

Summary of Research on Youth Engagement
in the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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The State of Adventist Youth in NAD

Over a century and a half ago the Seventh-day Adventist movement burst forth upon the North American landscape led by a group of young adults who sought the direction of the Lord to prepare their society for the coming of the Lord. In the Seventh-day Adventist church today, the picture is a whole lot different among young adults, especially Millennials—the group born between the 1980s and early 2000s. Studies reveal that:

- By the time Adventist youth leave high schools about half of them would have dropped out from the church.
- Between the late teen years and their early twenties 65% of youth leave the church for about the period of 1 year.
- For many youth there is a 50% chance they will drop out of the church by the time they get to 25.

Against this backdrop is the stark reality that the median age of the average member in NAD churches is 60 years, and one out of every five churches is without teenagers or youth. Clearly, Adventist youth in significant proportions, like their peers in other denominations across the country do not find the church to be relevant to their present lives.

Challenges and Opportunities

Different expressions have been used to describe the youth of this generation, however, one appellation that is most common is “Millennials.” In several ways Millennials are dissimilar to earlier generations such as the Baby Boomers, the

appellation given to their parents generation. Research reveals that these Millennials demonstrate greater denominational loyalty and faith maturity than their parent's generation. Obviously, there are qualities Millennials possess that present both challenges and opportunities for engaging youth in service to the Lord and commitment to the church.

Challenges:

A few of the challenges that have arisen from studies of Millennials are:

- A desire for community, which research reveals is lacking in many churches
- Craving for belonging—young adults feel there is no place for them in the church
- Strong desire for service—service opportunities appear to be lacking for them
- Unusually strong tendency to narcissism—this trend is demonstrated by the emergence and growth of social media sites such as Flickr, Instagram, Facebook, and many more that have been created, and in the phenomenon of “selfies,” which have become commonplace today
- Love for electronic gadgets/media—games, Ipods, texting, and social media, and their submersion in these media make it challenging to reach a generation weaned on entertainment and the hypnotic effects of the cyber age.
- Dearth of programs designed for young adults—although Pathfinder and other Adventist Youth programs may engage teens, programs for younger adults appear to be non-existent

Opportunities:

However, there are several opportunities for engaging young adults that have emerged from studies of Millennials in general, and from Adventist research:

- Although church attendance may have declined there is still belief in faith and spirituality among Millennials
- Millennials believe that they can change the world, and they are brash enough to want to do it
- Knowledge and access to technology provides them a platform for greater connectivity on a phenomenal scale
- Millennials want to be involved in issues concerning their environment, society, and destiny. More than previous generations they show an awareness of the ecological connectedness between humanity and the environment
- Millennials are passionate about things they are interested in and respond readily to calls for action
- About 75% of Adventist university graduates surveyed pray at least once a day, and 30% of this group study their Bibles at least once every day

To sum, Millennials can be described with the acronym, EPIC—Experiential, Participatory, Image-Rich, and Connected.

Perception and Attitudes

Studies reveal that the main reasons why Adventist Millennials, like those from other Christian denominations, leave the church is due to negative perceptions and attitudes they find in their faith communities. Among the reasons that drive them away from such congregations include:

- Judgmental attitudes due to their different styles of dressing and appearance
- Perceptions of a lack of authenticity in church leadership

- Divergent views on social or political issues with the church
- A sense that the church is unwilling to keep up with the times
- Impression that the messages of the church are irrelevant to their situations
- The feeling that they are not needed or missed by the church

Church's Efforts Towards Youth Engagement

For several decades the subject of faith transmission to younger generations has been a concern that the church has taken very seriously. In 1949 the General Conference commissioned a study on the youth of the church: *Seventh-day Adventist Youth at the Mid-Century*. Decades later the largest longitudinal studies on the retention of Adventist youth over a period of ten years, between 1987-1997, was undertaken by the Institute of Church Ministries led by Roger Dudley which resulted in the book *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*. As a testimonial to the church's commitment to understanding the factors that affect faith transmission another major research project known as *Valuegenesis*, was conducted across the division. The first was in 1990, and the study was repeated in 2000. There have been follow-up studies and spin offs from this major project among Adventists in other parts of the world. However, most recent study was the Barna research on Adventist Millennials commissioned by NAD in 2013.

Besides *Valuegenesis I & II*, dissertations, and other articles and books on this subject, recently another major study was conducted among Adventist Millennial graduates between 2001 and 2010 from Southern Adventist University, Oakwood University, and Pacific Union College. As a result of these a summary profile of the priorities of Millennials can be drawn.

Millennial Priorities (from a Pew Research Center study)

- 52% of Millennials indicated that they would love to be good parents to their children
- 30% stated that they would love to have successful marriages
- 21% would like to help others in need
- 15% desired to live a very religious life.

The data above presents a hopeful picture and reveals opportunity for Millennials to turn to the church for help in fulfilling these priorities. All the same, for the church to successfully engage Millennials in the life and ministry of the church, it would first need to shut the back door.

Shutting the Back Door

The Adventist Connection Studies (ACS) conducted by the Robert H. Pierson Institute of Southern Adventist University with graduate Adventists from the three southern universities revealed that:

- 60% of Adventist graduates do not see any benefit in going to church
- 52.5% had not found any place where they fit in the church.
- 77.3% of them want to raise their children as Adventists

This study highlights what has been described as the “relational disconnect” between young adults and the church. Among the estimated 50% who drop out of the church before the age of 25 a number of these are as a result of:

- Rebellion against the status quo
- Perceived secularization in the church
- Perceived achievement-orientation they find in the church

Those who return to the church in later years usually do so when they are having a family, or for the purpose of marriage.

Why Young People Remain in the Church

Studies have been done concerning not only why young Adventists leave the church, but also why they remain in the church. Some of the reasons why they remain include:

- The role of the family—this was discovered to be important in remaining and returning. When parents live out their faith and have regular worship this exerts a positive influence on their children
- The impact of youth ministry—Pathfinder and other youth programs played critical roles in training and engaging the youth by helping them learn useful skills and providing an environment for bonding and faith development
- Service in youth ministry—Leadership roles in youth ministry also had a powerful staying effect upon those who served in such capacities
- Parochial education between grades K-10 was also an influential factor for youth who remained in the church in later years. Among the staunchest supporters of the church's mission and programs were those who had attended church elementary schools
- Above all, according to Dudley, the greatest factor that influenced young Adventists to remain in the church was the relationships they had formed

Strategies for Engaging Millennials in the Church

Over the years much has been written and continues to be written on how the church can engage its youth in the life and mission of the church; even as recent as the cover

story of the May edition of *Ministry Magazine* has been devoted to this subject. A

summation of the concepts that have been garnered from these sources suggest that:

- The church should be intentional in developing programs and ministries to engage the young adults in its congregations in mission, service, and worship tasks
- A climate of acceptance and warmth should be created to welcome Millennials to the church in contrast to the critical and judgmental attitudes that make them leave
- Programs that foster relationships between young adults and Jesus, and with church members should be emphasized. Such programs need to include food and fun activities.
- A shift from age-specific programs to intergenerational services and ministries need to be encouraged—studies indicate that youth connected with 5 older persons in the church remain in the faith.
- More responsibility and trust needs to be invested in young adults to perform diverse roles in the church while older members retreat and assume new roles as mentors and guides. Thrust forward to performing such roles under the supervision of older members produces expertise and confidence as inevitable results.
- Millennials should be encouraged and empowered to design and develop programs that would interest and attract their peers to the church. Spiritually mature Millennials should be sought by the church who have a burden for reaching out to their peers in innovative and challenging ways

- Forums for open discussion of moral and spiritual issues confronting youth need to be created in atmospheres that are safe and caring. Millennials need to see authentic Christianity on display, where they can hear testimonies of members who have struggled with and gained the victory over wrong practices and sinful habits. Listening to the struggles and victories of others would help them realize the church is made up of real people, rather than a group of perfect people demanding perfection from others
- Empowerment of youth to develop missional programs that address the social and welfare needs of their local and international communities will satisfy their belonging needs in the church
- Millennials should be encouraged to infuse passion and vivacity into the worship services and total ministries of the church with the help of older respected mentors—Sabbath Schools, web/social media, and technology-based programs should especially be led by youth, but their services should not be restricted to these areas alone.
- Young ministers should be freed from caring for aging congregations so that they can develop creative bible-based and social programs that would minister to the needs of Adventist Millennials

Reversing the Trend

For decades the Adventist Church has been hemorrhaging as its vital force of young adults have left the church, finding no place, ministry, or acceptance in their faith communities. Much talking has been done and a lot has been written, however, if this

trend must be reversed drastic measures will need to be taken, and fast, to arrest the loss of the church's most vital assets. Among the actions that are recommended include:

- (1) Education of every church and member on the nature and causes of the loss of its most vital assets is needed in order to engage every one towards the transformation of the perceptions and attitudes that have resulted in such losses
- (2) Enlightenment is needed concerning what empowerment of Millennials entails—it shall lead in part to the loss of some authority of certain older leaders, but result in the greater benefit of the entire church as Millennials find their places in the churches
- (3) New orientation needs to be given to leaders and members of the church to dispel the distrust and suspicion of youth that is common with every generation and to help them appreciate the influence and power for good inherent in young people.
- (4) More aggressive and innovative efforts are needed in campus ministries on Adventist and secular universities. It is during those critical college years that young adults experience identity crises which lead them to either hold fast to their faith or let go completely. Funds and resources invested in nurturing and supporting young people in college and graduate years will reap greater rewards in later years when they are established in their careers and professions, and they reflect on the role the church played in their faith journey.
- (5) Millennials have many needs—emotional, social, relational, financial, and spiritual. The church needs to be more sensitive and responsive to the needs of its young members and the community. This neglect has contributed in no small measure to the present development which needs to be redressed

Conclusion

Sacred and ecclesiastical history clearly demonstrates that renewal and revitalization is generally championed and spearheaded by the youth of the church. If the Adventist Church in NAD seeks to engage its youth and train them to be that army of workers that will execute the end-time functions of the church, it will definitely need to **listen** patiently and attentively to the voices of its young adults needing help and wanting a place to serve; **learn** from them fresh innovative concepts for confronting the challenges of this complex, connected, globalized world; **lend** the finances and resources necessary to establish them in the faith, and provide a firm footing for success in life; and empower them to **lead** the church in NAD to bold new frontiers where it has never been before.