
Stop the Sad Exodus: Three Practical Solutions

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Abstract

Students of Adventist campuses of higher education experience the finest in ministry options. When they graduate, they often return to congregations that are much lacking the ministries to which they have been accustomed. Three solutions for the campus are: (1) Risky Sabbath schools that involve students in outreach, (2) Youth summits, and (3) Training for involvement in local congregations.

Every year I see my students leave a vibrant campus, and I know what's going to happen to them. Many will walk inside a small Adventist church where they expect or hope to encounter excellent preaching; soul-stirring music; honest, deep friendships characterized by open dialogue; and attractive, imaginative, courageous discipleship. Soon, they will be disappointed. Soon after that, they will bolt.

Every Adventist college sets up graduates for this sad exodus. We do it by offering years of excellent preaching; soul-stirring music; honest, deep friendships . . .

That's right.

Anyone who hasn't yet heard the stories or witnessed firsthand the North American Adventist young adult hemorrhage is not plugged in to current realities. Unfortunately, today's young adults are not being trained to thrive in hostile and sterile spiritual environments as tough disciples of the Carpenter from Nazareth. Students are instead recruited, targeted, coddled, and wooed like discriminating indie music fans.

They emerge from college unprepared to face older Adventists who believe, deep in their hearts, that most contemporary Christian music is from the devil. That only a traditional order of worship is sacred. That God honors entitlement. That the week exists to point us toward the Sabbath. That church is a denomination or building. And that what ultimately matters most to God is what happens inside that denomination or building.

Young adult Adventists believe, deep in their hearts, that virtually all musical styles can laud God. That Jesus handed down no specific order of service. That God honors

creativity and accountability and love. That the Sabbath exists to launch us into the week. That church is a community of uneven believers. And that what ultimately matters most to God is what happens on streets, in schools, and in homes outside any denominational building.

Can these two heartfelt perspectives merge and flourish? What other differences exist? Moreover, what about those who are not in the church?

Emerging Portrait

In their riveting book, *unChristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (2007) document a three-year, groundbreaking study from The Barna Group using thousands of interviews with people who are outside of Christianity—"outsiders." The researchers focused their questions on 16-29—parts of Busters (born between 1965 and 1983) and Mosaics (born between 1984 and 2002)—highlighting distinctions, as shown in the following table (p. 18).

| Generation | Age (in 2007) | Percent outside of Christianity | Size in U.S. |
|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Older Mosaics and Young Busters | 16-29 | 40% | 24 million |
| Boomers | 42-60 | 27% | 21 million |
| Elders | 61+ | 23% | 12 million |

Because they have been the target of more marketing and media than any previous generation, Busters' and Mosaics' mindset is "incredibly savvy and unusually jaded." Relationships (think mobile phones, texting, blogs,

Facebook) are their driving force, with one of the highest values “being loyal to friends” (p. 22).

Furthermore, they:

- Engage in nearly constant search for fresh experiences and new motivations.
- Disdain self-proclaimed experts and “talking head” presentations. (“Being skeptical of leaders, products, and institutions . . . they do not trust things that seem too perfect.”)
- Quickly move on if not permitted to participate in the process.
- Prefer casual and comfortable to formal and stiff.
- View life in a nonlinear way; they don’t mind contradiction and ambiguity (p. 23).

In analyzing research results, Kinnaman and Lyons refuse to sugarcoat the situation. “The title of this book, *unChristian*, reflects outsiders’ most common reaction to the faith: They think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind.” As one outsider observed, “Christianity has become bloated

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with blind followers who would rather repeat slogans than actually feel true compassion and care. Christianity has become marketed and streamlined into a juggernaut of fear-mongering that has lost its own heart” (p. 15).

Many outsiders hold negative opinions of Christians “not because of any specific theological perspective. What they react negatively to is our ‘swagger,’ how we go about things and the sense of self-importance we project. . . . *We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for*” (p. 26). In other words, we’re barking up the wrong tree of life.

The book spotlights six broad objectionable themes raised by outsiders (pp. 29-30):

1. *Hypocritical*. Christians “pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished image that is not accurate.”
2. *Too focused on getting converts*. Outsiders too often “feel like targets rather than people.”
3. *Antihomosexual*. Christians “show disdain for gays and lesbians.”
4. *Sheltered*. Christians “do not respond to reality in appropriately complex ways, preferring simplistic solutions and answers.”
5. *Too political*. Christians are “overly motivated by a political agenda.”

6. *Judgmental*. Outsiders doubt “that [Christians] really love people as we say we do.” We are too quick and too willing to judge.

What appear as self-evident truths to Christians are anything else to others. “A minority of outsiders perceives Christianity as genuine and real, as something that makes sense, and as relevant to their life” (p. 27). To them, we’re barking up the wrong tree of life.

As the book maintains, it’s not a pretty picture.

Then the really troubling news: “We must grasp the idea that young people in our churches are . . . bringing up some of the same challenges, questions, and doubts facing those outside the church” (pp. 18-19).

Recently I introduced my book (a supplemental text) *Searching for a God to Love* to a Union College physician assistant class. Of the twenty-three post-grad students, only four are Adventist. When I surveyed the class’s overall perceptions of Christians, all six of the *unChristian* themes surfaced.

“They’re two-faced hypocrites,” said one student.

“Usually I get the idea,” observed another, “that they just want to ‘save’ me.”

“They have all the answers. But, really, they don’t even know the questions.”

Not one responded with hostility. They were simply being honest.

Conversation over Conversion

Thankfully, Mosaics and Busters compose “the ultimate ‘conversation generations.’ They want to discuss, debate, and question everything.” Unfortunately, outsiders convey that “the overarching concern of Christians often seems more about being right than about listening” (p. 33). Even Christian young adults worry that the actual message of Christians has become “one of self-preservation rather than one of world restoration” (p. 35).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is capable of checking the six broad objections. For instance, to combat hypocrisy, we need to be transparent about our flaws while maintaining balance with redemptive suggestions. To counter the “sheltered” problem, we can engage youth and young adults in real, complex situations people face.

Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners*, states, “The young people I meet . . . [are] not happy with Christianity being either a list of things you shouldn’t do, or just about being nice. They want to go deeper” (p. 179).

David Kinnaman writes, “I was amazed in our research to see how comfortable young people are with nuance and subtlety, expressing awareness of context in complicated and intricate issues” (p. 125). He concludes, “A faith that

does not effectively address convoluted and thorny issues seems out of tune with a generation asking big questions and expressing candid doubts” (p. 126).

For a generation that prizes authenticity, a posturing faith will not supply nourishment. In a world that is fast unraveling, a sheltered faith will not rise to the challenge. This generation echoes the thoughts of the Apostle Paul: “The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Corinthians 4:20, RSV).

To stanch the hemorrhage, young adults must be engaged and educated to thrive in our churches and world as compassionate, creative, tough disciples.

No More Making Crazy-makers

Because they can’t or won’t discuss feelings and beliefs openly, people can become “crazy-makers”—using (often unconsciously) passive-aggressive techniques to vent their resentments. Crazy-makers employ a variety of indirect tricks and sneak attacks.

The following five widely-known crazy-making characteristics found in Adler (2004) appear in many Adventist young adults when they intersect with their church.

The Avoider. Avoiders refuse to discuss or engage. No vital, deepening friendship can develop because they simply won’t show up.

The Pseudoaccommodator. Pseudoaccommodators pretend nothing at all is wrong. When the going gets rough, however, they leave, explaining, “It was never good.”

The Joker. Because they are afraid to face reality squarely, jokers constantly kid around. This behavior blocks expression of important feelings. Eventually, jokers opt out for something more “real.”

The Blamer. Blamers would rather point out faults than solve problems. Through a torrent of criticism they place everyone else on the defensive—then are sorely wounded when others strike back.

The Benedict Arnold. Arnolds “get back at” the church or God by ridiculing, failing to defend from attackers, and sabotaging united efforts.

Last week I showed this list to a 26-year-old Adventist who wrestles with church attendance. “Wow,” she said. “I’m all of these.”

In the final analysis, the antidote to passive-aggressive behavior exists in enabling direct, responsible communication, in creating sanctuaries—safe places—for open, caring dialogue. Ironically, too many church sanctuaries are anything but safe.

When a church offers honest, redemptive avenues for expression and involvement, it stops making crazy-makers.

Three Practical Solutions

Parents, pastors, and teachers tend to believe that if we can persuade people to *believe* the right things, they will act the right way. But studies don’t support this. In 1964, psychologist Leon Festinger concluded that people are more likely to behave their way into thinking than think their way into behaving: We believe what we do more than we do what we believe. Cognitive dissonance dictates we cannot continue doing something and persist in believing it is wrong; rather, we rationalize whatever we’re doing—*It’s all right just this time* or *That doesn’t apply to me, exactly*.

That’s why nine days spent building a school in Honduras is better than nine years hearing in Bible classes about the importance of Christian service. Young people come to believe Jesus’ admonition to serve by doing it. Action creates belief. As Jesus insists, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Wherever we invest our energies, resources, and time, our devotion follows.

Thus our great, golden mission is to enable people to *do* Christianity. This is the best practical means of discipleship.

The following three strategic proposals move beyond broad analysis to pragmatic involvement and training of youth. Each proposal already has an extant infrastructure to build upon, and thus each is eminently doable. Moreover, each aims at discipling Christians rather than merely “getting them to go to church.”

1. Train youth and young adults each week through ministry-driven, risky, real-world Sabbath Schools.

Laurie Evans, past president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, told me a story about his attending a conference in Australia with leaders of all Christian denominations. One presenter, in the midst of describing the overriding, dismal state of Sunday Schools, suddenly stopped and pointed straight at Laurie.

“You Seventh-day Adventists,” he announced, “have the best system in the world!”

Laurie felt a thrill of pride race through him.

“And,” the speaker added somberly, “you squander it every week.”

At present we lose countless young people through ineffective Sabbath Schools. Fortunately, we can use our phenomenal Sabbath School structure to actually do Christianity—to truly train up young people in the way they should go—every Sabbath.

Ministry-driven Sabbath Schools revolve around Ellen White’s classic statement, “Christianity is always intensely practical” (1930, p. 200). While worship services should be about worship, Sabbath Schools should be about *practicing discipleship*—enabling people to do Christianity. Ministry-driven Sabbath Schools involve members in five ministries: prayer, money, time, study, and social. These are

the fundamentals of connecting disciples of Jesus Christ to a hurting, hopeless world.

The format and outcomes are detailed in the book *Reinvent Your Sabbath School* (Review and Herald, 2001), and ministry-driven, practical Sabbath Schools have sprung up from Florida to British Columbia, from Norway to Australia. All have adapted the concept to fit the needs of their local church with material support from Center for Creative Ministry.

Something Else Sabbath School, a ministry-driven Sabbath School in Lincoln, Nebraska, has existed since 1995. During that time, this class of about 70 regularly attending members has raised \$203,000 for 512 special projects, donated countless hours for ministries, and enabled all who attend to experience the palpable joyful presence of God.

“This class involved me from the first day,” says Carole. “I was able to pray for people I didn’t know and learned names when they were put up on the board. . . . I’ve been here only a year, and I know this class would do anything for me” (pp. 9-10).

Another class member shares, “When I came here I felt spiritually dead and depressed. I was on edge almost constantly. Since I came to Something Else class my spiritual life has vastly improved, and I feel as though a great burden has been lifted from my shoulders. I praise God for this class” (p. 17).

Kim, another member, reports, “The first time I attended this class I was unprepared for the overwhelming sense of the Holy Spirit during the prayer ministry time and the feeling of awe of what all was being done during the money ministry time. I knew right away that I wanted to be a part of this” (p. 23).

The class has received literally hundreds of thank-you cards and letters from grateful recipients of the ministries.

“Mere words seem inadequate to express our gratitude. Your actions are an answer to prayer as I believed God would take care of our finances this month. I am overwhelmed and amazed at the kindness shown to us” (p. 30).

“I don’t know who you are or who sent the monetary gift—a tangible way of saying that you love me” (p. 31).

“Thank you for coming to the rescue of this school in Pakistan. What joy you’ve brought to the school personnel so they can continue to serve young people” (p. 33).

“Though I don’t belong to your church, I called a member of your class because I heard that you help people

in need. I’m so glad to know that there’s a place where someone can go for help” (p. 35).

“When I first came to Lincoln, my two teenage daughters were—for lack of a better word—horrible. They were into anything that could possibly keep a parent awake at night or give a parent nightmares. The first time I brought them to Matt Talbot Kitchen to help feed some of the homeless

of Lincoln, they were impressed, and somehow (only by the grace of God) they slowly came around. My 21-year-old, who now has a baby of her own, comes to class with me; my 18-year-old has also turned over a new leaf. And it was this class who helped. If it hadn’t been for their work, for each individual’s prayers, for their caring, it would not have happened. I know, without a single doubt, that they would not be where they are; in fact, neither one of them would probably be alive” (pp. 36-37).

Currently, students at Union College are implementing the ministry-driven concept. Rich Carlson, Union College chaplain, observes:

“In the more than 25 years I have been at Union, this approach has successfully deepened the practical discipleship of students more than any other we have tried.”

2. Target youth in small churches and public schools through the re-emergence of Youth Summits. This target group is an at-risk youth demographic. In Rick Lawrence’s “Crisis in Small Churches” (1991), Barna Research Group found that “the beliefs, the religious activities, the relationships, and even the self-perceptions of teenagers attending a small congregation consistently emerged as less healthy than was the case elsewhere.” Teenagers in small churches (those with less than 100 people) are much less likely than kids in larger churches to:

- Describe themselves as religious (down 21 percent)
- Say they’d emphasize religious training in their future families (less than half as likely)
- Read the Bible and attend worship services (down 13 percent and 22 percent, respectively)
- See the Bible as “very important” in their lives (down 13 percent)

Group research attributed these problems to 1) “A lack of time and attention directed at kids”; 2) “A sparse schedule of youth group activities”; 3) “A shortage of qualified, trained volunteers”; 4) “A dismal financial picture” (“one-third of small-church youth workers say they have *no* budget for youth ministry”); and 5) “A lack of enthusiasm for the

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ministry” (“Large numbers tend to generate excitement. Small numbers can do just the opposite”).

While the study is dated, it’s likely that the situation for small churches hasn’t dramatically changed for the better since 1991. Here were *Group’s* recommended solutions: “Network with other small churches; Look to parachurch organizations for help; Develop young people as leaders; Turn small-church weaknesses into strengths; [and] Emphasize volunteer recruiting and training programs.”

Youth Summits, developed in consultation with the Center for Youth Evangelism (CYE), target Adventist youth in small churches. Summits are one-day discipleship events designed to create a large critical mass of energetic youth and focus on involvement rather than entertainment. Interactive mixers, dramas, discussions, music, video, workshops, and an expedition diary pepper the day (Even lunch is a challenging activity). Recycled themes are honesty, love, freedom, communication, and balance. In addition, during these discipling events dozens of young people have indicated for the first time their desire to be baptized in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

At one time CYE conducted 40 Summits a year across the North American Division, with paid seminary students gaining valuable skills by providing detailed helps, forms, graphic arts, and administrative expertise. High school students and their sponsors paid about \$30 (traveling up to three hours each way) to meet on a Sabbath with scores of other small church and public school students. The \$30 fee included lunch and a Youth Summit commemorative tee shirt—and CYE still turned a modest profit with each Summit.

While original Youth Summit materials still exist, modern Summits should be adapted and technologically updated using similar resources, creativity, and emphasis given to modern-day Pathfinder Camporees. (Haven’t Camporees been adapted and updated?)

It’s time small church and public school Adventists were treated as first-class members.

3. Educate college students through campus ministries, so that when they leave college they don’t de facto leave the church. The kernel of this idea is to organize college (and university) chaplains to develop their own system for educating and training students to effectively enter small/different/narrow-minded/boring local churches after graduation and make a redemptive, realistic difference.

This is a huge gap in our system—a gap we ought to be addressing. When we merely provide excellent college worship experiences, we set our students up for unsatisfying post-graduation church experiences and early exits. That’s when many young adults bolt like Usain.

As *unChristian* points out, we as a church must address all six of the broad themes. What if college chaplains developed (using their campus ministry resources) an ongoing training class for juniors and seniors? Suppose troublesome scenarios (complete with pictures) were posed. How will collegiate young adults handle these real-life problems?

- Church offices perennially locked up
- Attendance down, tensions up, morale dropping
- Discussions monopolized by vocal minority
- Judgmental finger pointing and loveless, “crazymaker” climate
- Unwillingness to deal with reality and necessary change
- Ethical compromise by church leader

Through invigorating brainstorming, interpersonal problem solving, and lively role playing, Adventist young adults (including new members—and perhaps even older members) can be trained to enter any environment as tough, savvy, compassionate disciples of our tough, savvy, compassionate God. When this “adaptation” class is combined with the know-how to start their own ministry-driven Sabbath School (with a few like-minded disciples), our young people will have the wherewithal to spiritually thrive.

Youth and young adults are built for action. I urge the Symposium to include these three ideas in its action recommendations and, as far as plausible, enable them to practically take root across the Adventist church and educational landscape.

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