Social Advocacy Youth Ministry Model

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Abstract

Every church should have a transformative youth ministry but not everyone has been sensitized to the irrelevance of traditional church programs to 21st century youth needs. Every church, however, seeks to reach communities with young people. Every school should have a meaningful non-academic youth ministry contextualized to its community, but not every school has formatted a structure for the holistic development of young people. Every community deserves to have meaningful youth organizations but not every community has invested in the commonwealth of youthfulness. The Social Advocacy Youth Ministry Model is suitably structured to stimulate and sustain the level of interaction and care for the church and the un-churched youth. It is relevant to all communities and should be used by all.

Undeniably, social advocacy has a biblical origin. Genesis 4:9-10 identifies the dysfunctional attitude of a community that seemed to have had lost its accountability for its members. Social advocacy evaluates community on the basis of accountability. It interprets justice on the premise of purpose. It resolves injustice on the same basis that it demands justice. Cain is symbolic of emotional dissatisfactions, economic bankruptcies, family dysfunctions, political instabilities, religious fanaticism, racial indifferences and unmanaged passions. Abel is the symbolic silence that fails to cry out to prevent and correct injustices.

As in the time of Cain and Abel, social injustice existed in Jesus' time. Luke's account of the inauguration of Christ's ministry took place in his hometown of Nazareth. When asked to select a portion of Scripture for the synagogue reading, he chose the passage from Isaiah 61:1-2, which reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV)

Christ was the peasants' advocate. In that way Jesus applied the principle of accountability to the issue of faith. Consequently the matter of faith application has been a discussion in the Christian church

from the time of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus used the conditions of his time, including the attitudes of the religious leaders, to argue for a transformed society. He pointed to a relevant gospel that was equipped to give liberation to the peasants and other exploited people. Jesus lambasted as poor role models the powerful and enriched scribes and Pharisees of his day (Mathew 23:1-39).

Christ's concern is still relevant today, as it was when Yahweh asked Cain about his brother Abel (Genesis 4:9-10). Through the medium of social advocacy the question that Cain so snobbishly avoided can be answered daily. Social advocates believe that Cain is his brother's keeper. Social advocates are intentional on how Christians translate the virtues of Sabbath worship (Exodus 20:8-11) into acts of kindness through all the days of the week. They pursue the means through which the principle of liberation can be best transferred to the marginalized young adult and low-income families. Social advocates ask, "How can the worshipping church say that it 'loves God whom it has not seen' (1 John 4:20) and be silent in the work and public places?" The tenet of social advocacy answers with unquestionable certainty a commitment to transformational leadership.

The preservation of advocacy has been a call of the church. Christ's handling of the reaction of the religious leaders who pressed him regarding the woman brought to him after an adulterous act (John 8:2-12) presents a classic advocacy principle. The expectation was that Jesus would condemn her in some way, which would eliminate his authority as Savior. When the church adopts a non-advocacy position on matters of social justice (often translated "righteousness"), it reflects a supportive attitude to condemnatory voices with the wrong attitude. Women and young people are often victims of such silence and chauvinistic mindsets. Social advocacy is transformative witnessing and it demands an

appetite for righteous disobedience and unconventionality. Christ's dealing with the Samaritan "woman at the well" (John 4:1-42) presents an archetypal example of the power of advocacy work.

The Church and Social Advocacy

Social advocacy is for the "sick" who have no voice and the abuser who has a destructive purview to life. Unfortunately, it has not been traditionally viewed as a responsibility of the church. It has often been viewed as secular and ungodly. However, social advocacy and justice has been the interests of many professors of religion—both Catholic and Protestant (Banana, 1985; Sider, 2006; Van Reken, 1999). For example, Monte Sahlin (1997, p. 12) asserted, "We believe as a religion (SDA) that issues of religion cannot be separated from the health of the family, neighborhood, or any aspects of human life."

According to the Second Vatican Council:

It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, in each and every one of the world's occupations and callings, and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence. There they are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties.

Youth ministry in the 21st century is uniquely challenged by noted attitudes that repel the behavior of Jesus to those defined as sinners. The tentacles of consumerism, secularism, liberalism and pluralism, cultural norms and values of the institutionalized church further compound it.

The community needs the mark that implicitly indicates the spiritual involvement of the church in exposing the wickedness of the evil systems. As argued by Brueggeman and supported by Campbell in *Preaching to the Powers,* we need "speech that breaks the silence of violence and the violence of silence." (Brueggeman 1998, p. 203) The community is dependent on that word. In the context of the conversation on transformational youth ministry, the church needs to review its approach to handling the disparities and marginalization of its youth. The feeling of marginalization is tantamount to banishment of youth, the exact opposite of what they need.

The culture in which we live is no longer under the control of Christians. In fact, it could be labeled unfriendly to the point of exile from friends and support systems that remain in the dominant culture. Such a stance creates polarization when it comes to the Christian faith (Hauerwas & Willimon, 1998; Brueggemann, 1997; Campbell, 2002). While this faith has its own community, it often stands against the rest of the world. In such a relationship the challenge to preachers remains "How do we make the gospel credible to the modern world?" (Hauerwas & Willimon, p. 19).

While the relevance of the church shows in community building and transformational work, the voice of youth and young adult leadership should be in social advocacy. When the Jewish exiles returned to build the temple and Jerusalem, in a relatively short amount of time capitalistic greed showed itself as some prospered at the expense of others who sold their children into slavery (Nehemiah 5:1-13). Who will speak up for the young who suffer simply from the utter selfishness of adults? And this has not been limited to Old Testament accounts. Social advocacy is the metaphoric *Magna Carta Libertatum* (Luke 4:18-19) of Jesus' agenda.

The Youth Ministries department of the Seventh-day Adventist community of faith has a divine mandate to call its members to be catalysts of social advocacy in both the private and public sectors. Employment in those sectors ought to be seen as opportunities to be instruments of God's grace and creative power. Rather than perceiving one's work as a job, it should be understood as an opportunity to advocate for social justice and the benefit of the nation.

Seventh-day Adventist Christians are taught that decisions of social justice for young adults and the greater community are reflected in our daily decisions. Social advocacy needs to be seen as an integral approach to transformational Christianity. It is not an individual task. "It is a call to work with others to humanize and shape the institutions that touch so many people. The lay vocation for justice in the world cannot be carried forward alone, but only as members of a community called to be the 'leaven' of the Gospel (The U.S. Catholic Conference FABC Paper 87)." This effectiveness of this principle can be best supported by young adults.

Youth leadership is strongest when the Jesus model shapes Seventh-day Adventist ideologues. In fact, Ellen G. White in *Ministry of Healing* penned:

> Let not your un-Christ like character misrepresent Jesus. Do not keep the little ones away from Him by your coldness and harshness. Never give them cause to feel that heaven would not be a pleasant place to them if you were there. Do not speak of religion as something that children cannot understand, or act as if they were not expected to accept Christ in their childhood. Do not give them the false impression that the religion of Christ is a religion of gloom, and that in coming to the Savior they must give

up all that makes life joyful. As the Holy Spirit moves upon the hearts of the children, co-operate with His work. Teach them that the Savior is calling them, that nothing can afford Him greater joy than for them to give themselves to Him in the bloom and freshness of their years (White, 1942, pp. 43-44).

For some, it seems as though church simply must tolerate its youth. In actuality, the church needs to advocate for the youth. In order to experience a move beyond tolerance, the church needs a change of attitude. As Katherine Mansfield wrote, "Could we change our attitude, we should not only see life differently, but life itself would undergo a change of appearance because we ourselves had undergone a change of attitude (Mansfield, 2007)." When youth leadership is transformational and advocates for the un-churched and socially disenfranchised youth, communities that are negatively impacted by tourism, prostitution, domestic violence, illiteracy, and consumerism will their find voice in the church. Kimball (2007, p. 58) appropriately summed it up in the words:

> I believe Jesus wants them [those who like Jesus but not the church] to understand what the church really is and not just make assumptions about it. I think Jesus wants the church to offer an apology to people when needed, and I think Jesus wants those who like him to forgive the church if she has wounded them.

Model Application

Social advocacy research has indicated two fundamental approaches to youth ministry in the SDA church—a "To Youth" approach and a "For Youth" approach.

The "To Youth" approach in youth ministry emphasizes token positions in the operations of the church. Its main purpose is to ensure

that the youth are not made to feel "left out" of the affairs of the church and that a representation by age is apparent in areas where reasonable youthful recklessness is flexible. With careful placement young people can be given a sense of belonging without threatening the smooth running of the church. For example, one of the individuals picking up the offering can be labeled a junior deacon as long as the offering plate gets handed over to responsible adults immediately after the offering has been collected. A young person can be put on the church board as long as that young person is silent most of the time or makes primarily nice comments. The image of youth involvement gets promoted but its reality is primarily for show or expediency.

The apparent strength of the "To Youth" approach is its understanding that representation of young adults is necessary. Its weakness is inherent in its strength. The understanding for representation does not compel the base to act. Rather it relies on urgencies to determine when it responds by the creation of a position for a young adult. It typically occurs at a politically convenient time for adults or after a crisis so representation comes after the fact.

The "To-Youth" approach makes evaluations on the basis of established commitment to church operations, including baptism into the body of Christ and the ability to fellowship with church members. The evaluations struggle with status quo maintenance and generational commensality—"Let's all get along!" It expects that the young adults of the church have limited and undeveloped talents or gifts necessary to effectively serve. It assumes that their lifestyles are probably worldly and run counter to the spiritual things of God. The assessment tool for an invitation into church office is the consistency with which they attend they attend Sabbath and Wednesday night church services, how close they sit to

the front of the church, their relationship status, their clothing style, and the respect they show for established church leaders. This youth ministry approach has form without substance, lacks relevance, and is unfriendly at best and vindictive at worst.

With the second approach, the "For Youth" approach, youth ministry is systemic and institutionally bureaucratic. It appears elitist even when its intention may have some validity. The approach is derivative of a structure that perceives youth ministry as a welfare system—*we do for you what you are unable to do for yourself since you are incapacitated*. In such a system, young adults are continuously assessed as needy and dependent, as self-defeating, rebellious against a system that has tried so hard to keep them alive, as losing the way to God's throne and in need of a shepherd. Furthermore, they are considered to be unholy and consequently unqualified to participate in particular church functions or to hold particular church positions.

The "For Youth" approach evaluates young adults on the potential negative results of youthful immaturity, generational naivety and spiritual dwarfism. It asks the questions "What if they mess it up, can we fix it? Why should we allow them to participate in the program?" It asserts its authority based on its own evaluation. It responds by making plans for the youth and insisting that is what's best for them. If consultation is held with young people and feedback is provided, a high-handed response can be assured.

The "For Youth" ministry approach perceives the system as substantively infallible. It focuses its success on historicity and current trends in some church sectors where a high percentage of the population is youth. The attribution is that traditional programs have maintained the focus of a high percentage of young adults and that there is no real need to alter the approach.

The best approach to facilitate responsible growth and development among the youth is one that emphasizes relationship, camaraderie, community and family. The church would benefit immeasurably from creating space for community and open dialogue with youth and young adults.

A relational emphasis recognizes more than casual greetings and pleasant platitudes. It intentionally, without a clandestine motive, works its way into the heart of the youth, identifies with their deficiencies and provides relevant age appropriate responses to both the churched and the un-churched.

Building on this is a participation element which recognizes the interrelatedness of relationship and results. It instructs for results and is result driven. Results are, however, balanced with meaningful relationship The Participatory Ministry approach promotes the building and strengthening of relationships without victimization or concealed motives. It voids itself of proven attitudes and perceptions with displaced results. It is a catalyst for change in those who having embraced the ministry display impeccable Christian values and others, though appreciative of the ministry remain conscious of their innate deficiencies and desired changes.

Hope

I want to add my voice to a harbinger of transformation: there is no better way to begin the process of transformational social advocacy youth ministry than with the church. The church is the spiritual body, the body with access to supernatural resources. The church is the body with unique relationships and the community that best reflects the world. She is therefore best positioned for social advocacy work.

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