not behavior by choice. In our educational institutions, where young people are essentially captive audiences, much should be done to discover whether what is being taught is being internalized—especially on the religious level.

Another thrust of the young people’s comments is the perception of “favoritism.” Their perception is that the young people who are able to attend SDA schools are mostly “well off” or sons and daughters of SDA workers. The young people are saying that to ensure opportunities for all Adventist youth, there should be a more balanced work/study program in which all students can find work.

Lay members must take more responsibility for the young people in their local churches, counseling them toward embracing Christian education and encouraging the church to do more in helping them financially. Some of our educational institutions are providing full tuition for children of employees, and that is noteworthy. However, since receiving high grades and being on the dean’s list is what draws attention to a student or to a graduating senior, those students who must work full-time to obtain money to pay their tuition will be at even more of a disadvantage if someone doesn’t step in and fill the gap. As time passes, the chasm gets wider and deeper for “disadvantaged” youth. Laypeople in the local churches will do well to help unearth these “diamonds in the rough” and help to finance them toward a Christian education.

Students who attend SDA schools and who’ve shared their views with me have been impressed with the quality of education and expressed their appreciation for Adventist education’s being Christ-centered.

The Religious Dimension

Working with many people is difficult, because their “minds are like concrete, all mixed up and permanently set.” Young people have not yet gotten to that stage, so there is time for any necessary intervention. Too often from a religious perspective the first category of caregiver considered is the pastor. But we need to remember that caring for the spiritual needs of youth should be a shared responsibility. Pastors regulate the pulse of the membership—they stimulate the church to higher levels of functioning. They ignite the church and enable it to move forward. But pastors and laypersons are partners in the cause of God.

Pastors and lay members must be sensitive to the special needs of each person in the congregation. A mother shared the following with me: “I am the mother of three youths . . . raised in this church. My son, just coming back after dropping out for a few years, went to a Revelation Seminar. I went with him. The pastor took no special notice of him, even though he went night after night.” Pastors—and the church as a whole—must be aware so that this need never be said of a young person seeking the truth.

Most pastors are also parents and therefore, along with other parents, should spend as much time as possible with their children—especially when they are young. Some pastors spend so much time solving everyone else’s problems that they sometimes do not even recognize those that are developing in their own homes. All caregivers need to understand that when it comes to religious exposure and the development of religious experiences for the youth, we are all partners with Christ.

Too often when consideration is being given to programs for the youth, church members who are not parents are inclined to remain neutral as decisions are being made (especially if finances are involved). But such neutrality is misguided. Retaining our youth is easier than regaining our youth. Investment in our youth will pay off handsomely as well as being Christ-centered.

Considering the difficult domestic and international situation we face today, some might ask, “Why should we invest?” We should realize that “a nation’s most important asset is the skills and learning of its work force.” Likewise, religious preparation of our youth is the lifeblood of our denomination. The future of our youth lies with caring adults who are willing to succor them today and give them reason
searching for things to do, think what is going through their minds on Saturday night—after a restful Sabbath.

While it is true that youth must be exposed to the facts of life, that we cannot be expected to shelter them, we ourselves sometimes made the wrong choices when faced with problematic social alternatives. Many people helped us along the way. In providing “guided” forms of social interaction, we are making use of the “prevention path” in our effort toward retaining our youth in the church.

It is in social settings that the youth find refuge and love and build friendships. Without these social settings the youth tend to find their partners and their fun in the “world.” Sadly, in some churches there are no youth programs at all. One young person said, “I think the church needs to implement more programs for the youth of the church. It seems that after the age of 16, the youth disappear. There are programs for the younger ones, like Pathfinders, but nothing substantial for the 16- to 25-year-olds.” The church should provide social programs for its youth so that they do not feel the need to go out into the world to find entertainment.

One of the ways to encourage our youth is to engage them in the planning stages for their own activities. After all, it is during these activities that they get the opportunity to meet other Christian young people.

Most of us know that we are part of the decision-making process when we are part of the committee in charge of planning and organizing the event in question, when our vote has weight in determining what direction the project will take. We are then more likely to feel responsible for the implementation of that project. We are living in changing times. Let’s give the youth the opportunity to plan and organize social activities, to see the trust we place in them. If they have internalized the value system of the home and the church, and are allowed to accept the challenges of today, they will be appreciative of what is being done for them. In the same vein, adults need to be ready and willing to assist the youth as they are requested to do so.

Of course, let’s keep in mind the various asymmetries—the generation gaps and the cultural gaps. Cultural gaps can exist even between parents and children. With these differences, we must be prepared for possible polarizations. Youth are trying hard to gain independence, and adults are trying just as hard to preserve their authority.

Our tasks, therefore, must include:

1. Making Christian education available at least through high school for all children of SDA parents, with preparation in skills as well as preparation for college, and also offering career counseling.

2. Providing forums through which youth of different races and genders can interact and thereby learn to understand, appreciate, and accept one another.

3. Participating in the SDA networking project, which would facilitate the denomination in making available courses in higher education that might not otherwise be available.

4. Encouraging churches to develop mechanisms that would help prepare young people to function in the larger society without succumbing to non-Christian values.

5. Teaching the youth to appreciate the sacrifices that have been made to create the foundation upon which they can build, helping them to appreciate their government and the sacrifices that have been made to preserve their homeland.

6. Helping the youth to recognize the limitless power of God. “Are we fully awake to our privileged responsibilities? Are we wholly aware of the unusual position that we occupy in God’s scheme of things? . . . Are we, because of misplaced values and lack of vision, frittering away the thrilling destiny that God has ordained for us?”

1 Winstone A. Richards, The Pastor’s Desk (St. Croix, Virgin Islands, 1993).