Chapter V—Youth Ministry and the Family

1. Family-based Youth Ministry

Young people do not exist in isolation. Each youth in your church is part of a family, and your youth ministry should reflect this reality. If your church has a department of family ministries, the youth leaders and family ministry leaders should work together to ensure that youth ministry includes the family. While youth need time to associate with other young people, apart from their families, they also need to be recognized as part of a family unit. Encourage your youth leaders to plan programs and activities that youth can participate in along with their parents and siblings--family potlucks, family camp-outs, parent-teen games, father-son or mother-daughter dinners, seminars on issues of concern to both youth and their parents.

2. Communicating With Youth and Parents

Parents in your church need to be aware of the goals, programs and specific activities the youth department is planning. Encourage the youth leaders to include direct communication with parents in their public relations plan. Telling youth about an event or activity and reminding them to "Tell your parents!" is usually not enough. By contacting parents directly, the youth leaders will build bonds of trust and communication with them.

As pastor or elder, you may find that a parent approaches you, rather than the youth leader, when they perceive a problem with their son or daughter or with the youth program. Do not bypass the youth leader in this situation, but work as a liason to bring together the youth, the parent and the youth leader to discuss and resolve the difficult issues.

3. Dating for Youth

Interest in the opposite sex is normal for youth and young adults. Both you and your youth leaders will need to be sensitive to the appropriate norms for dating in your church culture. Youth social activities should be structured so that these norms are respected (for example, if you are in a community where the majority of parents do not permit their teenagers to date, a youth event such as a couples banquet, where dates are expected, would be inappropriate and insensitive to the standards of your community).

When youth and young adults in your church are dating, stay in friendly communication with the young couples. Let them know, in an informal way, that church leaders like them and care about them. Criticism and disapproval drive relationships underground, where unhealthy sexual behaviors can flourish. Make sure young couples are welcome in your home and the homes of church members. Encourage happily married adults in the church to mentor dating couples, modelling a positive marriage relationship.

A young person who is seriously dating a non-Adventist or a non-Christian should be tactfully counselled about the dangers of being "unequally yoked," but their unbelieving

boyfriend or girlfriend should be welcomed into the church family with friendly enthusiasm at every opportunity. Many non-Christian young people have been "loved into the church" by their future spouse's caring church family.

4. Marriage Counselling and Weddings for Young Adults

As the youth in your church grow into young adults, many will marry, and many of those will come to you to perform their weddings and provide marriage counselling. This is a wonderful opportunity for you, not only to pass on our church's values and standards on the subject of marriage, but to form a relationship with a young couple. Be a positive, loving force in the lives of young people who marry in your church. For many, especially those who are lukewarm in their church attendance and commitment, this is the one chance the church and its pastor will have to make a significant impact on their lives. If you can make that a positive impact, they will see the church as a warm, friendly place to which they will want to return and in which they will want to raise their children. (Refer to *Ministers Manual*.)

5. Ministry to Single and Divorced Young Adults

Don't overlook young singles in your congregation. Encourage your youth leaders to plan young-adult activities that specifically include the divorced and the never-married, who often feel excluded in the primarily "couple-oriented" atmosphere of the church. If your church has a large enough group of singles, some singles-only activities might be planned—or your youth leaders might want to team up with other area churches to begin a singles ministry.

As a church leader, look for opportunities to connect with single young adults. Invite them to your home for Sabbath dinner or for a Saturday night get-together, and encourage other adults in the church to do the same. Do not stress "match-making" in your conversations with them, unless you know that the young person is actively seeking help in finding a partner. It is far better to let a single young adult know that you value him or her for him or herself, rather than seeing them as someone who needs to be "married off." Show interest in the single person's career, education and other interests, not primarily in his or her social life.

Study Guide

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Youth ministry within the family structure is a must for a successful youth program. Youth programs should be tailored to allow both participation of youth with their parents and siblings.

KNOW:

Young people in your church do not exist in isolation.

Families are vehicles for developing spiritual maturity.

Family based youth ministry prepares youth to be responsible citizens, church members and parents.

Youth ministry should provide marriage counseling for young adults.

Ministry to single and divorced young adults must be given undivided attention within a local church.