

# The ABCs & Ds of Young Adult Relationships: A Conceptual Model for Discipling New Generations

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## Abstract

*Literature has consistently pointed to relationship building as the primary means of nurturing the spiritual growth of adolescents and emerging adults (Setan, 2008). Yet, according to recent observations, the relevant praxis of young adult ministry is all but absent from our current Protestant landscape (Wuthnow, 2007). This paper offers practical elements in fostering spiritually nurturing ministry relationships with those who are in post-secondary education through pre-parenthood.*

Young adults, those who are in post-secondary education through pre-parenthood, seek quality relationships in all spheres of life (Setan, 2008; Wuthnow, 2007). In the realm of faith development and spiritual community, this search is both crucial and daunting for young adults and the church alike.

It was a sunny Friday afternoon in a crowded metropolitan restaurant and farmer's market. Gathered around a small wooden dining table sat a group of young adult friends from various places, enjoying a leisurely

lunch. I [Kasper] will never forget what Adrian, a young college student from the city of Dallas, Texas, told me. He explained that there was no way he would have come back to the church he is now a member of unless they had taken the time to get to know him and interacted on a relational level. He could have cared less about what they believed at the time of his searching. What kept bringing him back every week was the fact that he could feel like they really wanted to connect with *him*.

For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the quest for meaningful, transformative, young adult relationships is a significant barometer for an aging denominational population (Center for Creative Ministry, 2006). Do our young adults feel like they can find the quality relationships they seek whenever walking through our doors?

During a recent interview with noted ministry researcher Roger Dudley, I [Allan] was struck by his comment:

"While there are many factors in retention, I really think that the congregational climate is perhaps the most important thing of all. To them [young people], Adventism is that congregation. . . . If that congregation is a warm, accepting place, then Seventh-day Adventism must be a good thing. If that congregation is a place that is struggling, then they wonder what's the matter with Adventists" (Martin, 2009, p.19).

It is sad, but true: many of the young adults I [Kasper] know who have left Seventh-day Adventist church fellowship have not done so out of disagreement with fundamental beliefs, but out of a lack of inclusion and unconditional acceptance within the social community of their local churches. In an insightful commentary on retaining church membership, Roger Dudley echoes these observations: "Research on why members leave. . . suggests that social and relational factors are much more significant than disagreement with denominational teachings." He continues: "The reasons most frequently cited by persons who leave local church fellowship are found in the realm of relationships, the absence of a sense of belonging, and the lack of meaningful engagement in the local congregation and its mission" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee, 2007, p. 2).

It is time for those within the Seventh-day Adventist Church to start placing their actions

where their intentions are. It is time for young adult ministry to become more than a priority agenda item and become a priority action philosophy. Robert Wuthnow, professor of Sociology at Princeton University, endorsed, "My view is that congregations can survive, but only if religious leaders roll up their sleeves and pay considerably more attention to young adults than they have been" (Wuthnow, 2007, p. 230).

It should be asserted here that every adult member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is perceived by new generations as an authority figure or leader, to varying degrees and contexts, within the local congregation. And the need is significant enough to call on every Seventh-day Adventist Christian adult to foster environments of relational ministry with young adults, lest we succumb to the bystander effect that has crippled our faith community for far too long.

The idea of relationship building as a primary ministry model is not simply a result of recent research. This concept has been exercised since Christ's perfect example of soul winning. Observing the current state of affairs within the increasingly secular context of current generations, what are the essential characteristics needed to make meaningful and positive differences in the lives of young adults? Here are four key observations, the ABC's and D's of young adult relationships.

### **Authenticity: The Art of Being Real**

Young adults are desperately looking for relationships that are real, honest, and transparent (Martin, 1998; Stetzer, Stanley, & Hayes, 2009). In a recent survey of American young adults, researchers Kinnaman and Lyons found that 85% of non-Christian young adults and 47% of young adult church attendees perceive the church to be "hypocritical." Seventy percent of non-Christians surveyed also believed the Christian faith is out of touch with reality

(Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007). Unfortunately, the claim of hypocrisy is not a new attack against Christendom. What is significant about these experiential observations is their connection to the core values of young adults within the current generational cohort. Young adults today cry out for honesty and vulnerability in people they encounter. Continuing in their plea to fellow leaders in the faith, Kinnaman and Lyons advocate for a corrective perception where Christians are transparent about their flaws and act first, talk second (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007). Opposed to the faux facade of “having it all together,” young adults are seeking out genuine interaction with Adventists that are human, willing to admit they too are working through issues and challenges. In contrast to previous generations that valued individuality and privacy, young adults want significant adults to be more relationally involved in their lives. Leaders who are willing to be authentic offer young adults a priceless opportunity for rich relationships.

This is not to say that adults are to develop an awkward relational climate by divulging too much and creating a confessional-type codependency. Nor does cultivating authenticity suggest that every conversation be centered on self-disclosure. Be gradual and genuine. The simple steps of building trust validate one’s reliability. The humility to admit mistakes, then pursue forgiveness goes a long way towards authenticating a young adult relationship.

Sincerity is one of the most vital facets to authentic relationships. An honest interest in a young adult, fueled by virtuous intention, builds relational bridges to new generations that have seen so little attention from parental and adult figures. Christ’s authentic interest in the people He encountered stands out just as much in the 21st century as it did in the first.

Young adults want genuine, bona fide

relationships. Don’t pretend perfection; be human. Those who are willing to be real, honest, and sincere offer young adults a cherished opportunity for rich relationships.

## **Belonging: Feeling Accepted and Involved**

Young adults today seek in ever increasing ways to be valued as active contributors to the world around them. They don’t want to just fit the mold prescribed them; they want to help shape it. In our interview conversation, Dudley noted a contributing factor to young adult attrition is the “lack of inclusiveness of youth involvement in congregational life and leadership” (Dudley, 2000). According to Dudley’s research respondents, an ideal church is one where young adults are active in the life of the group (Martin, 1995). As we conversed, I [Allan] noted the qualities Dudley identified that make the church attractive to new generations:

“I think one of the things is [that] they found a place of belonging there; they felt like they were a part of a family; they felt like they were needed; they felt like the church depended on them; they felt acceptance there; they had friends there; it was a pleasant experience for them” (Martin, 2009).

It is our firm belief that leaders who are willing to minister collaboratively with young adults solidify their sense of purpose and significance as part of their faith community. Former president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Jan Paulsen also agrees,

“We [church leaders] need to hear and understand what they [young adults] are saying, for it comes across clearly and strongly from those who are under thirty in our church. The point they are making is this: Being

included, being trusted, being considered responsible, for elders to be prepared to take some risk with inexperience, are sentiments and attitudes which senior leadership must be willing to show, or we [young adults] are gone! We are gone simply because we have no ownership responsibility in the life of this church" (Paulsen, 2006, p. 14).

There is a risk involved with allowing the participation of newer generations in your ministry. It means that you as a leader must be vulnerable to new approaches and methodologies. Often the skill sets young adults bring to the table take different forms than ones recognized by generations past. Was it that long ago that we played music on vinyl discs and composed papers on typewriters? Our dexterity to integrate young adult's unique contributions and value their talents not only impacts their sense of belonging, but also our relevance to their peers. Being needed and feeling involved also bolsters their experience of security and meaning.

Young adults bring tremendous skills and talents along with mental dexterity to apply their knowledge with relevance. Adults who intentionally work synergistically alongside these new generations make a tremendous impact on their sense of belonging and purpose.

### **Compassion: Do Something Now**

In the days of increasing community awareness through social networking, compassion ministries have never been in better positions to connect with those outside the Christian faith. All sociological markers seem to endorse the high value of service and characteristic social activism of emerging adults (Setan, 2008; Smith & Snell, 2009; Wuthnow, 2007). The desire of current generations to be compassionate contributors

to their society is being widely expressed in various forms. From environmental concerns to humanitarian causes and beyond, young adults are connecting with the needs surrounding them in ways unlike the generations preceding them.

Compassionate service has traditionally been the trademark of faith communities, both in global missions and charitable benevolence. Unfortunately, compassion is rapidly disappearing from the list of adjectives new generations place on the Christian religion. Recent surveys show that only one third of young adults outside the church perceive that Christians are a caring people (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007).

Social action is high on the priority list of young adults, and their perception of an attractive church is one actively involved in helping people in need (Dudley, 2000). Funding missionary endeavors in far off lands is fine, but one-dimensional. Young adults are clearly interested in being a community of character that does more than outsource compassionate endeavors (Martin, 1995). Global is good, but young adults also gravitate towards ministries that meet local needs in their neighborhoods and communities. They're eager to align with causes and advocacy that transcend denominational and socio-political lines for the sake of making a good difference in the world.

From short-term local mission trips to protests against sweatshop labor, young adults are adamant about the human responsibility to enact the ideals of God's kingdom here on earth (Dudley & Walshe, 2009). And it is in this humanitarian context where they could conceivably find value in religious organizational structures. The church has real meaning for them to the degree it lives out Christ's call to help those in need. Leaders who are passionate about making a

difference among the marginalized and rally their community to action will find young adults joining them in the fray.

### **Discipleship: On the Journey Together**

Among the generational needs of Authenticity, Belonging, and Compassion, the need for Discipleship is the value most uniquely met by the Great Commission. However, many struggle to provide effective models of this method. Christian demographer George Barna suggested, "The chief barrier to effective discipleship is not that people do not have the ability to become spiritually mature, but they lack the passion, perspective, priorities, and perseverance to develop their spiritual lives" (Barna, 2001, p. 54).

This appears to be especially true during the young adulthood years that are marked with significant identity and relational transitions (Barna, 2006; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). Barna further indicted, "This [discipleship barrier] is partially attributable to our focus on providing programs rather than relationships that support growth" (Barna, 2001, p. 55).

The modernistic structure of ministry departments, the fear of crossing the daunting "generation gap," the human tendency to "flock together" with our own kind, and Western individualism are among many contributors to the relational isolationism that has been perpetuated for generations (Martin, 1998).

However, contrary to popular myth bolstered by the rebellion of Boomers and angst of Generation X, today's young adults are different—they are looking to be discipled by adults and others (Martin, 1995; Stetzer, Stanley, & Hayes, 2009). Tim Elmore describes young adults as not seeking a "sage on the stage," but rather, they long for a "guide on the side" (Elmore, 2008).

It is the art of discovering and affirming young adult virtues that benchmark effective discipling. As Christ was able to transcend the initial characteristics of His twelve disciples and reveal the noble attributes He was shaping in them, so too He calls us to nurture young adult lives. When Christ's followers 'go and make disciples,' they impact emerging generations and they also further the cause of the Gospel.

The process of discipleship is not an overnight endeavor. It requires significant investments that don't promise certain and immediate dividends (Martin, Bailey, & LaMountain, 2009). However, there is no lack of evidence that such diligent discipling fosters life transformation.

Young adults are eager to be mentored by spiritually wise adults willing to pour their life experiences into new generations. Don't dictate direction, rather explore possibilities and lend guidance. We urge you, as leaders in the faith: Mentor young adults in fulfillment of Christ's call to make disciples and empower these new generations to expand His kingdom.

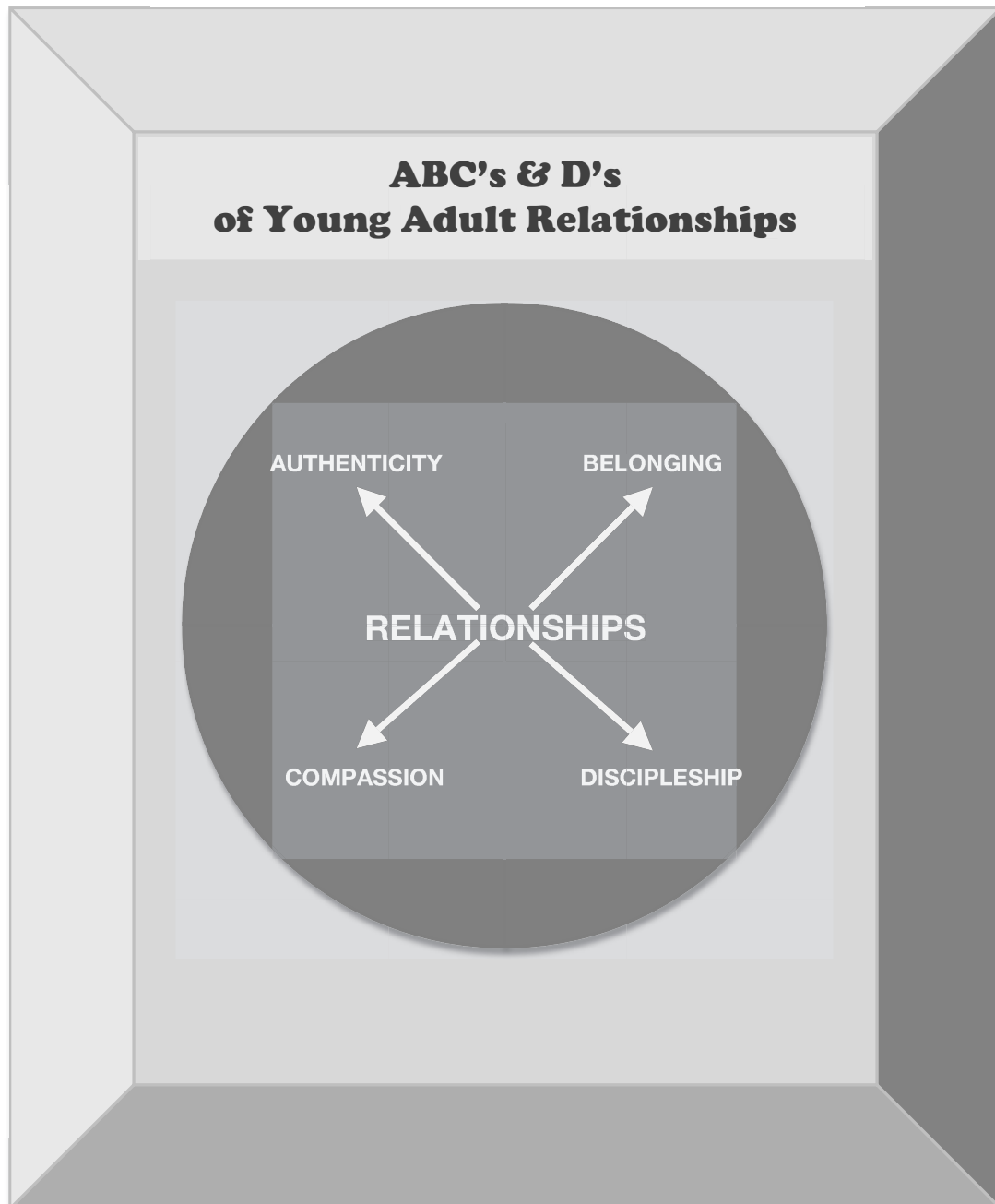
### **Simply Complex Relationships**

The Great Commission challenges Adventist adults to go beyond superficial relationships with new generations. Although small talk and social mixing have their vital roles in relational introduction, young adults crave deeper relationships that look beyond the exterior.

Reflecting on religion, relationships, and new generations, Dudley commented: "It's not some kind of behavioral code, some complex theoretical experience. I want them [young people] to see it as a relationship experience. I want them to see that it is first a relationship with God, who is a Friend, and a

relationship with their fellow human beings, where they help and support each other. At the center of true religion is this question of relationship" (Martin, 2009, p. 20).

Being authentic... fostering belonging... expressing compassion... purposefully discipling – in some ways, young adult relationships are simple. Throughout the complex paths of ministry within our current generations, we must keep ever present the simple task Christ gave in the Great Commandment. Let us follow His call to fulfill the Great Commission in the lives of new generations in light of His soon coming.





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