

**LET'S  
TALK**

# Other books by Jan Paulsen

*When the Spirit Descends*

*Let Your Life So Shine*

*Where Are We Going?*

# LET'S TALK

Conversations  
With Young Adventists  
About Their Church

JAN PAULSEN



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# Thank You

A book of this kind involves the participation of many people. Let me first thank the thousands of youth, young adults, and young professionals from around the world who challenged me through the years of the *Let's Talk* dialogues. It's their ideas, concerns, and hopes that are reflected throughout this book. They are at the heart of our church, and when they speak, the church *must* listen.

A big "thank you" also to Bettina Krause, my assistant. She was a key person, together with Ray Dabrowski, Jennifer Stymiest, John Banks, and Williams Costa Jr., in organizing the *Let's Talk* live broadcasts and Web site. In writing this book I turned to Bettina to research the questions, comments, and challenges the young raised, and these form the backdrop against which some of my comments are made. And then, her editorial skills in bringing it all together.

I also want to acknowledge and commend Pacific Press® Publishing Association, which has been an invaluable partner in bringing this book to the public.

But most of all, I shall always be indebted beyond words to the one and only Lord and Savior, whose love for the young knows no measure.

**Jan Paulsen**

January 15, 2013

# Preface

As General Conference president, I had a conversation with Seventh-day Adventist young people that stretched over seven years and six continents. I spoke with groups of twenty to thirty young men and women at a time—usually college students or young professionals—who came together for a one-hour, live, unscripted, unrehearsed conversation broadcast on the church’s international television network, the Hope Channel. From Cameroon to the Caribbean, Australia to Germany, Hong Kong to Brazil, these *Let’s Talk* broadcasts brought together young people from an incredibly diverse range of cultures, backgrounds, and local church experiences. No topic or question was off the table.

The broadcasts—more than thirty in all—were perhaps the most visible part of the Let’s Talk initiative, but behind the scenes there was also the Let’s Talk Web site. This site connected Adventist young people around the world with my office in Silver Spring, Maryland, giving them an online space to share their opinions about the church and bringing a constant stream of questions and comments to my desk.

Why? What was the point of these efforts?

From my perspective, I simply wanted to know what Adventist young people were thinking and feeling. The young represent at least half our global family of faith, and they’re as much a part of the church as I am. Why shouldn’t they have an opportunity to be publicly heard?

I wanted to hear, firsthand, about their experiences—both positive and negative. Was the church failing them in some ways? What could be done better? What were their joys, their frustrations, and their hopes for the future? As a church leader, I felt a need to get a true reading of their “pulse.”

From their perspective, I suspect the invitation to have a dialogue with the General Conference president had an element of novelty. Perhaps they were curious to know if their comments would really be unedited and if there were truly no restrictions on topics. I’m not sure many believed this would be the case until the cameras started rolling.

Frankly, when the *Let’s Talk* series began, I was pessimistic about where it

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would take us and, at times, I wondered whether the whole thing would prove to be an embarrassment! What resulted, however, was an ongoing dialogue with our young people that has touched me profoundly in many different ways.

Why do I now feel compelled to bring what I heard during these television and Internet conversations into book form?

In the past couple of years since *Let's Talk* ended, I've had a chance to sit back and reflect on what happened, to consider what these young men and women said to me and what it means—or should mean—to our church.

I wrote this book because I feel a deep sense of responsibility to the thousands of young Adventists I talked or e-mailed with over the years of the Let's Talk initiative. I don't want their ideas, passions, questions, and concerns to disappear into the mist of yesterday's events, soon to be forgotten. By putting some of their comments and questions into writing, my intention is to give some permanence—and perhaps a sense of legitimacy—to the major concerns I heard expressed by our young people.

I also wrote this book because I believe those of us who represent the more “mature” generations in our church sometimes need to be reminded to say less and listen more, to really hear what our kids are telling us.

I came away from every *Let's Talk* broadcast with a strong sense that even though the young and the old in our church may occupy the same pews, we don't necessarily speak the same language. Our experiences, cultural assumptions, and worldviews can be miles apart, and yet we may be completely oblivious to the gulf between us. And then we're surprised when we look around our church and see empty spaces.

My hope is that whether you're young, old, or in between, you'll read this book not as a final word on any particular topic, but as a starting point for a cross-generational conversation in your own family, school, or local congregation. I pray that the ideas expressed by our young people through *Let's Talk* will help you discover the particular burning issues that occupy young people in your local context—for these will vary widely by culture and geography. And finally, I hope this book will help you develop some of the tools you'll need to keep a dynamic and meaningful dialogue going.

As we who are older fade away, a new generation will take our place. What happens next? There will be no church of the future without the creative presence and engagement *today* of those who are young. They're talented, energetic, and spiritually gifted. They want to be involved, for they care about the church.

Please, let's talk!



# How to Use This Book

This book is more than just a record of a seven-year conversation with Seventh-day Adventist young people from around the world. And it's certainly meant to be more than just a collection of my reflections on some of the major concerns and themes they raised.

This book is intended as a starting point for a conversation only *you* can continue. You could use this book, for instance, to kick off discussions in your youth group or with students in Adventist schools. You could use it as reading material for your small group meetings, or even as a springboard to start regular Let's Talk events in your local congregation.

But the point is that I hope you'll not just read this book but put it to work.

For this reason, I've included after each chapter a short "Conversation Starters" section with suggestions for how you could continue exploring each topic in a way that makes sense within your local context.

Each Conversation Starter begins with a "Have Your Say" question or activity, designed to draw out the range of perspectives that you'll inevitably find in your discussion group.

This is followed by either one or two suggested discussion questions or activities that will ideally inspire you to consider the issue from new angles.

And finally, each Conversation Starter ends with the question "What now?" and prompts you to consider practical ways that young and old, together, can begin to respond to what you've learned from each other.

Obviously, these Conversation Starters will work best when your discussion group has a good mix of those representing different age groups. But it doesn't really matter: just get the conversation going and see where it—and the Holy Spirit—will take you.



# Introduction

In the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, *Time* magazine named “The Protestor” its 2011 “Person of the Year.”<sup>1</sup> In its cover story, the magazine traced the incredible rise of this vast army of young people, bound together through shared grievances and intimately connected through social media. Together, these young people became makers of history—a force that took the world by surprise.

Of course, the idea of a distinct “youth culture” that tests the status quo is nothing new. Significant youth protest movements have marked each decade since the 1960s. And since at least the late 1800s, sociologists of each generation have identified a distinct “young culture”—a period between childhood and mature adulthood marked by rebellion against authority, questioning of traditional values, and a search for identity.

But today’s youth culture has an added, unique dimension: a virtually unlimited, globalized communication platform at its fingertips that is profoundly changing the way young people understand and interact with their world. As United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a recent speech, “As a child, when I first saw a television, I put my hand on the screen because I was fascinated. Now, when my granddaughter sees a TV, she puts her hand on the screen because she expects it to respond to her commands.”<sup>2</sup>

## Do you know us?

Are we familiar with the current “youth culture” of the Adventist Church around the world? Do we understand the forces of technology and social media that are shaping the thinking and worldviews of the young men and women in our churches? Do we know what’s troubling them and what questions they’re struggling to resolve? Are we aware of the specific ideas and passions that, for them, define what it means to be Seventh-day Adventist in the twenty-first century?

I suspect the answer, in general, is, “Not so much.”

In more than thirty live broadcasts and through the Let’s Talk Web site, I heard our young people say, “Do you really hear us? Are you listening?”

## Family ties

In every exchange, I was struck by how deeply young people care for their church. It's true that a portion of each broadcast usually dealt with issues that loom large for those working through the challenges of early adulthood—dress, music, dating, and entertainment. Perhaps these topics may strike older people as frivolous or even silly, yet young people must ask these questions along the way toward developing the core values that will guide them through life.

On the whole, however, the issues raised by our young people touched on critical areas for our church as a global family as it moves into a new century.

Really, it's this concept of family that drove the Let's Talk initiative and that I want to bring forward in this book. The Adventist Church is a family, regardless of our vast differences of geography, culture, and language. As in every family, there are young and old who often hold different values and priorities. But we're bonded to each other in love and with a shared purpose, and from this flows a profound sense of support and tolerance for each other.

This idea of family defines the life of a believing community. Yes, we have our doctrines, and we understand the biblical basis for these. We have clear standards of faith, ethics, and morality. But against this static backdrop, church life is shaped by the dynamics of relationships—the give-and-take and often unpredictable interaction between imperfect individuals who've been drawn together into one family.

This is why we need to talk to each other!

## Do you really *want* to know us?

This book is structured around the various issues and concerns that kept reappearing in Let's Talk events around the world. At the beginning of each chapter are the voices of the young—I've edited samples of questions and ideas they put before me during broadcasts or through the Let's Talk Web site. Their comments may be surprising to some—perhaps even provocative—and yet, there they are. It's no use trying to gloss over them or make them more "presentable," or we'll invite defeat before we even begin.

After the comments from the young people, I've included some personal reflections on the issues they raise—not in an attempt to put the matter to rest but rather to ask, What can we do about this? Are their points valid? Is what they're saying hostile to the very identity and mission of the church? Is there an inspired word that says No to what they're proposing? Or could it be that if we fail to act on what they're telling us, we'll impoverish our church and obstruct our mission?

## Clear messages

I can't claim to have identified some kind of monolithic Adventist youth

culture. Such a thing doesn't exist, for the experiences, problems, priorities, and opinions of young people vary dramatically, not just between cultures but *within* each culture as well.

What I did hear through *Let's Talk*, however, was a series of distinct and recurring signals from our young people that, at the very least, should lead us to take note.

These themes included the following:

- The cry of Adventist young people to be accepted as serious participants in the life of the church. “I have ideas, talents, and energies. I want to be heard, understood, and used by my church! If you don't need me, tell me, and I'll be on my way.”
- “I don't understand why my church thinks I'm negative and critical simply because I have questions I need to ask. Must I check my brain at the church door in order to be welcome?”
- Standards of dress, diet, relationships, and entertainment. “Is looking drab somehow more Christian? How do I construct a lifestyle I can fully own, and yet that is also fully in line with biblical values?”
- “Why are youth and women—75 percent of our global family—so underused in our church? The secular world, both in business and government, values the contributions of young professionals and women of all ages, but why don't we? Does God have a problem with this?”
- “This world is where I live today—I can't step out of it. So why doesn't Adventism speak more clearly and courageously to the issues I see in the news media every day? Shouldn't the faith I love have something significant to contribute to matters on the public agenda?”
- “Homosexuality—OK, it's there. I understand the biblical position that shapes our church's teaching about this, but we're talking about human beings, loved by Christ! How can the church uphold its moral and biblical position without appearing strident and intolerant to the point that it doesn't seem to care about people?”
- Cohabitation and sexual relationships outside of marriage. “Are you aware of how 'normal' this is outside the church? Can you please talk to me about why our moral standards and attitudes toward marriage are still valid?”

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- “I wish my church could be more tolerant. Having the right formula seems to be more important than how we treat each other. Are being ‘right’ and being loving mutually exclusive? I look at the way Jesus treated people, and I wonder why doctrinal truth and love for people don’t always coexist in my church.”
- Through *Let’s Talk*, the young revealed a whole spectrum of attitudes about the Bible and Ellen White. There were the enthusiastic idealists who feel we aren’t promoting Ellen White’s writings as we should; the skeptics who are uncomfortable with her role vis-à-vis the Bible; and the yawning apathy of those who say, “She may have had a role ‘back then’ but frankly, I don’t see that she can contribute anything to my spiritual journey today.”
- And then there was the simple refrain I heard from young people no matter what particular issue we were discussing. “Please, let us in the door. Please keep talking with us.”

Take a look at the faces of the young men and women you worship with each Sabbath. Do you know what they’re really thinking and feeling? You’ll never find out unless you ask. This book begins a conversation I hope you’ll continue so that it becomes a dynamic, intergenerational exchange of ideas within your family, school, or congregation.

We owe it to each other and to our Lord to keep talking; for when conversation stops, we walk away.

### [ Endnotes ]

1. Kurt Anderson, “The Protester,” *Time*, December 14, 2011, accessed December 4, 2012, [http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745\\_2102132,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132,00.html).

2. Ban Ki-moon, keynote address to the Global Colloquium of University Presidents at Columbia University, delivered April 2, 2012, accessed November 12, 2012, [http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/search\\_full.asp?statID=1498](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/search_full.asp?statID=1498).

# Let's Get Acquainted

Sometimes we seem to pass each other as ships in the night—only vaguely aware of the presence of the other. The worlds of the young and the old in our church seem so different. True, the “under thirty” and the “over sixty” occupy much of the same physical space, but within the space of the mind, we could hardly be further apart: our hopes and frustrations; what we rate as important or peripheral; what we see as “alive” or “dead”; our memories of yesterday and visions of tomorrow; and, yes, our choices of entertainment and music.

This reality of separation prompted me to begin the *Let's Talk* television conversation with Adventist young people—a project that developed into a series of thirty-plus live broadcasts taped on six continents. The heart of this initiative was my desire to listen—really listen—to young people and to ask the question: “What does the world, and our church, look like through your eyes?”

The *Let's Talk* series actually began in 2003 with an idea for a single live television broadcast with young people in Simi Valley, California. But from the very first, it became apparent that we couldn't stop with just one interview. The response to that first broadcast made it abundantly clear that young people wanted to talk, that there was a vast, pent-up desire to engage in dialogue about issues important to them and their daily reality.

After more than thirty live broadcasts and a six-year Internet dialogue with young people that brought hundreds of e-mails to my desk each week, I'm left with the conviction that we—the younger and older members of the church—hardly know each other.

Yes, we go to the same church building, we hear the same pastor (although the young don't take from the sermon what the older do), we sing the same hymns (well, some of them), but we hardly know each other. We don't actually talk together. Unfortunately, we're strangers.

The young have a huge need to be heard, understood, and be taken seriously. We need to talk, but those of us from the older generations can't speak to young people as if we're doing them a favor—as if we're magisterially granting them an “audience” with us. We need to admit that not all openness is real, and not all

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conversations result in genuine communication.

Listen to some of what young people told me through the Let's Talk Web site and through the various *Let's Talk* broadcasts.

- *"I think the best thing church leaders can do for the youth of our church is to 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."*
- *"Youth should be given more chances, even though they make mistakes. The problem is that elder folk see some young people's behavior and apply that kind of observation to all the youth. I get the sense they're suspicious of us and our ideas."*
- *"I wish we were encouraged to run projects and programs in the church without people constantly looking over our shoulders and making sure we're doing it 'right.' Parents should be there to cheer the progress and, if criticism is needed, it should be [done] in a loving and building manner, not destructive."*
- *"I think our church elders should schedule a regular time to talk to young people and know about their problems and views on different issues. We don't mind advice and counsel, but I think they should actually listen to us before they give it!"*
- *"Our leaders need to wake up and give the young people more credit. We are more than just globs of emotions, although we're treated that way most of the time. We are thinkers and future leaders."*
- *"I'm not sure if older people realize how condescending they often are to us. They judge us, talk down to us, and squash our ideas. It's time for the 'old folks' to 'let go and let God' when it comes to young people."*
- *"I think the biggest thing young people can bring to the church are new and creative ideas. There are so many more ways the church could be reaching unchurched people, but it seems like the Adventist Church so often just 'talks to itself.' Please, please listen to the ideas young adults have, even if they appear too 'modern' or too 'un-Adventist.' But take those ideas seriously. They just might reach people who otherwise wouldn't hear about the Adventist Church."*
- *"To me, trust is everything. If you trust me and show me that by giving me an opportunity to have responsibility in the church service or in an evangelistic campaign, then I'm not going anywhere! I have at least twenty friends who are all very active in the church because of this. Adults have trusted us with responsibility and we love it!"*



- *“I hate hearing people say, ‘Young people are the future of the church.’ Really? They have a funny way of showing that.”*
- *“I think that instead of always being ready to condemn or judge the way youth think and behave, church leaders should try harder to understand life from the point of view of a youth. I think they’ve forgotten what it’s like.”*
- *“Church leaders can make the youth feel valued and involved when their ideas and thoughts are heard and recognized as part of the decision-making process in the church. More often than not, most of the decision making of the church is done by the older ones who give small value to the voices of the youth. In fact, youth are about the last priority in my church.”*
- *“We always hear, ‘We love our youth, we support our youth’ but, really, it never amounts to anything. The way to show that you support us is to actually listen to our ideas, and maybe even let us take leadership of certain things.”*
- *“When we [the youth of our church] talk to leaders in the church, they don’t really listen—they’re hearing us, but they’re not open to all arguments and discussion. They always end up doing what they think is important.”*
- *“There’s a big gap between the young people and church leaders and I don’t really see that changing in any meaningful way.”*
- *“I’m asking this from the top of my head, and I think that it’s an idea that is worth asking. Can we have an ‘Exchange Day’ where the church leaders and young people switch roles for the day? I think it’ll be fun and challenging, but also an experience that will show all of us how each other live.”*
- *“The youth of the Adventist Church is a ‘sleeping giant.’ When we get woken up, it will be powerful.”*

This is what they said. How do we handle it?

### **“Can you hear me?”**

There’s something powerful in the act of listening. We experienced this truth every time a group of young Adventist men and women and I faced each other at the start of a broadcast. The cameras would roll and we would begin to talk. Sometimes the beginning was slow—the questions were tentative or focused on safe topics. Sometimes the questions betrayed skepticism: “Are older adults really

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prepared to hear what we have to say?" was the unspoken subtext.

Invariably, though, we experienced a shift as the group warmed up. The young people began to realize that I was there not because I had an agenda or because I had all the answers—sometimes I didn't know the answer and admitted it. But I wanted to hear and understand them—that was all. As we talked, they began to express their pent-up frustration by speaking more freely and with greater passion. And more often than not, our back-and-forth would continue well after the broadcast had ended and the studio lights were turned off.

Through the Let's Talk Web site, the comments from young men and women from around the world tended to be a little "sharper." Perhaps in the relative anonymity of an online forum or an e-mail, these young people felt freer to express the depths of their feelings. In essence, they were asking their church, "Do you really know us? Maybe you think you do, but have you really listened to us? Please, talk to us—before we lose interest in talking to you."

They wanted to talk, but with the goal of being heard and understood. I once had an African student who told me, "I hear you, but I don't hear you." He was saying, "I hear your words, but I really don't follow what you're getting at!"

Maybe the younger and older ones of our church are talking past each other. Maybe we're not even speaking the same language.

### Listening for more than words

The young people I met in conversation weren't necessarily looking for unconditional affirmation of their ideas or their opinions—but simply to be heard! To have the chance to express themselves and feel that a leader of their church was seriously listening, regardless of whether I agreed with them or not. To feel that their ideas—and by extension they, themselves—were of tremendous value to their Adventist family. *This* is what fueled the growth of the Let's Talk initiative.

Occasionally, a comment would cross my desk from an older person questioning the value of these conversations, suggesting perhaps that the young people were focused on trivialities or "trying to make huge dilemmas of things that are essentially nonissues. After all, our church is very clear about standards of conduct and what we believe!"

It's true that in most broadcasts some questions were raised—perhaps about dress or hairstyles or entertainment choices—that it could have been easy to dismiss as lightweight or repetitive. But I regarded these questions as teasers to open the conversation. The questions belonged to a broader process in which young people were taking their value system for a test drive. Young people are synthesizing what they've been taught—their "received values"—with their own firsthand experiences as increasingly independent human beings. And in doing so, they're developing a framework of principles that will likely stay with them throughout their lives.

More often, though, the questions reflected serious thought and a genuine desire to understand issues of vital importance for them, personally, and for the church of the future.

First and foremost, the young people wanted the affirmation of someone listening to them respectfully; the assurance that their points of view had legitimacy in the eyes of the church establishment. Before sharing too deeply and before letting themselves become vulnerable, they wanted to know that there were no hidden agendas. This is the underlying message, I believe, in their comments listed earlier in this chapter.

“Are you really listening to us?” they’re asking. “Will you try to understand what we’re saying? We want to be sure because we’ve been burnt before.”

In summary, I have distilled from the young people’s comments a list of things older adults need to understand and do:

- Get better acquainted with your youth—you probably don’t really know them.
- Give your youth more chances—second chances, and then some more.
- Thoroughly understand the young people’s ideas before judging them.
- If criticism is necessary, offer your comments with love.
- Consider scheduling regular times for discussion with young people in your local church; make it part of the church calendar.
- Admit that young people are thinkers—and they’re your future leaders. Treat them as if they are important.
- Avoid sounding condescending, as if you’re talking down to them.
- Listen to young people even if they sound too modern and “un-Adventist.” They may have ideas for reaching those who are modern and “un-Adventist.”
- Trust is really everything. Try trusting them and see what happens.

Are these fair points or not?

When the young people of our church vent their frustration, there’s no reason for us to take offense anymore than we would with our own children. It all comes down to a basic question of how we’re going to function together as a spiritual family.

## **They'll have the final say**

I also encountered an unmistakably strong, sometimes even brutal, signal from the young in every conversation we had, whether it took place in Manila, Cape Town, or São Paulo. I heard it regardless of whether I was talking with men or women, students or young professionals. I heard it no matter whether we were discussing homosexuality, social justice, racial equality within the church, or women's ordination. It was unmistakable and clear.

It was this: "If our local church is not a place where we're loved, heard, and given meaningful responsibility, then we will walk away."

Young people want their church to be a genuine home, hallmarked by acceptance and love. If it isn't, they'll find it elsewhere. We'll lose them, but not because they've lost faith or they've come undone spiritually or they're "too difficult" or their ideas are too outrageous. They'll leave simply because they feel they don't belong. We'll lose them because we, the older ones, have failed to communicate that this is their church, just as much as it's ours.

I visited many, many churches during my years as General Conference president. Sometimes I'd look out over the congregation, and my eyes would meet a sea of gray hair, and I'd wonder, *Where are the young people?*

## **Internal bleeding**

How many of our young people are we losing? How many have walked out and left without a forwarding address, with perhaps only their immediate family keeping track of what's become of them?

Precise statistics are difficult to find, but according to Roger Dudley, a researcher from Andrews University who has spent more than thirty years studying trends among Adventist young people, some "40 percent to 50 percent of those who are baptized members in their mid-teens will drop out of the church by the time they are halfway through their twenties."<sup>1</sup>

I wouldn't be surprised if 70 to 80 percent of those who were, at one point, students at Adventist schools, are now, ten to fifteen years later, nowhere to be seen. Such numbers are more than alarming—they're catastrophic. They should shake every caring church member awake and make us cry. Our Lord would go looking for one lost sheep; how deeply do we care for the many? Will we make the effort to not just ask the question "Why?" but to actually make changes that need to be made?

We're a mission-focused denomination—we always have been. It's a monumental failure on our part not to be directing more of our resources toward mission by the young, for the young. Let them loose! Just give them resources, support, and trust, and they can do mission among their own peers and friends much more effectively than older "seasoned" workers in mission.

As one young woman said to me, “Trust is what we are asking for.” My sense is that they’re not actually asking anyone to do anything for them. They just want a climate in which they can thrive, feel accepted, and safe—an environment in which they can cultivate friendships and social lives and which, in turn, becomes the basis for drawing more of their friends, former friends, and colleagues into the embrace of their faith community.

As I think of the ones who’ve actually walked out the door, I also have to wonder, *How many more young men and women are staying on, one foot in the church and one foot out, unfulfilled in their spiritual walk and unengaged with their local church?* They stay because it gets to be so complicated—socially, with their family, or whatever—to make a formal break.

I doubt there’s any single comprehensive plan for reversing the attrition rates of our under thirties. But what I heard from young men and women, over and over again in different ways and in different words, was that we have to look hard at the culture and the “temperature” of each local congregation. Without this first step, we’ll have no hope of addressing the bleeding of youth from our churches.

## New attitudes

What catalysts could help transform relationships between generations in our churches? Well, here are just a few suggestions.

- Accept the fact that twenty-year-olds will think differently from sixty-year-olds. It’s just a fact of life that holds true both inside and outside our church. To deny it or try to override it is insensitive, insulting, and unreal.
- Just as my children and grandchildren are an inseparable part of my life, bonded to me with cords of loyalty and love, so I’m bonded with the young in my church. As with my own family, if they bleed, I bleed. There are no qualifiers—no ifs or buts. If the bond is broken, I suffer.
- The young need space to test the ground of their territory without feeling like someone is constantly looking over their shoulders. This reality means those of us in the older category sometimes need to exercise self-restraint.
- Young people are going to make mistakes; and when they do, we need to love them and embrace them. Let them feel the warmth that comes from us in the midst of the mess they’ve made. Why? Because they’re part of us! We should never walk away in disgust.
- We should never forget that their freedom to make personal choices, even

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crazy ones, is a freedom God has given them.

- We need the humility to exercise our own gift of remembering. Didn't we also once make the same journey, perhaps many years ago?

This list could be expanded or tailored to your particular congregation, but try these for a start. I believe they'll go a long way toward changing the temperature of intergenerational relationships in your church.

Can we count on any guarantees with respect to outcomes? No. In this, as in all human relationships, there are no guarantees. Will some of our young people continue to go astray? Yes, tragically they will. But by trying on some new attitudes, perhaps we can start keeping more than we lose simply because the atmosphere "at home" makes it a good place for them to be.

### **Is experience overrated?**

And then comes the question I heard over and over again in the *Let's Talk* conversations: "Why can't we be trusted with more responsibility? Why can't we sit on the committees that make decisions? Why can't young adults be much more visible in church leadership, both in my local congregation and in the broader church context? Does the Bible spell out certain age criteria for spiritual leadership?"

What do we say to all this? Usually we say, "With experience comes wisdom and judgment, but the young haven't earned these yet."

But consider this: In 1848, Ellen White experienced a vision that had profound consequences for the development of our church. It's sometimes called the "streams of light" vision. She saw that James White should start publishing a "little paper" that would eventually take the Advent message around the world like streams of light.

What's remarkable to me is not just the vision itself, but Ellen White's actions after she received the vision; her determination to see the Lord's plan put into action in spite of those who said it was impractical, if not impossible. She stood firm against the disapproval of other leaders, such as Joseph Bates, who felt that her husband, James, would be more effective as a preacher than as a writer. She also withstood the doubts of James, who saw the huge financial difficulties involved in printing and distributing such a paper. She insisted: "He must write, write, write, and walk out by faith."<sup>2</sup>

It's easy to forget she was just twenty-one years of age!

When we hand out responsibilities within our local church, experience is often the first criteria we look to, and sometimes with good reason. We want the task done well, and a visible track record is reassuring. But do we tend to overplay the value of experience?

Let's ask first, "How does this person deal with others? Does he or she have the capacity to love and care for the church? Will she or he be responsible? Is he or she prepared to learn? Is his or her commitment strong?"

If you put the right young men or women into a certain place with a defined responsibility, they will gain the experience they need. But put the wrong people in, regardless of age, and they will never do well.

## Making trust real

The young in conversation frequently told me, "The older ones in our church don't trust us."

Once we've decided that we're going to entrust an assignment to a young person, our next responsibility is to step back. And then to take another step back. We must do it, risks notwithstanding, because it's right. Only then does the word *trust* name a reality rather than just a buzzword. Micromanagerial supervision has always been a poor model because it belittles and constantly undermines trust. But what if they don't get it right? The simple truth is that young people won't do things by the same methods that we would and they *will* make some mistakes. But making mistakes while being trusted to try something new is a great learning experience.

Sometimes, I suspect our reluctance to allow our young people greater responsibilities within the church stems from motives that have no place within our community of faith—territorialism, the need to control, a desire to wield authority, a feeling that it should be "our way or no way."

Or perhaps our unwillingness comes more from a sense of fear—that our time is over, our contribution will no longer be needed or valued, or our voice will no longer be heard. It's an inescapable fact of life that the moment to step aside will come for a variety of reasons—advancing age, failing health, fading energy, or whatever. Every generation must eventually turn responsibilities over to a younger generation.

There have been moments in my life when I've thought, *How wonderful it might be if I could just hand over my briefcase of responsibilities to those who are half my age.* They have the promises of the prophet (Joel 2:28, 29), a computer full of ideas, and the energies to carry them out. But so often when those of us who are older step aside, our replacement is someone from the slightly-less-old category. It's "safer" that way and causes fewer ripples. It also ensures that there are fewer surprises or innovations. Is this approach less risky and more comfortable? Of course. Could we be closing the door on something extraordinary that the Spirit is seeking to accomplish? I have many moments when I think so.

## [ **Conversation starters** ]

*Do you want to explore more deeply some of the issues raised in this chapter? Here are some ideas for getting a dialogue started between younger and older members of your congregation.*

**1. Have your say.** What are some of the biggest “trust killers” in the ways older and younger people in the church speak and act toward each other?

**2. Conversation builders.**

- In a recent survey, young people were asked about the major differences between younger and older generations. They pointed to music, use of technology, political views, moral values, and attitudes toward different races.<sup>3</sup> In your congregation, what are the major differences between the young and the not-so-young?
- What do younger and older members of your congregation share in common in terms of beliefs, hopes for the church, and vision for mission?

**3. Discussion questions.**

- How much emphasis should be placed on experience when filling elected positions within your church?
- Could young people sometimes be partly to blame when they're sidelined from church office? Are they sometimes too passive?
- What do older people in this congregation need to do or say to make younger members feel loved, heard, and trusted?
- How can younger people help the older ones feel respected and valued?

**What now?** What are two or three practical, easily implemented ideas for improving the intergenerational lines of communication within your congregation?



[ Endnotes ]

1. Roger Dudley, quoted in "180 Symposium Convenes at Andrews," *Andrews University News*, accessed December 3, 2012, <http://www.andrews.edu/news/2008/10/symposium.html>.
2. Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of James and Ellen White* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1880), 260.
3. Paul Taylor, Rich Morin, Kim Parker, D'Vera Cohn, and Wendy Wang, *Forty Years After Woodstock, a Gentler Generation Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2009), 4.

