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SUCCESSION OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP:
A MENTORING INTENTIONALITY
WITH EMERGING ADULTS

A Pastoral Epistle

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This letter is from A Allan Martin, like you a servant leader for Christ Jesus, called as a local pastor in North Central Texas, having served in ministry with young adults for the past four decades. I am writing to you, fellow pastors in the 21st century, recognizing the unique challenges we face in the era we have been tasked to serve and shepherd. More personally, I am writing to my ministry colleagues in the Seventh-day Adventist faith community, acknowledging and empathizing with the daunting work of the local church in our shared context. May the grace and favor of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus, be with each of you and with those you love.

My prayer for you is to experience the abundance of God's blessing, filled with kindness and mercy, that you may overflow His richness to your congregation and community. In an age marked by the antithesis of this goodness, may you be a distinctive contrast to the darkness that surrounds us. May the Holy Spirit fill you with wisdom, discernment, and perception, that your ministry prowess will grow, blessing this generation and the next. May our Redeemer, Christ Jesus, sturdy your resilience and passion, so that you may, with great confidence, take yet another ambitious step into the commission He has offered to you and me.

Although on many fronts we share pastoral ministry challenges that are daunting, my letter is focused on our relationship with the coming generations. As pastors, an important leadership responsibility we hold is, as Max DePree states, "defining the reality." Upon graduating from high school, half our young adults with drift from our faith communities, and while many of them will still endorse their faith in the person of Jesus Christ, some will indicate no religious affiliation at all (Powell, Mulder, and Griffin 2016).

The twenty-something years are filled with major transitions and decisions where young adults are setting an important trajectory for their future (Jay 2021). Our reality is the local church is experiencing a disintegrating influence in the lives of next generations, and, potentially more alarming, in the lives of our own young adult children. The Christian young adult research is replete with evidence of decreasing attendance, engagement, and interest in the local church. And while, following the worldwide pandemic, some would naively hope for a resurgence of new generations participating in local church life, the data indicates young adult attrition has long been the case for the Christian church in the western context (Jenkin and Martin, 2014).

The current posture of the local church bemoans an ecclesiastical pandemic of sorts, where methodologies and strategies have been anemic to address the hemorrhaging of young people from our congregations. Yet, much of our continued ministry practices seem unphased. The contemporary context that surrounds emerging generations continues to grow in complexity, while the typical local church remains religiously committed to traditions that have little to no current pertinence to young adult life (Argue 2024). Dr. Scott Cormode (2020) cautions, “The church is perfectly calibrated for a world that no longer exists.”

In the Seventh-day Adventist context, church leaders have long been aware of the attrition of church members from their worldwide denomination. Dr. David Trim (2024) reported to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists annual council that since 1965, of the over 45 million converts that joined the Adventist denomination, 19.4 million have since chosen to leave. This constitutes a 42.98 percent attrition rate over the last half century. Recognizing 63.5 percent indicate leaving the church during young adulthood, the research reveals, over the nearly six decades of recording attrition statistics, a total of 12,314,229 young adults have left the Adventist faith community (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2014). This exodus

is not exclusive to Adventism as current estimates tout over 1,000,000 young people leave the Christian faith every year (TENx10 2024).

While dismay could overtake many as we define our reality, my hope is that you and I, dear pastor, will bravely investigate and face our circumstance with spiritual boldness. While the sheer attrition numbers pose an overwhelming task, my hope is – in your local church and in my local church – we might envision specific pastoral steps that will transform **the** world, and make an impact in the corner of **our** world where we've been called to shepherd. The servant leadership of the pastor remains relevant.

Above worship style, social justice emphasis, and the latest technology, three fourths of church members and pastors endorsed leadership as the primary means of church effectiveness with young people. This may come as a bit of surprise to you, but in a quantitative and qualitative study of over 250 churches experiencing effectiveness in involving and retaining young people (ages 15-29), over 75% of the congregation members named leadership as the “secret to their effectiveness” (Powell et al. 2016). So, while it may seem intuitive to common congregations to try new music, be more politically active, or add more of the latest digital devices into ministry programming, there is a far more personal question I want to pose to you pastor.

What is your succession plan?

In candor, my days of pastoral ministry are typically spent in homiletical preparation, program management, with just a touch of pastoral care. If your church is like mine, “leadership” is often translated as who can I convince to be a church volunteer to carry the load of ministry services, responsibilities, and operational duties. In the typical graying local church, we have come to depend on a small, reliable circle of members, our age or older, who have a proven track

record of obliging the pastor's requests; Or in more dire cases, "if I want to have it done right, I'll do it myself." Most pastors in my circles have invested very little thought to fostering a "succession plan," if any thought at all.

Hence, the admonitions of the apostle Paul to his protégé Timothy, may feel more like a remote, ancient, Biblical exhortation than an applicable premise for contemporary pastoral praxis: "Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim 4:11-12 [English Standard Version]).

In perusal and application of this Scripture, what if pastors in the 21st century were to take seriously the need for a succession strategy?

Powell et al. (2016) identified six core commitments in "churches that were growing in involving and retaining young people bringing overall vitality to the whole church." Notable for me among these were "Keychain Leadership" and "Prioritizing Young People Everywhere."

Keychain leadership describes giving responsibilities and roles to young people that transcend being token and serve as essential influence and consistent engagement of healthy church life (Powell et al. 2016). The 1 Timothy passage referenced earlier appears to admonish Paul's young apprentice to direct and instruct in "things" that he had learned from Paul's modeling and mentoring. On Paul's behalf, Timothy was to assume leadership posturing with the local congregation, despite the push back that he might encounter given his age (1 Tim 4:11-12a). Correlating with this theological frame, it is assumed that a keychain leadership role was more than didactic, but took on a wholistic approach including, but not limited to, behavioral modeling, grace-oriented compassion, and aspiring toward virtuous, Christ-center ideals (1 Tim 4:12b).

The secular research is filled with examples of the success of mentoring ranging from government, to education, to societal welfare. Throughout the Scriptures, and explicitly in the cultural mores of Jesus's relationship with his disciples, we see repetition of the teacher-student, apprenticing relationship, yet, except for the rigor of seminary training in select instances, why is it so absent from contemporary pastoral practice? Paul's teaching and instruction afforded Timothy pastoral leadership and authority, even with Paul absent (1 Tim 4:13), for which Paul anticipated there would be growth in both the congregation and Timothy himself (1 Tim 4:15-16). Argue (2023) asserts the importance of identity, belonging, and purpose for young adults, and points to the value of intergenerational leadership training as a powerful conduit in helping next generations constructively pursue answers to life's most poignant questions. If local pastors would consider apprenticing young adults as a succession strategy transcending mere ministry practice, the benefits could be felt by the apprentice, the local church, and the pastor themselves.

Dr. Filip Milosavljević (2024) advocates for young adult engagement with pastors and church leadership, noting a mutuality of mentorship between generations could afford beneficial partnerships and increased effectiveness for all parties. Argue (2023) endorses a collaborative relationship with young adults where both the mentor and mentee benefit. Instead of desperately dreaming for "more hours in the day," the local pastor may find active mentoring as a means to expand their ministry effectiveness through the life lenses of next generations.

It may be felt that deploying a succession plan may impinge the value of the local pastor, or even suggest a diminished role of their leadership within the congregation. Some may fear being replaced. A mindset of scarcity will often leave a congregation and its pastor frozen in past structures and systems, however when next generations are empowered and engaged, the whole church wins (Argue, 2023). When we, as pastors, give young people a slice of the ministry

leadership pie, this doesn't diminish our share, but rather such focus enlarges and expands the potential for kingdom impact (Powell et al. 2016).

As an artifact of the modern era, many of our local churches deploy ministry in a departmentalized fashion. Children programs, teen programs, and adult programs are often conducted in their own separate silos, with little to no interaction, except for the once-a-year emphasis weekend. Although there is some developmental benefit to such segregation, such as offering teaching appropriate to maturational age, such practices have left many of our churches languishing in their sense of community and connection (Powell et al. 2016). We can find the local church member completely ignorant of those outside of their own age demographic or stage of life, or worse, prejudicial given society's fixation on generational stereotypes (Milosavljević 2024).

Given the increased complexity that emerging adulthood poses, and the expanding duration of this psycho-social developmental stage, there are increasing transitional experiences in which young adults feel alone, neglected, even abandoned (Argue, 2023). To add insult to injury, many local churches, in holding to their antiquated, modernistic, ministry departments, don't know what to do with young adults in that emerging adults are postponing marriage and having children later in life compared to older generations (Jay 2021).

As local pastors consider implementing a succession plan, the core commitment of "prioritizing young people everywhere" is a crucial paradigm shift for current congregational practice (Powell et al. 2016). Often next generation engagement is relegated youth ministry or a religiously enhanced form of childcare, led by a small pocket of overworked volunteers. If there is any young adult ministry at all, it can often be relinquished to a purgatory-like singles ministry, with the intrusive question of marital status being the only point of conversation.

An intergenerational mindset that bursts the typical ministry silos affords the local pastor with a succession strategy that constructively impacts the whole congregation. Simply the sharing of stories between the generations can bring stronger relational rapport between the various age cohorts (Jenkin and Martin 2009). Learning to empathize and fostering relational warmth yields vitality for the whole church (Powell et al. 2016). The local pastor who affords these interpersonal connections, especially to young adults, creates powerful bonding along the fronts of identity, belonging, and purpose (Argue 2023).

The proverb, “Train up a child in the way he should go [teaching him to seek God’s wisdom and will for his abilities and talents], Even when he is old he will not depart from it (Prov 22:6 [Amplified Bible]).” is more than wise prose, but serves as an architecture for communal relationships between young and old. The intersection, collaboration, even conspiracy among parents, relatives, congregants, religious educators, ministry leaders, and pastors for the benefit of next generations offers a robust, vibrant faith-forming web that imprints Biblical virtues in young lives with longitudinal impact (Martin 2009). It is in the milieu of the local church where young ones are “trained up” in life that faith for life is most resilient (Prov 22:6); Starting the spiritual mentoring at an early age, but also remaining engaged with our local church children well into adulthood, offers the best potential for congregational retention (Prov 22:6b).

It is here where pastoral leadership is so crucial; If the culture of our church continues to emulate the modernistic, specialized, departmentalization of ministry and no efforts are made by the pastor to foster a succession plan with young people, then it is reasonable to assume the youth attrition trends will continue. If the local pastor, parents, and other church leaders leave the discipling of youth exclusively to the teen program, then we should anticipate our young people

to continue to graduate not only from high school, but from church life as well (Powell et al. 2016).

However, if in your leadership as a pastor, you implement a succession plan that prioritizes the mentoring of young people everywhere in your church, it will offer next generations responsibilities and equipping that will provide kingdom expansion and relational continuity from generation to generation.

In authenticity, considering a succession plan has at times felt like a threat to my importance and my value as a local pastor. I've been reluctant to release my exclusive expertise status, and lean into the mentoring process, especially with areas where I felt most important, most needed.

In the context of pastoral ministry, I was struck to the core as Dr. Cormode (2020) quoted leadership expert, Ronald A. Heifetz, as saying, "What people resist is not change per se, but loss." I've personally had to grapple my own sense of identity, belonging, and purpose, and the grief of personal loss in any one of those quadrants. How would a succession plan impact my importance, my power, my significance? So, you are not alone, dear pastor, as you consider your succession plan. I also struggle.

But I am encouraged by Scripture that such servant leadership is a blessing, a remedy, and a prophetic solution. In the Apostle Peter's powerful citation:

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy
(Acts 2:17-18 [ESV])."

Dear pastor, it is my prayer for you and me that we will take the posture of servant leaders, anticipating the powerful Spirit of the Lord being poured out on all generations. My prayer is to be a conduit, in my pastoral practice, of the culminating days of our Lord, where you and I fuel next generations to succeed, even supersede what has been done in our time with the local church. It may very well be that our succession plan could actually be our local pastor legacy. I pray that our congregations will thrive in the vitality of all generations dreaming together, growing together, ministering together, until the day of His promised return.

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