

ADVENTIST MILLENNIALS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONAL EVANGELISM

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The Seventh-day Adventist church has a long history of public presentations on Bible prophecy, reaching back to our Millerite beginnings. Adventists drew some of their prophetic understandings on a Reformation (and therefore American Protestant) tradition that had historically identified the antichrist as the papacy.¹

However, over time, Protestantism has generally changed its stance on the identity of the antichrist, making the prophetic interpretations of the Adventist Church on this subject a point of disconnection with wider views. A recent survey by Pew Research indicates that seven in ten Americans have a favorable view of the pope (including 53% of white evangelicals).² Another survey by Pew Research shows that “the majorities of both Protestants and Catholics in America say the two traditions are, religiously, ‘more similar than they are different.’”³

Adventist young adults in North America are leaving the church at an alarming rate (which in some places seems to be as high as 70%⁴) leading us to question an approach that may alienate more people, especially young adults, than it brings in.

In this project, we particularly wanted to look at how Adventist millennials perceive traditional Adventist evangelistic presentations, and to examine their views of the antichrist and the Reformation. We also wanted to examine what might be the motivational or contextual factors for their perceptions.

Methodology

There were three phases to the survey. We began with two focus groups made up of diverse millennials to help us draft the survey. We followed this with a paper survey distributed to three general education classes at Southern Adventist University (SAU). The last phase was an electronic survey on SurveyMonkey. There was a total of 2,660 responses gathered, with 1,680 responses from the millennial age group. Social media was the primary tool of recruitment for the electronic survey (1,410 responses from Facebook and Twitter), with a number of organizations also providing a strong secondary source of respondents.⁵

Demographics of Survey Respondents

In this paper we will look primarily at the young adult response (18–34 years old). It is important to note that the respondents in phase three were self-selected. The demographics of the respondents are therefore important in understanding their responses. First, the respondents were educated: about 55% had already completed more than 4 years of college, while about 39% were

still in college or had recently graduated from high school. Theology, business, nursing, and education (in that order) were the most common majors. Most respondents were from SAU (65.60%), although other colleges and universities were also represented.⁶ There were more female (56.12%) than male (43.41%) respondents.⁷

The majority of the respondents were baptized Adventists or connected with the Adventist church (95%) although about 11% no longer attended regularly (less than once a month). They largely grew up in the Adventist church, with 83% born into Adventist families. 65% of the respondents described their ethnicity as White/Caucasian.⁸ The majority of the respondents were from the South and West.⁹ 51% described their religious views as moderate, and 25% described their views as conservative, with just 13% describing their religious views as liberal.¹⁰ The fact that most respondents wanted to be identified as “moderate” suggests that while a polarizing climate does exist, many younger adults wanted to be seen as “middle of the road.” However, this moderate group can be called the silent conflicted majority. They are less vocal than the conservatives and liberals, and more conflicted, rather than consistent, in their views.

In a similar vein, Thom and Jess Rainer state that, “Millennials represent a group of young adults who are weary of divisiveness and polarized views” and that Millennials view institutionalized religion as just another divisive voice in the world. However, the authors also note that millennials who are highly committed to their faith tended to be more vocal about defending their beliefs and resist the popular cultural perceptions.¹¹

As is to be expected with self-selected respondents, the demographics skew towards those interested in the topic and are biased by the methods of recruitment. This was confirmed by a comparison with the sample group selected from General Education classes, which showed the self-selected survey respondents to be more conservative, educated and white than the typical Adventist student population.¹²

Results of the Survey

We had several research questions going into the project, and the findings of the survey will be categorized by these research questions: How do Adventist Millennials perceive Adventist prophecy meetings; How do Millennials perceive the messages preached at these meetings; and, How do Adventist Millennials relate to presentations on the antichrist?

To begin, we wanted to understand the amount of exposure millennials had with evangelistic series. A remarkable number of millennials in the survey had attended evangelistic series (over 90%) with nearly half attending multiple prophecy-based series, and a significant number having preached their own (15%). While we do not have data on how this has changed over time, it is suspected that these numbers are much higher than in the past. This is likely due to the increased prevalence of graphics and sermon packages that have increased the number of meetings being held at local churches, as well as opportunities to preach abroad.¹³ This may not necessarily mean that more young adults are present at meetings. Recent research shows that the majority of attendees at evangelistic meetings are older, and even when young adults do attend, they are not consistent.¹⁴ Increased exposure may simply be because of the frequency of public meetings.

However, even though millennials had experience with these meetings, very few saw these meetings as their first introduction to Adventism. In fact, less than 2% of all respondents said that they first heard of Seventh-day Adventism through a brochure or invitation to an evangelistic series. It appears that more millennials became Adventist as a result of marrying an Adventist than as a result of a prophecy meeting. This may suggest (tongue-in-cheek) that “dating evangelism” has been more effective in reaching millennials than public evangelism.

To understand how millennials felt about evangelistic series in general, we asked them to rate their overall impression of Adventist evangelistic meetings on prophecy on a scale of 1 (highly negative) to 5 (highly positive). The responses indicated a neutral view of these evangelistic meetings ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.18$). Interestingly, there were two large contingents of people indicating opposing viewpoints. There was a polarized response with a group of people demonstrating very negative views and another demonstrating very positive views. This theme of polarization occurred throughout the survey and will be explored further.

Next, respondents were asked how likely they were to invite a friend to a evangelistic meeting. Here the response leaned more negative than neutral ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.38$). There was a common criticism that the meetings had nothing new to offer. “Most series are all the same, just reiterating the same dates, points and verses; the only difference is the packaging.” There was some frustration that we seem to focus more on doctrines than on Christ, and that the content was irrelevant or even offensive to others. “How could I bring my Catholic friend to these meetings, when he is going to hear that we think his church is the antichrist?” However, those who had the most positive impressions of the meetings were also the most likely to invite a friend.

We also wanted to know the motivation behind millennials’ attendance at evangelistic meetings. The number one reason for attending an evangelistic series by all millennials in the survey was “spiritual growth”, followed by “interest in prophecy”, and “family expectations”. In the comments section, however, there appeared to be some frustration between the expectation of spiritual growth and the more information-based content of the meetings.

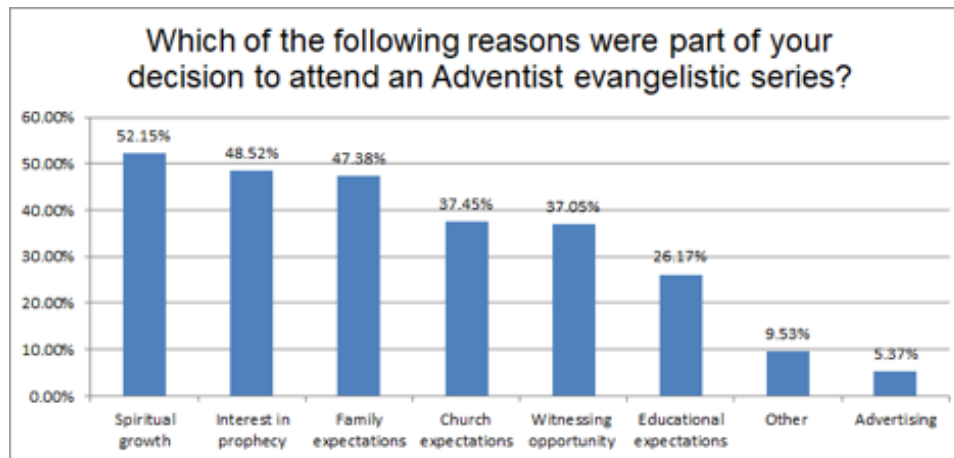


Figure 1: Reasons for Attendance

To answer our next question on millennials’ perception of the messages at these meetings, we gave respondents a list of descriptors and asked them to rate the descriptors on a scale of 1 (not at all accurate) through 5 (very accurate).

Respondents generally stated that these meetings were biblical (84% rated this statement as very accurate or mostly accurate), but once again, there was a conflicted response, with a number of respondents also seeing it as speculative (48% rating this description as somewhat to very accurate).

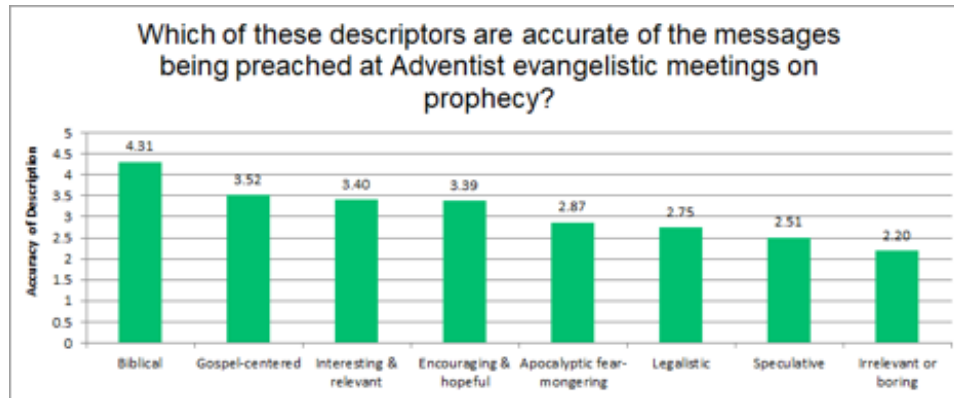


Figure 2: Descriptors of Evangelistic Meetings

In their comments on the question, these respondents felt that there was a lack of context provided to biblical passages, and a tendency to proof-text in the presentations. Some felt that while the meetings were biblical, speculative elements would be brought in. One respondent noted, “I love use of the Bible to explain the Bible, especially when the topic is presented with clarity and relevance. I dislike the use of non-credible media sources like conspiracy theory blogs/websites or opinion columns.”

While the overall perception of the meetings was neutral to positive (but conflicted), the reaction to evangelistic advertising was mostly negative. There was a compelling sense that our advertising was aimed at Adventists, conspiracy-theorists and fanatics. As one respondent stated, “This is for people who find sensational images appealing.” They clearly did not see millennials as the intended audience.

Many respondents were critical of the advertising used. The following comment was typical, “I find the advertising used to be a bit sensational and out of touch. I personally feel the imagery (all the beasts, etc.) and such is outdated and off-putting to many in my generation.”

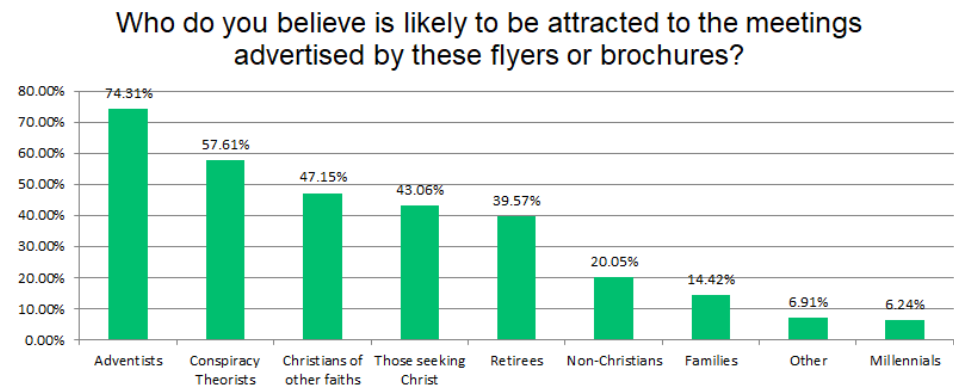


Figure 3: Perceptions of those attracted by evangelistic flyers

Those from a graphic design background were particularly annoyed by the outdated look and wondered why we were using the same artwork from

decades ago. “Flyers and brochures are so old school that they fail to have much relevance.”

To answer our third research question how millennials related to the antichrist, we asked our respondents their level of interest in finding out the identity and activities of the antichrist. Only 12% of millennials said they were extremely interested in this topic. An additional 25% indicated that they were very interested. This means that six out of ten millennials in this study had only a minimal to mild interest. A common refrain among all millennials was stated by this respondent, “We should know our enemy, but more so we should know our Saviour.”

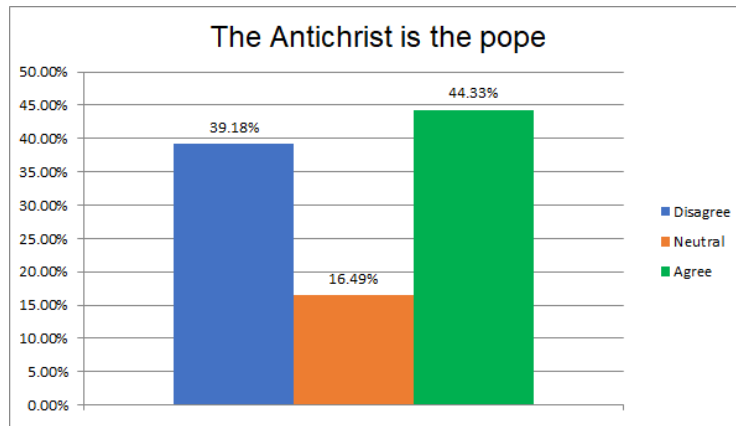


Figure 4: Perceptions of the antichrist being the pope

This was an interesting response because Adventists do not officially teach this position. We do not believe that a single individual is the antichrist but that the institution of the papacy has fulfilled this role by placing its leaders in the place of Christ. It’s a subtle but important distinction. Once we phrased the statement to reflect that it was the system, we got much more agreement, although there was a strong minority dissent.

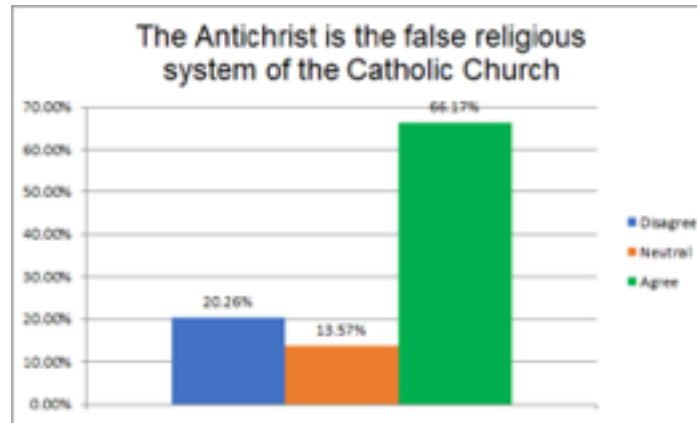


Figure 5: Perceptions of the antichrist being false religious system

Analysis of Correlation Factors

We wanted to know the characteristics that could make someone be more negative or more positive about evangelistic meetings. We looked at a variety of variables, such as gender or exposure to evangelistic meetings, in an attempt to answer this question. However, none of them showed large enough

correlations to help explain the disparity, that is, until we considered religious identification. Those who identified as “conservative” were likely to have a positive impression of prophecy meetings ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.93$). Those who identified as “moderate” were more neutral about prophecy meetings ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.02$), and those who chose “liberal” were likely to have a negative impression of prophecy meetings ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.98$).

Religious identification also moderated a person’s reasons for attending an evangelistic meeting. Whereas a “conservative” millennial attended because of internal motivation (spiritual growth, interest in prophecy and desire to witness), a “liberal” millennial attended because of external motivation (church or family expectations). This would seem to be a significant factor in the positive or negative view of evangelistic meetings. The “moderate” millennial group fell between these two sets of motivations.

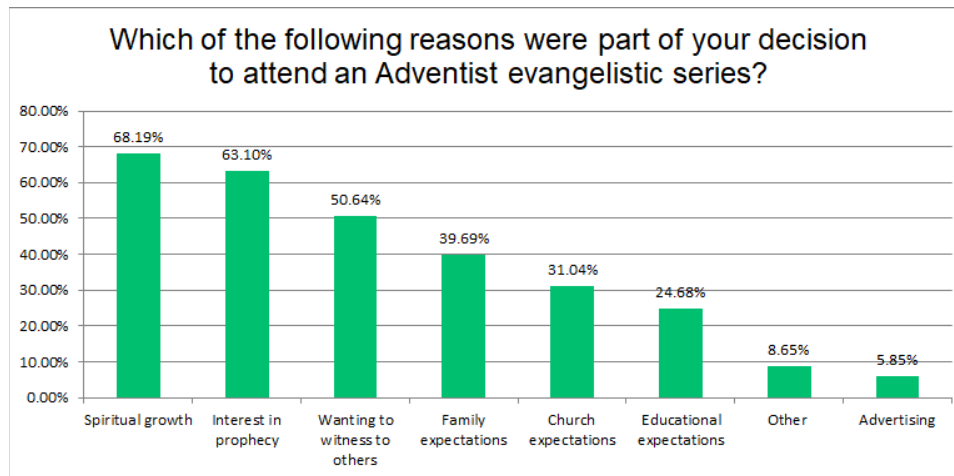


Figure 6: “Liberal” reasons for attending evangelistic meetings

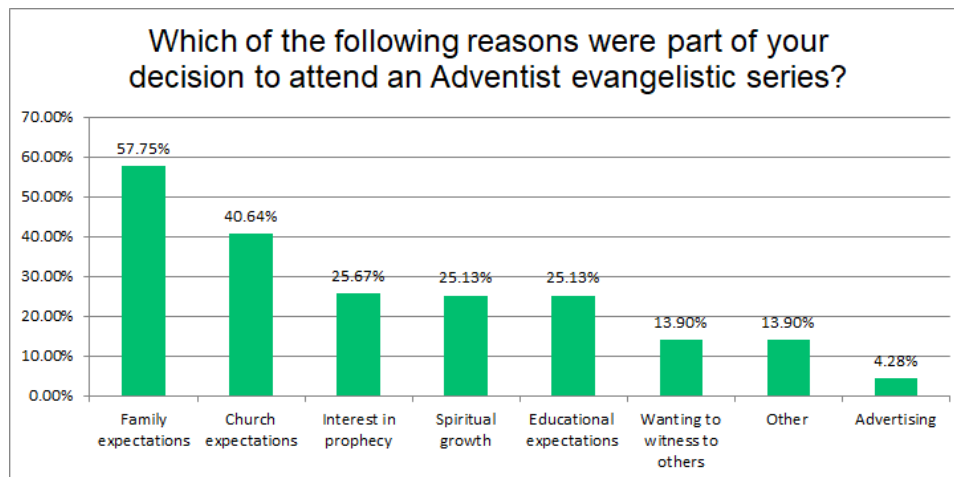


Figure 7: “Conservative” reasons for attending evangelistic meetings

When it came to descriptions of the evangelistic meetings there was once again a clear distinction between the liberal /moderate/ conservative identifiers in their description of evangelistic meetings. The conservative group felt that the presentations were gospel-centered, whereas the liberal group saw the presentations as leading more legalistic.

In the comments, most suggested that it depended on the presentation and the speaker. For example, they stated that while some messages might be gospel-centered, others in the same series might be legalistic.

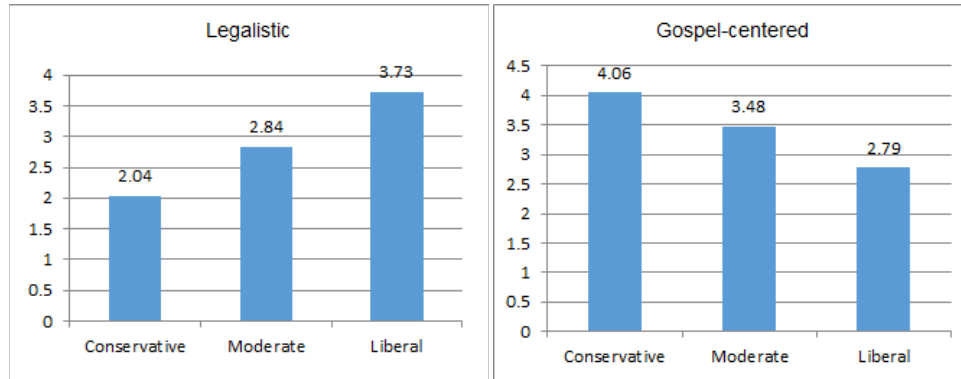


Figure 8: Millennial Perceptions of Gospel vs. Legalistic Elements in Prophecy Meetings

The greatest division in this area seemed to be around the perceived atmosphere of the meetings. As the figure below shows, the conservative group tended to see the meetings as hopeful, whereas the liberal group tended to see it as fear-based.

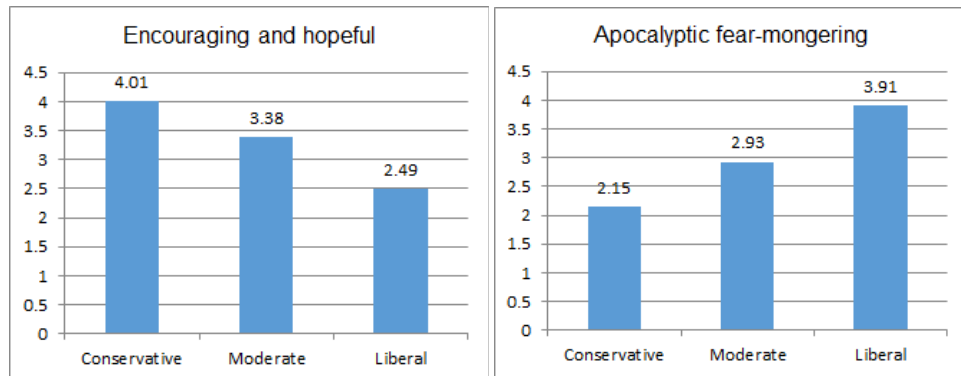


Figure 9: Impression of Hope and Fear in Evangelistic Meetings

Analysis of Religious Orientation on Views of the Antichrist

We also wanted to see if religious orientation affected how millennials viewed the Antichrist. We examined their responses to an open-ended question: “What message about the antichrist should Adventists be sharing?” Over 1,000 millennials responded to this question, many of them with extensive comments.

Four strong themes emerged from the conservative group: (a) warn people of the coming danger so that they are not fooled; (b) make sure we point out that this is not about people but a system; (c) show that the papacy is sharing a false gospel and non-biblical teachings; and (d) show that it is more than just a system, and that we should be concerned with the spirit of the antichrist rather than just the papacy. This last view appeared to be a newer conservative view that was gaining traction. Most in this group felt that we should definitely share on this topic and that we should not water it down.

This “new” view of the antichrist was particularly fascinating to us, because it appeared to be shared across all three groups. In this view, any person or group

could be the antichrist because they saw the antichrist as a spirit rather than a system. Here are some sample comments: “Personally, I think the Antichrist is any type of false Christianity, whether it be Roman Catholic, evangelical, or even misguided Adventism. Anything that elevates human tradition and salvation by works is the Antichrist.” Another person stated, “The Antichrist is also a spirit anyone can allow to grow within them of boastful, little-horn-like attitudes.”

The moderate group generally agreed that the papacy as a system represented the antichrist, but they wanted to see that definition broadened and were concerned with *how* the message was presented. Themes that emerged from this group were (a) whatever we do, let's make sure we reveal Jesus first; (b) it's a matter of timing and we should wait until we've won the trust of the individual; (c) the antichrist is more than a system – it is any false gospel; (d) make it a message of hope and love, rather than focusing on the papacy. A significant number were unsure or felt that they didn't have enough information to make a suggestion in this area.

The liberal group was more likely to indicate that Adventists had missed the mark on this topic and that we should never be presenting it publicly. “Can we just not?” was a common response. Themes that emerged were (a) let's focus on God's character and on love; (b) the antichrist within is more worrisome than the external system; (c) stop labeling and excluding others by creating an us/them mentality; and (d) stop creating fear in people and point them to a relationship with God/Christ instead.

Thus, the response to this question was not monolithic, but was dependent on the person's perspective as to whether the antichrist was more internal (the spirit of the antichrist) or external (the papacy). The conservative group was most concerned that we didn't lose sight of our responsibility to declare this truth to others; the moderate group was most concerned about our method of sharing these ideas; and the liberal group was hoping we could avoid talking about it at all and focus instead on the gospel.

Millennial Suggestions for Adventist Public Evangelism

When asked to respond to the open-ended question, “What would make you want/likely to attend an Adventist evangelistic series?” there were several areas of consensus that emerged. Strong themes were (a) make sure we share the gospel and speak about Jesus; (b) make it relevant and practical to our lives; (c) use fresh material; (d) keep it biblical and not speculative; (e) make the meetings shorter; (f) serve food; (g) use engaging speakers – someone who speaks our language and isn't boring; (h) show how to grow my relationship with Jesus; (i) emphasize redemption rather than Revelation; (j) make them more interactive – perhaps using small tables; (k) be more inclusive of social issues; (l) offer something that is not in a church – maybe online; (m) advertise in a way that reaches the inbox (or the phone) rather than the mailbox; (n) use better visuals; and (o) involve millennials in the planning and presenting.

Conclusions

Seventh-day Adventist young adults/millennials (aged 18-34) appear to have polarizing views of Adventist evangelism, and especially of presentations on the antichrist. Those with more conservative religious views are likely to see such presentations as a necessary part of the Adventist mandate to warn the world of the coming apostasy and false worship. Those who identify as “moderate”

appear to be less aware of historic Adventist views and more concerned that we might be sharing the message in a way that alienates others. They tend to see the antichrist as more than just a system, and as a spirit of deception or false worship. Those who identify as liberals, are the least interested in the identity and activities of the antichrist, and are also strongly negative toward Adventist public evangelism. They are not inclined to see the antichrist as a system, but rather as a way of life lived against God.

While this strong polarization exists, areas of consensus do occur. Almost all respondents agree that current Adventist public evangelism is not aimed at millennials. Prophecy presentations are generally seen as being marketed to Adventists, conspiracy-theorists and fanatics. And there were several helpful suggestions for how Adventist public evangelism could appeal to a millennial audience. Many millennials wanted fresh presentations, better visuals and more practical messages rather than a rehashing of old material that was largely information-based.

It is important to remember that more than half of the millennial group rejects the polarization perspectives of liberal or conservative. And whatever their perspective, we should focus on listening to each other's voices rather than rejecting them.

In closing, as the church projects its evangelistic efforts in a millennial context, it should pay attention to what millennials have to say. In this sense, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words seem relevant: "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear."¹⁵

Endnotes

1 Le Roy Edwin Froom in *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* spends considerable time tracing the Protestant tradition of identifying the papacy as the antichrist, seeing its roots in Luther's interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel. Chapter Twelve, "Luther Sets Pattern for Reformation Interpretation" in *Vol. II*). Froom goes on to identify Calvin, Knox, and Cranmer as other Protestant Reformers who taught that the papacy was the antichrist. Thus, Froom argues that the Adventist interpretation is in harmony with the established Protestant view.

2 Claire Gecewicz, "U.S. Catholics, non-Catholics continue to view Pope Francis favorably" last modified on January 18, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/18/favorable-u-s-views-pope-francis>.

3 Pew Research Center, "U.S. Protestants Are Not Defined by Reformation-Era Controversies 500 Years later," paper released on August 31, 2017.

4 A recent research study found a 68% attrition rate among young people reared in the Collegedale Church of Seventh-day Adventists (Rainer, 2009). Rainer and Rainer (2008) found that across Christian denominations in America, the attrition rate is at 70%. 'If this trend is not reversed, the viability of Christianity in America, including Adventism, could come into question' (Cross, 2011, p. 2). As a result of this youth and young adult attrition rate, almost half of white North American Seventh-day Adventist members are 60 years of age or older (Sahlin & Richardson, 2008)." 21st Century Adventist Retention Study Fact Sheet, Southern Adventist University, 1.

5 Southern Adventist University Email – 444; ARISE Institute Email – 318; GYC Social Media – 297; Disciples Software Email – 177; Union College Email – 110; La Sierra University Church Young Adult Email – 34.

6 Andrews University (15%), Union College (12%), Walla Walla University (6%), La Sierra University, Loma Linda University and Southwestern Adventist University (4% each), Pacific Union College (3%) and Oakwood College (2%). Other colleges or universities were 1% or less.

7 There were 8 respondents who identified as transgender or non-conforming.

8 Other groups included Hispanic (17%), Asian/Pacific Islander (11%), Black/African-American (10%), and Other (6%). Respondents could check more than one race/ethnicity.

9 33% of the respondents identified their home region as the South, 26% were from the West, 17% were from the Midwest, 11% from the Northeast and 13% identified themselves as International

10 The remainder described themselves as either non-religious (5%) or came up with their own label (6%). xii

11 Thom and Jess Rainer, *The Millennials* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2011), 157, 163, 261.

12 A selected sample from three undergraduate general education classes (all students took the paper survey) was younger (89% from those 18–24), less educated (90% without a college degree), less conservative (only 13% described themselves this way) and more ethnically diverse (Caucasians were 46% of the group) than the self-selected sample.

13 ShareHim, ASI, NET meetings and others have brought a resurgence of the prophecy-style approach. Since many of the survey respondents are SAU graduates, it is likely that the Evangelistic Resource Center (ERC) is also responsible for these high figures. The ERC sends about 100 students (from all disciplines) to preach an evangelistic series overseas each year. SAU also requires all theology students to preach their own series.

14 Alan Parker, “Is Evangelism Still Effective?” *Ministry* (August 2017), 6–7. In Parker’s research, 354 public evangelistic meetings were examined and it was found that the average age group at a prophecy meeting was 50+ and retirees were the most consistent attendees.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 97–8.