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**T**he alienation of Adventist youth from religion is easy to presuppose but very difficult to measure. No one would challenge that some, perhaps many SDA youth are alienated. All are not. And some who are alienated from religion are not alienated from the church. For them, Adventism is a social club that is sufficient without religion.

Furthermore, the aware observer will note that among this group are many young people who, although mainly social in their relationship to the church, are not alienated in any ultimate sense. They are not angry or hostile. They plan to be believers someday—or at least to raise their children as believers. “I’m not against religion,” my 20-year-old son told me two days ago, “it’s just not for me right now.” He and his 18-year-old brother have seen the best and the worst in the church, and while they are not alienated, they are waiting to see better. Unlike the fiery idealism one thinks of as an inevitable characteristic of youth, my sons and many of their friends exhibit a yawning patience as they wait for the passing years to somehow make it all relevant.

To address the various levels of belief and unbelief among the church’s youth has appealed to adult analysts for generations. These adults express concern about saving the young people for the church, protecting them from worldly allurements, and develop-

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# The Alienation of Adventist Youth From Religion

## A Discussion Starter

By Wayne Judd



ing church programs that meet the needs of the young. Ellen White's pessimism regarding the general readiness of the youth of her day to face eternal judgment continues to motivate adult Adventists who watch today's secular generation. But other concerns also trouble older Adventists. The extended distance in time from 1844 has become more than a nagging reality. People who promised with some fervor that Christ would come "in my lifetime" are dying. There is a future to be faced on earth, and like it or not, that future belongs to kids who listen to rock music, go to movies, and play on Sabbath.

The word *alienation* may be ultimately inappropriate in describing the attitudes and behavior of SDA youth today. The word suggests withdrawal and estrangement. Despite the sometimes wanton application of the sacrament of baptism, many Adventist young people have never become sufficiently involved in the life and mission of the church to qualify now as being alienated.

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I propose that much of the alienation and disillusionment that touches the lives of youth today is second generational. It is their *parents* who are alienated and disillusioned. These parents are no longer able to sustain traditional perceptions of SDA faith and life. Their children have not committed half a lifetime to the ultimacy of Adventism, and are therefore less

influenced, for example, by such crises as Ellen White's use of sources or the involvement of church leaders in financial scandals. Indeed, many of the youth show little interest in such issues.

In the paragraphs that follow, then, I assume that both parents and children suffer from alienation. The difference between the two groups can be summarized thus: Adult alienation involves fear and loss, while youth alienation is characterized more by apathy and uninvolvement. The implications of this double phenomenon are sizable, given the critical place in which the church finds itself historically.

#### Contributing Factors

A number of factors contribute to the apathy youth feel toward religion. Three are identified here:

1. *Breakdown of authority.* Those who study history and sociology generally agree that the youth revolution of the 1960s made a radical, perhaps permanent, difference in attitudes toward authority in the western world. Although today's young people prefer to focus their nostalgia on the 1950s, their responses to authority are colored much more by the sixties.

Paralleling the general societal disparagement of authority today is the reduction of authority in the church. Conservative traditions require considerable authority. Adventism has been able to assume the solid authority of Ellen White and church leadership for generations.

Those in the church who accuse SDA scholars of depriving a demythologized Ellen White of her rightful authority do not adequately account for the attitudes of the age that has come upon us. Those who lament the reduction of authority church leaders hold in

the mind of the SDA populace should look beyond post office scandals and Australian theology debates to discover the reasons for the shift.

Eventually, we may be required to probe the origins of Adventism

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*The most prominent and devastating response from youth today is silence.*

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as expressed in the Millerite movement. Ours was a radical, dissenting movement that challenged all authority, especially church authority. It is not difficult to make a case that early Adventist leaders were alienated youth who challenged existing authority. Perhaps a partial solution to our present dilemma of authority lies in opening our corporate minds and hearts to our past radical modeling. In fact, our prophetess urges us to look to our past to find help for the future.

2. *The Adventist identity.* The identity crisis for the SDA Church contributes to disillusionment and alienation at a number of levels. Organizationally, most Adventists would describe their church as a denomination. Few choose to be known as members of a "sect."

However, Adventism is best identified as a sect, and will continue to be so for as long as the Sabbath remains central. A sect is a group of adult believers who withdraw in alienation from a larger mainstream denomination or church with the purpose of restoring a forgotten truth, or creating a more satisfying fellowship.

If the sect succeeds and grows, it inevitably faces a crisis in convinc-

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The opportunity to meet parents and school board members, participate in the church program, attend teachers' meetings and generally "shadow" the supervising teacher is invaluable. This is the real world. For the elementary education student the experience would be especially helpful in a multigrade classroom. The secondary education student would benefit from teaching experience in a boarding academy. Students who have participated in "total immersion" teaching experiences have expressed enthusiasm about the benefits gained.

The above list of recommendations is only a beginning. Areas such as multicultural education, the exceptional child, and planning for individual differences have not even been mentioned. Nor has this article addressed the concept of approved teacher education programs. It does recognize, however, that educating teachers is a complex task that requires skill, commitment, and hard work.

In a Seventh-day Adventist college we must be committed to educating competent teachers; but more than that, we must prepare teachers who will care for the students they teach, who are willing to go the extra mile to help them, who are dedicated to unselfish service. The shaping of values and attitudes is even more difficult than the developing of knowledge and skills. A study of the life and methods of the Master Teacher is the foundation on which we build. Only as teachers model in their lives the principles of education demonstrated by Christ will they succeed. □

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> George Denmark, "Educating a Profession," *Journal of Teacher Education*, XXXVI:5 (September-October, 1985), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 377.

<sup>3</sup> James B. Conant, *The Education of American*

*Teachers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 103-105.

<sup>4</sup> *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, prepared by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April, 1983), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Denmark, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> *A Nation at Risk*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> John E. Newport, "Let's Admit We Can't Train Teachers—And Ask for Help," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65 (October, 1983), p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Chion-Kenny, Linda, "Teaching—It All Begins in the Elementary School," *Education Week* (September 5, 1984), p. 1-18.

## The Alienation of Adventist Youth

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ing its children and grandchildren of the ultimacy of the cause espoused by the fathers and mothers. As the years and generations pass, the sect tends either to flow back toward mainstream denomination-ism, or to break up into additional groups who believe that they

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are now called to carry the banner by instituting further reforms. In this scenario, the children "flow," while the parents dig in and resist change. Without their own organizational base, the youth often flow out altogether.

The identity crisis goes beyond organizational perceptions. Recent theological discussions seem to take a "debate" rather than a

"handshake" approach. Instead of people of varying backgrounds and views sitting down together, and in brotherly kindness seeking, with God's guidance, to arrive at a progressive and mutual understanding of truth, theology in recent years has been argued vehemently and sometimes divisively. These noisy debates have convinced many young people that truth is ultimately unknowable. As a result, few of them become involved in the discussions. Instead, they stop their ears to avoid the confusion.

3. *Refusal to address issues.* Most Adventist young people do not believe that their church is addressing the real issues they face. Some see the denomination as 15 to 20 years behind the times. Others accuse the church of trying to live in the nineteenth century, while the world in which they live is drawing them into the twenty-first century. Those who still bother to ask about movies, wedding rings, rock music, jewelry, dress, and other church standards of behavior complain that they receive decrees rather than discussion and well-reasoned explanations. When arguments are presented to defend church standards, many young people believe them to be relics dusted off by people who have long since repented of any fun they ever had.

But the most prominent and devastating response from youth today is *silence*. Many are not interested enough to challenge the traditions. Their world is filled with dreams of personal (usually financial) success. They have become more conservative, but not more committed to their conservative church.

Today's young church members move about comfortably in the "world," which is not the stranger to them that it was to their Adven-

tist parents and grandparents. The technology damned by their parents in the 1960s is celebrated and exploited by youth of the 1980s. Flower power is out; high tech is in.

The young people described above sometimes find themselves in trouble in the SDA schools they attend. They flatly reject appeals for traditional behavior by academy principals who cite the "expectations of our constituency," precisely because the constituency the youth know—their parents and their friends' parents—indicate no such expectations. The contradictory signals the youth receive from home, church, and school provide little clarity for their attempts to understand religion. They are bewildered by the role that the school assumes as watchdog to guard and ensure the good behavior no longer required by the home or by the church. In these terms, of course, parents and pastors are much more popular than academy and college administrators. Recognition of this contradiction is not a new insight, but no one seems to have found a way to effect church-wide consistency in dealing with this alienating phenomenon.

Ocasionally, when a young person is asked to leave an Adventist

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school for not conforming, the alienation for him is complete. Let's take the case of Rick, an academy junior who has committed an infraction of a school rule against socializing with the oppo-

site sex. He is told that he no longer fits; that he has made bad choices and thus removed himself from the society of acceptable young Adventists.

Rick is assured that he will one day be grateful for this rejection, and that he will be remembered in special prayer. Of course, he is told that God loves him just as much as ever and that it is not the school or church that saves him. But he would be willing to forgo the prayers and have God love him a little less if he could just stay with his friends.

He agrees that the church can't save him, and determines to make it so. He understands that the school must stand for something, but he wonders why it has to stand

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for things that his home and his church do not seem to stand for. The entire process is discussed at length among Rick's friends, who are also a little alienated.

The conclusion of the story comes several years later when Rick, now a confirmed unbeliever, discovers that the standards that cost him his place in his religious society have changed, and his sins are no longer perceived as critical to school attendance.

#### Countering

Solutions are easier to list than to implement; nevertheless, an-

swers must be sought. Here are seven suggestions:

1. *Develop an information flow on the attitudes, needs, and wants of SDA young people.* It is almost impossible to find substantive research that deals with the areas considered in this discussion.

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*We should stop telling the youth that they are the best hope for the church's future and tell them instead that we need them now.*

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2. *Face every issue openly and honestly, making sure that the topics discussed actually connect with the lives of the youth.* The only really dangerous questions of youth are the ones we refuse to let them ask. The same formula should be applied in dealing with older Adventists who are in transition.

3. *Provide a usable past.* History has remarkable power, despite the unswerving efforts of many history teachers to destroy the discipline by their teaching techniques. The Adventist past abounds with answers to the questions and crises of contemporary Adventists.

4. *Provide new meanings.* A significant number of young Adventists view "progressive truth" language as idle chatter. Established truths do not need to be negated in order to provide new meanings. We can search for applications to current problems based on the principles of our pioneers.

In our schools and pulpits, religion teachers and ministers should keep in touch with what young people are thinking and reading.

They should certainly read books that are at least as challenging as those read by their students and young parishioners. Boring, uninformed religion teachers should be shifted to other duties. Poorly taught Bible classes will do little to give credibility to the doctrines being presented. Of course, the same could be said for other disciplines.

5. *Involve the youth in important decisions and projects, both in local churches and church institutions.* This involvement needs to be more than symbolic. We should stop telling the youth that they are the best hope for the church's future and tell them instead that we need them *now*.

6. *Promote humanitarian service in church and community as a positive substitute for the negative*

*flow of prohibitions.* New causes bring new commitments, new hope, and improved behavior.

7. *Win back disillusioned parents by providing more democratic involvement within the church structure.* Initiate a dialogue between parents, teachers, and

*When arguments are presented to defend church standards, many young people believe them to be relics dusted off by people who have long since repented of any fun they ever had.*

school administrators. Parents will thereby feel more involved in the mission of the school, and perhaps less alienated from the church as well.

The old ways are not working. But the reformation needed in the church at this time will probably not be prayed down or "committed" up. Our fervent hopes for our youth and their parents will be realized only when we become willing at all levels to put aside the personal, political, and traditional agendas that clutter the pathway to faith and service. We must ask ourselves what we really want to pass on to our young people, then deport ourselves so that when our time passes, they will be ready and willing to accept and implement it. □

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