

We Can  
**Keep Them** in the  
**Church**  
Success stories and ideas  
that really work  
How to love our children  
so they won't leave

Compiled by Myrna Tetz with Gary L. Hopkins



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# Preface

My husband and I were visiting a Bible study group, and after the discussion the leader asked what we're doing now that we are both retired. Bob explained his part-time ministry and then, pointing at me, said that I was putting together a book. I said that, as a church, we are losing nearly half our young people, that I believed we could keep our youth, and that I had asked a variety of individuals to write about how this could happen. Heads nodded and people agreed that something needed to happen. Then someone asked, "Why do we want our young people to stay in the church?"

I was stunned. Inside my head I was saying, "Why *wouldn't* we want to keep our children in the church?" Did the person who asked that question think the possibility of our young people meeting Christ in our church was minimal? Other questions arose, so this one wasn't answered, but afterwards I thought about it a lot. The question is a good one. Why *do* we want our youth to stay in the church?

Of course, there are obvious answers: We desire them to live Christian lives exempt from the evils that surround them. We're anxious that they minister to those who are hungry, both physically and spiritually. We want them to be saved when Jesus comes. So, yes, we want them to stay as active, loyal, dedicated, converted members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

And if they choose to leave, what would we want them to say? That they hated the church? That they were not loved? That the people in the church, particularly the older ones, didn't care if they were there or not?

Suppose your son or your daughter or your friends' children or your pastor's offspring were to choose another lifestyle. Wouldn't you want them to be able to say, "Oh, let me tell you, the Seventh-day Adventist church I attended was a warm and friendly place. Even though I made noise during the services, dressed inappropriately at times, wore a ring in my nose and one in my belly button that could be seen, acted like I didn't care, and sang music they didn't like, I was definitely loved. There were adults there besides my parents who spoke to me and hugged me every time they saw me when I was a child and during my rebellious teenage years. And they still keep in touch by phone, by letter, and by very meaningful gifts. Sometimes they even invite me to their homes,

feed me, and ask what I'm doing and *how* I'm doing. I certainly was and still am loved. I have such fond memories of attending the Seventh-day Adventist church.”

Does this description fit your church?

### How This Book Came to Be

Two events piqued my interest in the question “What could we do to keep our young people?”: a presentation by Jose Rojas on youth music groups and our reactions to them and Willie Oliver’s story about a man whose children were finding church boring (see the Rojas and Oliver interviews in this book). I put some scrambled thoughts down in an email to Gary Hopkins describing my new obsession and asking if he thought the topic was worth pursuing. (I didn’t know about his book *It Takes a Church*, which was just being released at the time.) Within a few minutes (typical Hopkins!) he sent an email saying that he had called Tim Lale, book acquisition editor at Pacific Press and told him about this proposed book. Almost immediately the telephone rang; Tim was on the line encouraging us to carry on.

Prospective authors—including church leaders, children’s and youth ministries directors, young pastors, and members—were contacted, deadlines were set, and almost all of those who were encouraged to write accepted, with no payment promised. As the manuscripts came in, I became excited: If every Seventh-day Adventist would read this book and put into practice what these individuals have suggested, our children and young people would become vibrant, happy, enthusiastic members of our church. And what’s more, they’d stay.

I invite you to read this book, internalize the suggestions, and pray about our church and our ministry to children and young people. Then do your best to change *your* church into a loving, happy, accepting group of dedicated members—if it isn’t already, that is!

—Myrna Tetz

Space limitations kept a lot of good stuff—like the whole story of Estera Stefanovich (see Appendix C)—out of this book. To see this extra material, look up [www.adventistbookcenter.com/olink.tpl?sku=0816319987](http://www.adventistbookcenter.com/olink.tpl?sku=0816319987).

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# Introduction

by *Tim Lale*

Some people in the Seventh-day Adventist Church feel dissatisfied with the status quo. I am one of them, and I suspect you are too. We wish to see change, but we're not sure exactly how the church should change or who could make it happen. The purpose of this book is to assemble a faint picture of what you might see going on at your church if it were full of happy, committed church members *of all ages*.

What we don't need is more bad news. We already know that about half of the young people raised in the church leave it when they reach adulthood. We know that the membership of the North American church is static in many areas. We know that the divorce rate of American Seventh-day Adventists is virtually indistinguishable from that of the U.S. population as a whole. We know that enrollments in Seventh-day Adventist Church schools have declined steeply in the past twenty years. If you want woeful facts about the state of the church, you can find plenty.

What if we agreed that the future for our young people could be a lot better? What if we decided to change our basic assumptions and started down a different path?

If the idea of change seems dangerous, let me assure you that there are no theological innovations in this book, only a bunch of loud affirmations. This is not a book about worship style or church-growth models or other subjects we argue about. This is a book of stories about how to form the most positive, happy, Christlike assumptions about ourselves and each other and then pass them to the younger generations. It is filled with anecdotes of individuals who have found ways to draw fellow believers, especially the younger ones, into church fellowship and relationship with God. Individuals from all the ministries of

our church—lay members and leaders—have contributed their stories and their vision, and I'm excited about the contribution each has made. You will like this book if you like good news. You will enjoy it and relate to it if you want good things to happen in your church from now on.

What's the formula for happy church members, young and old? It actually comes from the prequel to this book, another book called *It Takes a Church*. In it, Gary Hopkins and Joyce Hopp share this radical observation: *The way to keep young people in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to surround them with adults who acknowledge them by name, display a loving, caring attitude toward them, and show concern for them and help them whenever possible.* This formula, when applied, has done some radically positive things for children and teens.

Kids with supportive adults in their lives are much more likely to choose to *avoid destructive behaviors* like smoking and premarital sex than are other young people, regardless of whether the supportive adults have ever mentioned these subjects by name. The adults in a church don't have to tell the kids what to do; they only have to be loving and supportive. Why? Because young people already have lots of information, and they have already been told many times what is the right thing to do. What they may not have had is a sense that they are *important to the adults in their lives*. The sense that we care is the single biggest gift we can give them—and the surest way to keep them in the church. Children and youth who have this gift make good decisions in the tough situations of life and may not even realize why. And these kids will come back to church looking for more good news and support.

Of course, parents are the most important adults in the life of a young person. For many children, their parents' level of love and care and involvement is the biggest predictor of whether or not they grow into relationship with God and the church. The model of faith they receive at home is the most influential one in the child's life. Let's acknowledge, however, that some of the best Christian parents around have produced children who turned away from God and the church when they grew up. Only God Himself knows what is in the minds of these children. He gave the choice of belief or unbelief to every single one of His human cre-

ations, and that means there are no guarantees. We are not looking for a formula that deprives children of the choice to serve Him out of love.

But parents are not meant to carry the burden of their children's spiritual formation alone. Just as we need the members of the church, the body of Christ, for our own spiritual strength, so parents need the church congregation as a contributor to the spiritual growth of their children. That's where the rest of us come in. Do we need to become experts at something or take all kinds of training? No. As we learn ways of showing care and love to children and young people who enter our circle, we help to lift them up out of the muck of the world and draw them to the warmth and light of God's love. And the question of whether or not they stay in the church takes care of itself.

Whenever I hear someone say, "We are losing our young people," I shudder. It suggests that somehow we own them, that somehow we are losing what, as a church, is ours. I believe that is false. As I said earlier, there are no guarantees concerning the young people connected with the church because God has given each of us the right to choose. But every week there are opportunities to help children and youth understand how important they are. From the Bible and the stories of others we can learn how to help them be saved, and there are ways we can remove every barrier that might prevent it from happening.

However, the main reason the words "We are losing our young people" bothers me is that it covers up what has really happened until now. I believe that teens and young adults have left the church mainly because we, the adults in church, didn't connect with them when we had the opportunity—not out of malice or intentional slight, maybe, but because it is not our habit, very often, to seek them out in simple ways. I don't say this to create a sense of guilt. Feelings of guilt don't help us progress. This is just recognition of a root problem. And it is the source of the solution.

Is this a challenge that you can't see a way to meet? From the human point of view it may seem that way. Many of us feel we don't have much of anything to give to a child or teen. How do we make ourselves care more if we already care? How can we find something inside us that we haven't felt before?

Again, I think the answer is simple but overlooked. God's love is available to us in quantities that we would actually buckle under if we asked for a lot more consciousness of it. Throughout the Bible God



says, “Call on Me. Ask Me for stuff. Don’t hold back. Prove Me now.” He says over and over, “When you know what it feels like to be loved this much, you’ll be bursting with it. You’ll have to share it—to pass it on because you won’t be able to keep it in.”

Sometimes I have a little bit of a sense of how much God loves me. It’s like an amazing warmth—an out-of-this-world sense of security; a wonderful feeling that I am very valuable and esteemed and cared about. I want to know more about it and feel it more, and I want to be able to pass it on to the children in my family and my church.

So, do we start this process of change with a firm resolve to do things differently? No, that’s not the first step. We don’t make it happen with our own determination. We simply go to God and say in prayer as often as we can, “Please fill us up and make us know Your love. Please change us so that we can’t help caring about every child and teenager and young adult we meet. Please make us impulsively kind and interested and loving. Please help us to change kids by turning their hearts to You.” And then we leave it to Him to grow our hearts.

Is the world full of temptations for children and youth? Yes.

Is it saturated with images, objects, ideas, and attitudes that run counter to God’s culture? Of course it is.

Is it possible to insulate young people against this stinking mess without completely and totally sheltering them from it? I believe it is!

Is it possible to help the majority of our kids accept the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus as their own? With a God-given change in *our* attitude and habits, it seems very possible.

Is it possible to have too many young people in a church? I don’t think so—but let’s try to find out!

# More Than a Message

by Gary Hopkins

*Gary Hopkins is Assistant Professor of Health Promotion and Education at the School of Public Health, Loma Linda University, and Director of the Center for Prevention Research at the Institute for Prevention of Addictions at Andrews University. This chapter is adapted from an article by the same name published in the Adventist Review, March 6, 2003, pp. 26-30. Used by permission.*

Sharon is a young woman who works for an insurance firm in Kansas City. She is single and loves life. She's bright, fun, popular, and full of energy.

Sharon was raised in a Seventh-day Adventist home to loving parents. Her mother works as an assistant manager of a large department store and her father as the pastor of a large Adventist church. During her early years Sharon always attended church. She loved learning her memory verses. When she was young she would stand up in front of church and recite flawlessly all thirteen memory verses from the quarter.

Sharon attended Adventist schools from the first grade through college. She took all the required Bible courses and attended vespers and Sabbath afternoon spiritual meetings as scheduled by her father's church and her schools. In high school she sang in the choir, played the flute in the band, and worked at the church camp each summer.

While in college Sharon began attending worship services and other church activities less frequently. If you asked her why, she would have had a difficult time explaining the reasons. But she clearly felt less interested in the church and spiritual matters and felt somewhat guilty for her lack of interest.

Since finishing college, Sharon goes to church only when she's with her parents. Other than that, the church is a part of her past and has nothing to do with her present life. Sharon isn't an alcoholic, but she does drink on occasion, though never to drunkenness. She doesn't take drugs but is sexually intimate with her boyfriend.

Sharon knows the message of Jesus, the doctrine of salvation, the 2,300-day prophecy, Daniel and Revelation, the parables, and more. She understands the meaning of the Sabbath and is certain that there will be a second coming of Christ and a final judgment. She knows the message. She knows it well. Because Sharon does not practice what she knows to be true, we might think that what she needs is a better understanding of the message. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sharon's situation, a very common one, needs to be examined from a different perspective.

### Why Do They Leave?

If you look around and maybe at yourself, you might find people like Sharon. She also knows that she should exercise routinely but doesn't. Does that sound like you? Sharon has many friends who know well that smoking is dangerous and shortens life, yet who smoke. Does that sound like people you know? Sharon knows being overweight can lead to less than optimal outcomes, but finds herself a little heavy. Sound like you? In many regards, Sharon *knows*, but her knowing doesn't necessarily translate into doing—just as her understanding of the biblical message has not translated into her applying that message to her life.

If you look at our church today, it's easy to see that maybe half or more of our young people are leaving the church when they finish high school. People commonly conclude that we aren't preaching the message of the Bible well enough. I disagree. The kids who are leaving the church are leaving with a pretty good understanding of the church's message. Dr. Bailey Gillespie, the lead researcher in the Valuegenesis studies, tells me that by the sixth grade our kids generally understand the story of Jesus, the good news of the forgiveness of sin, the second coming of Christ, the Sabbath, and other basic spiritual matters. Our kids are leaving for other reasons.

Over the past few years several colleagues of mine and I have been studying what we can do to prevent the behaviors that are well known to contribute to the transmission of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. We've focused our work on adolescents between the ages of twelve and twenty or so. We're studying young people because globally, more than 50 percent of the new cases of AIDS are found in those less than twenty-five years of age.

As a part of our research we ask questions that test the participants' AIDS knowledge. Using a written questionnaire, we ask the young people—usually students enrolled in high school—if they can get AIDS from toilet seats, mosquitoes, holding hands, and so forth. During the analysis phase we actually score the students' proficiency in the AIDS knowledge section.

In research conducted on samples in Romania, the Philippines, the Caribbean, Armenia, the United States, Canada, and other locations, we've learned that generally students are well educated regarding HIV/AIDS. They tend to know the information that they need to know.

Our questionnaire also measures the extent to which participants have engaged in sexual intercourse and drug use—both behaviors known to be associated with the transmission of the AIDS virus. Our findings vary, but one item keeps emerging in every study: There tends to be virtually no association between their AIDS knowledge and their behavior. In other words, regardless of how much they know about AIDS, they tend to practice behaviors that put them at risk—sometimes very high risk—for contracting or transmitting the AIDS virus. It doesn't appear that AIDS education alone will result in effective prevention of AIDS.

First Corinthians 13 makes a point that I believe directs itself to this situation. It says that we have to love people. It makes this point very clearly. Our kids aren't leaving because they don't understand the message; they are leaving because our churches have become *message only* organizations. We assume that we have the gospel. Well, unless your church is a caring, extremely loving organization, then it clearly doesn't have the gospel. Part of the message is information, but there's another part—love. You can't separate the two. Message alone isn't working to keep our kids or even the results of our evangelism and it never will.

After puzzling about this very weak relationship between what we know and what we do, I searched for something that I already knew but apparently only poorly understood. First and foremost it is our responsibility to love. The Bible is replete with instructions to love our brother. It says the most important commandments are to love God and then to love our fellow human beings. First Corinthians 13 makes this very clear: If we speak in all tongues but don't love, we are no more than a clanging cymbal. If we have the faith to move mountains and don't love, it's not worth anything. If we gave all that we have and don't love, we are wasting our time.

So, I can't help but wonder if our church hasn't turned into an information-only organization. Now, I absolutely believe in the accuracy of the Adventist message. But if all we have is a message, we clearly don't have enough. To clarify, in the absence of love, our message appears to be insufficient. We must move beyond the message alone and become a loving organization. And I believe that we need to learn how to do this by starting with our kids.

Is your church absolutely and completely oriented to the spiritual development of your kids? Or does your nominating committee have to get on their knees to beg adults to work in the children's and youth's Sabbath School departments? I think that if someone ran into your adult Sabbath School class this coming Sabbath and screamed, "There's a fire in the kids' divisions!" most of you would get up and run to help without any hesitation at all. Well, there *is* an emergency in those divisions. Many or most of those kids will leave this church, and many will stray away from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

We may try to correct this crisis by bringing in great speakers with a wonderful message, purchasing well-made videos that seem extremely convincing, or maybe purchasing loud sound equipment so that the kids can play their own variety of music. But the issue here isn't a lack of knowing what the speakers or videos have to say or the absence of music with a beat, it's a lack of caring. Do you get it? The problem isn't the kids; it's you and me. We don't care enough for the kids of our church to devote our churches to their welfare. Most churches are about adults and about message.

### How Do We Learn to Love?

So, how do we learn to love? Maybe this is told best in a story. In a very small town in the Northwest, the problems of alcohol and teen pregnancy surfaced. The city council members were concerned about their kids and held several meetings to discuss what to do. They started with the logical steps: They consulted experts in teen pregnancy, purchased a very fancy teen-pregnancy prevention program along with drug prevention programs, and paid interesting speakers to give assembly talks to the kids about drugs, alcohol, and teen pregnancy. They spent a lot of money on their prevention efforts.

Evaluation of their efforts after several years showed that the rates of teen pregnancy seemed to be stable—the number of girls who had quit school due to pregnancy hadn't changed. And it appeared that no fewer kids had been using alcohol or drugs. The kids had enjoyed the programs, but the programs had not been effective.

So, the council members held another meeting. They just sort of stared at each other for a few minutes. Then an older rancher, who was sitting with his cowboy-boots feet propped up on a chair, said, "I don't know what to do. It seems like when I was a kid, everyone in town knew us, called us by name, and sort of hooked into our lives. People were real back then, and these problems weren't very common. Maybe we should get to know these kids."

The council members reminisced about their earlier days, and then someone came up with an idea. "Let's hold a town meeting. That wouldn't be hard—there are only about twelve hundred people living here. Let's ask every adult in town to learn the names of every kid. Let's greet them every time we see them and get to know them. Maybe that will have some effect."

The council members weren't overwhelmed with the idea but decided to give it a try. They held a town meeting and presented the idea. The townspeople seemed willing to make the effort. What did they have to lose? It wouldn't cost anything. So, they began to learn names and to nurture relationships with the kids.

Several months after the town started their effort another town meeting was held. There was an enthusiastic buzz in the room where people

assembled. They couldn't wait to tell their stories, and every person seemed to have one. People told of the relationships they had developed with youngsters in town—relationships they had begun by just learning the kids' names.

At a school board meeting a couple of years later the registrar mentioned something interesting: "It looks like the number of school drop-outs has decreased for some reason. I did some digging, and it actually looks like the number of girls who quit school due to pregnancy has decreased." There were still a few pregnancies among the students, but the improvement was obvious. In fact, in that town, alcohol- and drug-related arrests among the high school kids had also decreased. All of this started when the adults learned the kids' names.

How do you measure whether or not you know the kids well enough? Watch what happens when you see them at the grocery store or some other location. If they see you and simply wave, your relationship with them isn't strong enough. If they see you and actually run to you, you've got it right.

We must transform our church from a church with "the right message" to a church that genuinely cares. This all could start with members learning the names of not only the young people but of everyone who comes through the door of the church.

Can you imagine what would happen if we combined the correct message with the correct love? Are you anxious to hear people say, "Those Adventists are the kindest, most loving people you will ever know?" That's what we all say about Jesus when we get to know Him.

As for me, I'm more overwhelmed and touched by Jesus' love than by the message alone. How about you?