

## **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST YOUTH ADVISE THEIR CHURCH**

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Throughout 2012 the Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) at Andrews University conducted a congregational survey for the North American Division (NAD) Office of Strategic Planning. It was a multiple-project survey with five different types of questionnaires for each church: (1) the member survey was filled out by the whole congregation present at a given Sabbath worship service; (2) the new member survey, by all those who had joined the congregation by baptism or profession of faith in the previous five years; (3) the youth survey, by all young people in youth Sabbath School or other appropriate venues, who were up to age thirty; (4) the one-page clerk's inventory form, by the church clerk; and (5) the brief pastor feedback form, by pastors.

Five hundred congregations were randomly selected from the complete list for the NAD. The ICM sent a letter to each church clerk explaining the plan and asking the clerk to be the liaison for the collection. The clerks were to distribute and administer the surveys, and then return the completed surveys to the ICM. Nineteen incorrectly-addressed letters were never delivered, reducing the sample to 481 possible congregations. The letter was ignored by another 209 clerks, leaving 272 who replied giving their e-mail addresses. These clerks were mailed the five types of surveys in the requested numbers to meet the demographics of the congregations.

After many months of e-mail reminders, telephone calls, and some replacement surveys, the following returns were received and entered into the computer database: 8,163 member surveys; 1,020 new member surveys; 1,215 youth surveys; 264 clerk's inventories; and 261

pastor feedback forms.

We received at least some surveys from 264 congregations; thus, receiving data from an impressive 97% of the 272 congregations that actually signed up and received surveys. However, this is only a 55% return rate from clerks mailed an invitation to participate, 264 out of 481. Either way, the results are impressive, and the volume of information constitutes a major database from which the NAD will draw many implications for strategic planning in the coming months.

It is not the purpose of this paper to report on the complete study. This paper will only deal with implications drawn from the information provided by the 1,215 youth who participated. The age divisions for this category were as follows: 37% from youth under the age of 16; 33% from ages 16 to 19; 18% from ages 20 to 25; and 12% from ages 26 to 30.

The results are obviously biased toward youth and young adults who attend Sabbath School or other church meetings since the survey was collected at church venues. One positive discovery was that nearly 72% have found a class that helps them to grow spiritually. The data do not tell us about youth from Adventist homes who do not attend services. These youth are very important and must be part of our outreach ministry, but it will take a different kind of study to learn more about them. Yet since the church is losing teens and young adults at a frightening pace, discovering better ways to minister to those still with us is crucial in an effort to stem the loss.

### **Ideas—Great or Not So Great**

Seeking advice from the youth themselves, the question was asked: What do you think would help younger persons like yourself become more fully engaged in the life of *your* church?

The respondents were presented with ten proposed projects and asked if they would consider each a “GREAT IDEA,” “Seems like a good idea,” “Unsure about it,” or “NOT a good idea.”

Table 1 displaces the ten projects in descending order according to the percentage of youth that marked them as a “GREAT IDEA.”

Table 1. Proposed projects and the percentage of youth who marked great idea

Rank	Proposed project	GREAT IDEA
1	Offer more social and recreational opportunities for young people	69%
2	More engaging, constructive things for youth on Friday night/Sabbath afternoons	61%
3	Organize youth mission trips overseas or in this country	61%
4	Sponsor prayer conferences and youth retreats for spiritual growth	52%
5	More youth days when youth lead out in Sabbath worship services	46%
6	Redesign worship services to make them more innovative, upbeat, interesting	45%
7	Allow youth and young adults to take more church leadership positions	40%
8	Place youth in charge of church web and social media services	40%
9	Allow youth and young adults to establish and direct their own ministries	32%
10	Discourage youth from attending meetings with youth from other churches	13%

Table 2 gives the proposed projects with the percentages that marked each as a “GREAT IDEA” or “Seems like a good idea” and the total for both responses, also arranged in descending. When we total the percentages for “GREAT IDEA” and “Seems like a good idea,” we get a very similar pattern (ranking) as shown in Table 1.

Table 2. Proposed projects and the percentage of youth who marked great and good idea

Rank	Proposed project	GREAT IDEA	Seems like a good idea	Both responses
1	Offer more social and recreational opportunities for young people	69%	25%	94%
2	More engaging, constructive things for youth on	61%	28%	89%

	Friday night/Sabbath afternoons			
3	Organize youth mission trips overseas or in this country	61%	27%	88%
4	Sponsor prayer conferences and youth retreats for spiritual growth	52%	34%	86%
5	Allow youth and young adults to take more church leadership positions	40%	43%	83%
6	More youth days when youth lead out in Sabbath worship services	46%	35%	81%
7	Redesign worship services to make them more innovative, upbeat, interesting	45%	32%	77%
8	Place youth in charge of church web and social media services	40%	35%	75%
9	Allow youth and young adults to establish and direct their own ministries	32%	39%	71%
10	Discourage youth from attending meetings with youth from other churches	13%	13%	26%

The three highest ranked projects are clearly considered positively by almost all youth. It can be seen that the vast majority of the youth approve of all the ideas except “Discouraging youth from attending meetings with youth from other churches.” Nearly two-thirds stated that this was “NOT a good idea.” The youth see ministry as having a wider focus than just with their own congregations and appreciate a more diverse fellowship.

We sometimes hear that youth do not want or need entertainment, but in this survey recreation and social events came out on top (no. 1). When we compare this with the other top choices in the list, we see that social and recreational opportunities are not just for fun, but they provide fellowship. Youth do not want to be *loners*. Fellowship with other youth is very important to them, especially in the teen years before marriage.

Another important theme is the desire for service. They want to do constructive projects during the Sabbath hours. They find fulfillment in mission trips, holding church offices that have

responsibilities, directing web and media services, and leading in worship services.

Unfortunately, only 23% serve on their church boards. More youth would be retained in the church if they were entrusted with responsible leadership positions.

The youth are also interested in their own spiritual growth. They desire prayer retreats and conferences to deepen their own zeal and walk with Jesus. The Sabbath worship service is the most important vehicle for influencing youth, as well as older members. Youth seem to agree that Sabbath worship services lack innovation, creativity, and stimulation. A good worship committee who seriously addresses this lack could make Sabbath worship a positive and holding experience for the youth and, indeed, the whole congregation.

### **The Awareness and Use of Resources**

The Adventist Church has certainly been aware of the problem of youth retention. It has produced a number of materials and ministries designed to appeal to youth and young adults with the aim of more involvement and a stronger commitment. But how effective have these efforts been? The youth survey listed ten resources/services and asked the respondents, first, if they were aware of each one and, secondly, if they had personally used them. Table 3 lists the resources and services in descending order according to the percentage aware of their existence along with the percentages of those who had personally used these resources and services.

Table 3. Resources and services and the percentage of youth aware of them and had used them

Resources or services	% aware	% who had used
<i>Insight</i> magazine	43%	24%
Generation of Youth for Christ (GYC)	30%	20%
<i>Collegiate Quarterly</i>	26%	15%
Youth/Young Adult Leadership SUMMIT	22%	8%

Just Claim It! Youth Retreats	20%	8%
Just Claim It! Prayer Conference	17%	6%
Hey Youth! Preach the Word!!!	13%	5%
Mission Lifeguard	11%	4%
Youth “doing” Ministry Formula	9%	3%
1 voice 2gether—PERMS	6%	3%

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Obviously, most Adventist youth have never heard of most of these programs. It is possible that the majority of those who may be aware of them have never personally been involved with them. The usage, understandably, corresponds to the awareness. Except for the top three items, these services have been used by fewer than half of those who are aware of the resource. Since *Insight* is the official publication for teens, it is surprising that fewer than half have even heard of it and only a quarter of them have ever read it. The lower rates for the *Collegiate Quarterly* are partly due to the fact that many of the teenagers have not yet reached that level of Sabbath School participation.

After the journals, the best known event is GYC, which is widely promoted. Even then only 30% have ever heard of it. For the other resources and services less than a quarter of the participants were aware of them, and less than 10% have ever participated. These resources and services may be excellently conceived and executed, but they are not accomplishing their mission. If they are truly worthwhile programs, then the church must do a much better job of informing our teens and young adults of their existence and advertising them in an attractive manner that youth will be drawn to try them.

## **Youth Speak Out**

In addition to answering closed questions with multiple-choice options, the youth were provided with one free-response question to answer: “What ONE THING would help youth and young adults connect best to your local church?” Hundreds of answers came back, filling a couple of dozen pages. We cannot list all of them here, and many are repetitious. But we are including a sample of some of the most frequently offered suggestions:

Make sermons that the youth could directly relate to.

Have an accepting atmosphere so people don't feel like they're being judged.

More adults and youth doing things together

More events that bring everyone together in Christ

Activities to involve youth and young adults

More organized meetings to meet other SDA youth

Events that get the community together: events such as the movie nights we have and events where you can possibly bring a friend.

Make services more upbeat and keep the preaching as fiery as possible.

Uplift the young people instead of banishing them when they do wrong.

Let us decide what to do. Don't make us do these boring activities anymore and have more field trips. Let's try something new like a youth prison ministry or something.

Try to connect with us in a better way. When adults sit in a room and talk a lot on topics that aren't interesting, it doesn't catch our attention. Try to make the boring topics better by adding games or some type of activity to them. Amen!

More interaction with the church family during the week

An up-to-date church with technology

Upbeat tempo in music from the start of church to the end

Have the youth really get involved, and have the church support us.

Move the church out in the town and get involved in the community—not hide.

Allow youth to conduct things like song service and be able to sing more than just hymns.

Let youth express what is really going on. Just because we are Christians doesn't mean we don't have struggles.

Be open to discussing challenging ideas and debating doctrinal questions.

Have more interactive church service, different and unique techniques for church service, and maybe not such a “structured” service.

Have more Christian interaction and fellowship outside of Sabbath hours and more outreach ministries done with church members.

Help us to understand why we believe what we believe. Why God says what He says and how I apply it. Point us in the direction that will lead us to develop a desire to allow God to consecrate our hearts so that we will want the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Christ. We need to be prepared for the incredible hardships of the Last Days. We need to develop a steadfast spirit to obey God no matter what happens.

Give young people opportunity to be more involved in church events and to have opportunity to lead work alongside experienced adult church members. And don't stop asking just because a youth said “no” to a job the first time.

The youth need to know that there is someone who is dedicated to them, the youth. When they know that, they will follow the lead of the director with all their might.

Build relationships with God, not the rituals and rules of the church.

Integrate them into every ministry of the church, including the church board. If they are represented everywhere, they cannot complain. Then they will have a representative to discuss issues with and who will relay information in return to them concerning things that will not change and the reasons why.

Have regular local functions where the young people can socialize and establish relationships with each other outside the church setting, like at a restaurant.

Uplift each other. Have an opportunity somehow to get to know each other's problems and spiritual difficulties and help build each other up to grow.

We need to have more engaging vespers on Sabbath and Friday evenings. Currently, I am

reading *95 Theses on Righteousness by Faith*<sup>1</sup> with a group of people on Friday nights, and this is really helping.

Make the sermons and church activities more modern but still based on the Word of God.

Have social events that allow youth to make friends. Once the individual has friends in the church, he or she will want to come back.

Have prayer groups that are constantly praying for our youth to meet Jesus and accept Him into their hearts.

Treat us like adults in the sense that we do, in fact, know what we are talking about. Let us express ourselves in the way we would like to worship.

Kids my age love group activities—sports, parties, youth groups. To tie them into the church, show them that you can still do these things in a way that glorifies Christ and still have fun.

Have more youth activities to bring in more youth than youth lessons.

Have honest, authentic conversations about real spiritual life (highs, lows, struggles). Talk about Jesus.

Have seminars or events that help the youth learn about the Word together, something where we can ask questions on what we've heard. Youth get different ideas visiting or hearing about other churches and need understanding (clarification).

Pray for us. Don't judge us. Patience.

These are representative comments from the hundreds received. They offer much food for thought. Hopefully, Adventist leadership will find ways to incorporate the findings of this study into strategies for saving and discipling our precious young people.

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1 Morris L. Venden, *95 Theses on Righteousness by Faith*, rev. ed. (Boise: Pacific Press, 2003).

### **Reference List**

Venden, Morris L. *95 Theses on Righteousness by Faith*. Rev. ed. Boise: Pacific Press, 2003.