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# I Don't Want To Go To Church Anymore!<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*It is heartbreaking when a young person, raised in an Adventist home, decides to abandon the faith. There are practical steps that can turn the situation around. Suggestions are given for friends, parents, and church leaders. In a climate of love, God can work miracles.*

**I**t happened to us! We were stunned. Roger's mother had passed away, and we were on a plane en route to the funeral with our only daughter and her family. She gently explained to me that she and her family no longer attended church and that she did not want to continue the facade. Furthermore, she did not want to discuss it. Our hearts were now doubly grieved. Our first human reaction was to want to talk about it; surely there was something about this beautiful message that they misunderstood. But this definitely was not the time.

May I share with you some of the things Roger and I learned from personal experience and from talking with youth leaders?<sup>2</sup> As you read on, you will see that there are suggestions for friends, for parents, and for the church. Some will be interchangeable.

## If You Are a Friend

Most important is to avoid conflict—to not argue or become defensive. This only results in higher walls of defensiveness. In order to maintain an open bridge, it is vital to remain friends. Set aside time to really listen to young people as to WHY they have made this decision without being judgmental or denying them the right to their feelings. You may find that they think it is too boring, it is not relevant, and they have no friends there.

You may want to explore when they began feeling that way. Was it triggered by a particular incident? Spiritual apathy usually begins with non-attendance to Sabbath school. You may want to check it out for yourself—Is there a good Sabbath school program? If not, network with your church leaders to provide interesting and relevant spiritual programming.

Young people like to be able to think for themselves. Foster a thinking climate where young people can explore what the church teaches, where they can discover the principles and Biblical support behind our doctrines, and where they can determine its relevance for today's world. They should be able to feel comfortable to ask questions as they sort through their values and make their own choices.

## If You Are a Parent

Parents need tact and wisdom as they deal with this situation. Young people don't want religion pushed down their throats, and yet it is still appropriate for parents to establish Christian standards of behavior. To have this kind of wisdom requires much prayer, thought, and tact. Ella Rydzewski recounted a conversation she had with Roger Morneau (*Adventist Review*, December 1, 2001, p. 6) when he gave this bit of wisdom for parents of grown children: "He said parents should not talk to their children about religion unless asked, for they have probably acquired enough of it over the years that they now have 'religious indigestion.' He advised that parents pray daily and fervently for these children and pray for themselves that they remain loving and accepting. Children of any age need to see the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the lives of their parents if they are to find parental religion attractive."

Young people often announce on Friday evening or Sabbath morning that they don't want to attend. What would be your first impulse? A parent might say: "We will miss you, and we will talk about it this afternoon." This will give the parent time to think and pray before talking. Or the parent may prefer to write the son/daughter a letter

(if this is the best way to avoid conflict) and share personal experience by saying: “I used to feel the same way (if the parent did), and this is what helped me reconnect.” Encourage the young person to hang in with the family and find ways to work through it.

Schedule family council time when the family can brainstorm ways to work through situations like this. Whatever happens, do not argue, just listen carefully, and clarify what the family member is saying.

Walk the talk by living a life consistent with what you teach. Young people are very perceptive, and they learn more from what they observe than from what they hear. A famous lecturer was once asked for his parenting advice. His reply was: “There are three most important principles—example, example, example.” This truth is highlighted by these words from Ellen White:

“It is because so many parents and teachers profess to believe the word of God while their lives deny its power, that the teaching of Scripture has no greater effect upon the youth” (Education p. 259).

Teach that religion is basically a matter of relationships with God and with one another—demonstrating God’s love. “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13:35, NLT). Codes of behavior and a system of beliefs will follow naturally as the love of Christ changes the heart even as it has changed the heart of the parents. This represents a grace orientation rather than a law orientation and is demonstrated by a home that is warm, supportive, and where children can ask questions without feeling threatened.

Be willing to talk with your teenagers about your own personal faith. This is not about explaining doctrines but about what Jesus means to you and what God is doing in your personal life. Conduct interesting family worships, preferably morning and evening. This provides an opportunity to teach your youth how to pray conversationally and how to use the Bible so it provides spiritual nourishment.

Work on ways to make the Sabbath something special and church really interesting. A good place to start is by visiting the youth Sabbath school to find out how its programs are conducted. Are they interesting and relevant? A parent in our church worked with her teen this way when she announced that she no longer wanted to go to church. She said, “If you will go to church with me this week, I will stay home and worship together with you next week.

Sabbath is a day that the family needs to be together.” Her teen was not eager to spend Sabbath at home with Mom. Then this parent worked with her teen to find a way for her to help in the children’s division, This teen really enjoyed teaching the children, and Sabbath school attendance was no longer a problem.

If your young person feels he/she has no friends at church, here are some things you may want to try: Get another young person to call or invite your youth. Assist your church in providing other church activities for young people to get acquainted and work together by helping in Pathfinders, working on a community service project, or planning Saturday night activities. Relationships are very, very important to young people and will do much to hold them for the church.

Notify your pastor discreetly and confidentially about your young person’s apathy. Your pastor can then encourage church leaders to reach out to young people at this critical time and can make a point of touching base with this young person. Above all, the pastor can certainly pray for this youth.

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### If You Are a Church Leader

Here are some very workable and practical supportive projects which would be an encouragement to those who are faced with the challenge of winning back the confidence of their young people.

**Set up a web site** for parents and friends who are concerned about their youth. List resources that they can access to help them be wise parents. For starters, this book and others like it could be listed. Another excellent resource is an article by John Van Eyk, “The Influencing of Searching Minds—How to Make a Public College Student Feel Part of the Church,” *Adventist Review*, June 20, 2002.

**Organize a prayer group** for parents concerned about their children. It could meet during midweek prayer service or another time convenient to the parents. We have one at our church.

**Keep in touch** with your young people who go away to school by sending church bulletins and newsletters and by giving them warm welcomes during holiday breaks and vacation times. Encourage the parents to subscribe and send periodicals and devotional materials geared to this age group. For college and university students there is an international journal of faith, thought, and action which is published in four languages by the General Conference Department of Education entitled *Dialogue*.

**Create and foster** a warm, accepting, non-judgmental climate. Church members need to learn that we should not criticize those whose dress, music, or habits are different from our own. People grow only as they feel loved and accepted. Everyone who steps into one of our churches should feel welcome and wanted—part of the family. Church standards can be a stumbling block. We need to be able to differentiate between Biblical principles and cultural behaviors.

We need to be intentional about involving our youth in the lives of our congregations. Give them an opportunity to use their talents by starting them with lesser responsibilities and increasing them as they grow into the positions. They could even work with a mentor as they take on a leadership role in a department.

**Set up a spiritual guardian program.** Our church pairs a spiritual guardian with a newly baptized youth between the ages of 13-19. Guardians are asked to volunteer for this ministry by calling the youth Sabbath school director.

Remember that at the beginning I shared our heart-ache when our daughter and her family decided to leave the church. We placed a high priority on keeping a warm relationship going with them—a bridge for them to return. We had to refrain from talking about religion, but in private we spent many hours in tears and in prayer for them. This went on for ten long and anxious years. Then to our amazement we received a phone call from our daughter during which she said: “Mom, Dad, I received a letter from the church in \_\_\_\_\_ asking former members to come back for just a visit--to check them out and see how they had changed. Well, a number of things have happened in my life that have impressed me to accept this invitation. I will see for myself if they have changed because I will wear my makeup and jewelry and see how they will treat me. Don't get your hopes up too high because I have no idea what the outcome of all of this will be.”

We redoubled our intercessory prayers on her behalf. And sure enough she did go to the \_\_\_\_\_ Church with the makeup and jewelry. God was certainly directing because on that very Sabbath she was warmly welcomed by its members and by Pastor \_\_\_\_\_ who took her under her wings. It was not long until our daughter invited us to her rebaptism. We know from personal experience that it takes both loving acceptance and many, many prayers to bring back God's precious lambs.

May God bless each one of us as we prayerfully keep in touch with the young people in our homes and churches. Each one is of priceless value and needs to know that he/she is important to God and to us.

**“For I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children” (Isaiah 49:25, NRSV).**

### Endnotes

1. A version of this paper was previously published in the *Adventist Review*, July 10, 2008.
2. Information for this chapter was also gleaned by talking with youth specialists working at Andrews University: Dr. Roger Dudley, College Chaplain Timothy Nixon, and Ron Whitehead, Center for Youth Evangelism.