A couple of years ago, I received an e-mail from good long-time friends whom I met twenty years ago when I was a student at All Nations Christian College in England. They belong to a Protestant church and live in Scotland. Following is their letter quoted with some abridgments.

Our church life is very hectic at the moment. At 62 and 65, Keith and I are the youngest church members apart from one couple. . . . Keith has a very heavy workload as a deacon, secretary, treasurer, webmaster, computer operator in services, guitarist, [and] the list just goes on. . . . When my Grandfather died, it was said that they needed 12 people to do the work he did, and within a very short while of him dying, the church closed as no one else could take on what Granddad did. I fear it would be the same with us if Keith dies before more young folk come to the church and get involved. We have no youth work at church as we have no youth. . . . We are a church of old people. We desperately need some young blood but at the moment, none is forthcoming. It isn’t helped by the fact that we have one group within our church that do all they can to keep it as it was in the 1950s. No younger wants to come to the sort of service they fight for, and it makes life very difficult. They have already forced 2 ministers to go as they are such dominant characters, and all they do is hold the church back. (Dec 15, 2011)

After I read that letter, I realized that much of it describes my own church in Russia today. As a fourth-generation Seventh-day Adventist, I
have always known my church to be vibrant, full of young people, and a creative community. I cannot remember a single congregation I belonged to or pastored that did not have a good group of young people, young couples, children, and teenagers. Even during the late Soviet era, the local Adventist churches I knew, visited, and was associated with, with rare exceptions, were full of young people. The mass evangelism of the 1990s created a church that was even younger than what it was like in the Soviet era.

This was in the past, however, and today the picture of the Adventist Church in Russia is quite different. The church I knew was a community of young people, but that is no longer the case. Looking at the make-up of today’s churches in all four of Russia’s unions in the Euro-Asia Division, I see more and more graying heads and many gloomy faces.

In order to illustrate what is happening, some statistics will be looked at first, then some interpretations will be discussed before drawing conclusions. In this article I am not trying to blame anybody, but rather attempting to offer help so the Adventist Church can reverse the process of a slow death.

Demographics Picture of Russia

It is self-evident that the church as a smaller social body is affected by the larger society. The church, however, has a responsibility for society (Niebuhr 1946). The gospel invitation is to be given to all (White 1974:102). To understand the social conditions in which Russian Adventists live and minister today, it is important to look at the major social changes Russia has gone through during the last two decades or so. This is important for navigating future mission initiatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia. The more sensitive the Church is to its social environment, the closer it follows the Master who said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

The following charts demonstrate several major demographic trends that developed during the 20th century and accelerated at the beginning of 21st century in Russia. First, by taking a closer look at the larger demographic picture of Russia one is able to come to a better understanding of the social dynamics which led up to the disappearance of the USSR in 1991 and the collapse of the political, economic, and institutional systems soon after that. Second, the charts help the readers to understand how the social context in the Russian Federation affects the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s age and gender make-up. The charts will also help us to foresee how the social body of Russia will develop in the decades to come and therefore what the Adventist Church in Russia can expect in the future.
As figure 1 shows, the population of Russia reached its low point in 1946 shortly after the end of World War II, but reached its high in 1992, the first year after the collapse of the USSR. It is expected that the population will decrease by 2026 when it is predicted that the population will be 137.1 million, close to the population in 1979.
If figure 2 data is compared with historical events, Russia’s demographic processes were heavily influenced by social catastrophes which “repeatedly broke the long-term patterns of populations change” (Zakharov and Ivanova 1994; cf. Prokhorov 1998; Glotov 2012:36-46). In 1992, for the first time since WWII, the number of deaths in Russia exceeded the number of births, and with the exception of 1995, that trend has continued ever since. Deaths were higher than births by almost a million people in 1994-1995 and in 1999-2003. The birth rate dropped sharply in periods of economic crises in 1962-1969 and 1992-1999. The collapse of the USSR, followed by drastic economic reforms triggered demographic disasters. For the first time in its millennial history, Russia was labeled a “disappearing” country (Rudenko 2007). As Eberstadt observes, over the two decades since the Soviet collapse, “the country’s population has been shrinking, its mortality levels are nothing short of catastrophic, and its human resources appear to be dangerously eroding” (2011:95).

Eberstadt explains Russia’s gruesome deterioration as follows:

Although the country’s problems with infectious diseases—most alarming HIV/AIDS and drug-resistant tuberculosis—are well-known, they account for only a small fraction of the awful gap between Western and Russian survival rates. Most immediately, the country’s fateful leap backward in health and survival prospects is due to an explosion in deaths from cardiovascular disease and injuries [which] account for the overwhelming majority of Russia’s spike in mortality levels from those of Western countries. At the moment, death rates from cardiovascular disease are more than three times as high in Russia as in Western Europe, and Russian death rates from injury and violence have been stratospheric, on par with those in African post-conflict societies, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone (2011:98).

In 2005, the Russian government launched a new demographic initiative which was entrusted to Dmitriy Medvedev, who was at that time the Vice Prime Minister in charge of national projects and priorities (Latsa 2012). The idea behind this initiative was to boost the country’s birth rate and lower mortality rates. Starting on January 1, 2007 the government began paying maternity capital (family subsidies for mothers of more than one child, if the second child and any further children come after January 1, 2007). In 2007, the amount of the lump sum allowance was 250,000 rubles (about $6,820) for the second child and any additional children and was indexed against inflation, reaching 429,408 rubles (about $11,720) in 2014 (Pension Fund of the Russian Federation 2014).

This however did not reverse the demographic situation, and as of 2012, the death rate was still higher than the birth rate (Federal State Statistics
Only in 2013, for the first time in the last two decades did the population increase from January to November 2013. Within 11 months, there were 1,743,300 births which is 22,700 more than the number of those who died (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection Report 2013).

According to statistical predictions, starting from 2008 the percentage of the population that crossed the line of the “able-bodied age” (retirement) will double, from 21% to 42% in 2050 (Osipov and Rybakovsky 2009:250). This means that the burden to support elderly people will inevitably increase taxes on the younger generations, and the rising life expectancy in Russia will make this burden even heavier and worsen the pension crisis (Putin 2007:7).
It is also important to understand that the decrease in the number of young people in the population is not an independent process but a part of the larger depopulation of Russia in general (Semenova, Tvanova, and Dabrouina 2005:318-361). Russian society shares in the “global aging” phenomenon, a phenomenon indicating “a fundamental demographic shift with no parallel in the history of humanity” (Jackson and Howe 2008:3). The median age in Russia will rise by almost two days every week, from 38.7 years in 2011 to 42.4 years in 2025. Accordingly, Russians who are 65 and older will make up almost 19% of the population in 2025, compared to 13% in 2011 (Eberstadt 2011:102). Within eight years, from 2013 to 2021, the number of young people aged 14-30 will decrease by about 8 million (see fig. 5), which is over a half of the population of Moscow.

![Figure 5. The number of population aged 14-30 in the Russian Federation and prognosis until 2021 (in million). Source: Gorshkov 2010:15.](image)

Against this background of the Russian demographic picture, I next look at the growth rate of the Adventist Church in Euro-Asia, primarily in four Russia-based unions, the West Russia Union Conference, the East Russia Union Mission, the Caucasus Union Mission, and the Far East Union Mission of Churches.
First, I will look at the Euro-Asia Division membership growth rate from 1991 to 2013. As someone who was born in the Soviet Union and who grew up being a Seventh-day Adventist, I never heard any preaching in the church that envisioned the collapse of Marxism-Leninism and the disappearance of its grand political creation, the USSR. Neither did I hear this topic mentioned in any private conversations, nor did I ever see anything from the Bible or the writings of Ellen G. White applied in any way to even hint that one day soon the mega-project of Communism would collapse without a single shot being fired. However, this was exactly what happened in 1991 when in a twinkle of an eye many people in the USSR and its satellite partners encountered a dire reality, utter misery, and existential emptiness. To use a well-known image from Jesus’ parable that I used in another publication “the rags and dirt on the body of the prodigal son [is] a picture of post-Marxist Russia” (Drumi 2008:164). It is against this background that one needs to interpret the rapid growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the early post-Soviet years (see fig. 7).
What was the main reason for the rapid if not phenomenal church growth among Seventh-day Adventists in Russia in those days? By the 1980s, the growing inadequacy of the Russian version of the Marxist ideological paradigm became evident to the political elite led by then president Gorbachev of the Soviet Union. Many of the reforms that were initiated during the period of perestroika resulted eventually in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Not surprisingly, two surveys done in Russia in 1990 and 1991 demonstrate that the “rapid growth of religiosity and just as rapid ruin of mass atheism” went hand in hand in Russia (Furman 1992:7).

However, to say that religious faiths replaced atheism would be an exaggeration. The disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism did not lead the
masses to embrace an actual *practicing* of religion (Shterin 1998). It is also true that from around 1997, interest in a religious life began a steady decline. In the first half of the 1990s, the rate of church attendance across the Russian Federation was no more than 6-7 percent of those who claimed to be believers (Kaariainen and Furman 1997:36-38). The worldview of Russians did not suddenly become “religious,” “Christian” or “biblical.” Rather, it became more eclectic and controversial, allowing old atheistic clichés to coexist with the emerging new patterns of thought (38).

During that same period when the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was gradually filling an ideological niche, the conditions for non-Orthodox denominations to operate in Russia worsened. The Russian government reaction to the supposed threats from foreign sects and various isms led to the development of protectionist ideologies (Balmforth 2011). The dominant role of the ROC was legitimized when Russian president Boris Yeltsin in September 1997 signed legislation that recognized only the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism as “traditional religions” (System Garant 2013). Later amendments to that legislation introduced between 1997 and 2013 further narrowed opportunities for conventional methods of evangelism used by “non-traditional” religions, particularly Protestant ones. The amendments reflect a strong move by the government toward implementation of the “spiritual security” policy as an important subset of the national security concept of Russia (Elkner 2005).

Taking a closer look at figure 7 it appears that the excitement created through public evangelism—that the world is coming to its end—lasted probably only 10-11 years (from 1991-2003). The sudden increase in church growth slowed after reaching its peak in 2003, a downward trend that continues to this day. In the years that followed the collapse of the Soviet system, mass evangelistic campaigns had been initially well received and resulted in rapid church growth with most of that growth experienced in regional and district cities. By the end of 2003, the church membership in the Euro-Asia Division reached its highest point, increasing from 37,388 in 1990 to 144,760 (in the Russian Federation, from 8,666 to 45,000). In the late Soviet years, the majority of Soviet Adventists lived in the Ukraine and Moldova.

The tide started to turn in 2003 with a steady decrease in membership since that time. By the end of 2013, the membership of the ESD totaled 117,028. If compared with 2003, there was a drop of 27,732 or over 20 percent. Moreover, according to the ESD Secretary’s Statistical Report Analysis, from 1990 to 2011 the Adventist Church baptized 293,131 people (ESD SSRA 2013a:3). However, during that same period the Church also witnessed a great loss of members (as listed below).
Several things stand out as one looks at those numbers. First, the reasons for the large number of dropped/apostatized/missed members has not been analyzed in a comprehensive way. To the best of my knowledge, no in-depth study has been done in the ESD as to why so many people left the church between 1990 and 2011. The two international surveys among former and inactive church members conducted under the leadership of the General Conference Nurture and Retention Committee from 2011 through 2013 (Sahlin 2013; Kent 2013) did not shed any light on the specific situation in the Euro-Asia Division.

Nevertheless, two indicators from the survey conducted by Monty Sahlin might provide keys to better understanding the situation regarding dropouts in the Euro-Asia Division. First, he points out that 66 percent of those who left the Adventist Church were people from 18-29 years of age (37%) and 30-39 years of age (29%). Most of them were within the category of “youth.” Second, 83 percent of those who left the church had never attended an Adventist school (Sahlin 2013). It seems that there is some correlation between these two findings. It may well be that the greatest failure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Euro-Asia in the 1990s and early 2000s was a lack of appreciation of the importance and missional value of Adventist education as a long-term mission strategy. Hardly anybody in those days could foresee that the Russian government would change its attitude toward private (religious) schools (that is, kindergarten to 11th grade). Starting from September 2012 onward the government started to provide considerable financial support to private schools.

For example, during the 2013-2014 school year, the government subsidy of Zaoksky Christian School of the General Education (an Adventist school operated by Zaoksky Theological Seminary) amounted to 40 percent of the school operating budget (Bychkov 2014). Unfortunately, there are presently only two Adventist schools in the territory of the Russian Federation eligible to claim such benefits from the government—the one in Zaoksky and another in Tula. Had there been more schools established in the 1990s and early 2000s, and had there been a strategic focus on Ad-
ventist education for children rather than focusing only on new baptisms, today’s statistics would most likely be different.

Second, the number of those who died is close to 40,000, or an annual rate of about two percent of the total church membership. This means that the death rate within the Adventist Church has been twice as high as that of the general population in Russia (see fig. 3). In other words, this index indicates that the age of church members is older than that of society in general.

Third, there is a steady emigration of Adventists into other countries outside the Euro-Asia Division, mostly to North America and the European Union. From 1990 to 2011, 13,535 transferred their membership to other countries. The sad thing about this emigration is that among those who left the division were a number of key intellectuals and pastors. This “brain-drain” has hurt the church because it has not been able to regain the intellectual capital it used to have.

Because of the above factors, between the 2005 and 2010 General Conference sessions the church leadership in the ESD launched an all-ESD program of reclaiming church members. As part of its “Come Back Home” initiative the Church emphasized pastoral visitations and the establishment of friendly relationships. After the first stage was completed in 2013, the Church was able to reclaim 2,913 church members but unfortunately 16,569 members withdrew their membership (Euro-Asia Division 2013a:8-9, 13).

Two more things need to be pointed out in this context. As figure 7 shows, the turning point from good to poor church growth coincided with the decline of the youth population in Russia (fig. 5). Second, the beginning of the declining membership trend coincided with the downward enrollment trend at Zaoksky Adventist Seminary and Institute (fig. 8), an educational institution run by the Euro-Asia Division since 1988. As can be seen from figure 9, starting from the 2003/04 school year when the number of on-campus bachelor students in the Zaoksky Adventist Seminary and Institute was the highest—close to 300 students—from that point on there has been a clear downward trend. The negative trend has not been reversed in spite of unprecedented financial support provided to the institution by the Euro-Asia Division in the way of scholarships. Unlike the 1990s when there were large numbers of young people eager to get a Christian education and when many of them were short of money, today it is just the opposite. There is money available but a significant lack of young people willing to use it to take programs offered on the campus of Zaoksky.
One of the questions that needs to be asked is What went wrong? Did the church do anything wrong or what happened in society? To answer the above questions I would say that probably things have changed both within the Church and in society. As more Russians experienced exposure to material affluence and a lifestyle of a developed country, consumerism became the new ideology of Russia. As Golova points out, an entrenchment of consumerism through a system of control over consumerist behavior has led to an internalizing of “the values of the consumerist society and [the] creating [of] a new formation: an active and manageable consumer” (Golova 2011:91). As she concludes, the “inertia of our culture has been broken, and the Russian nation is now oriented to consumption” (102).

As Russia entered the orbit of capitalism and unrestricted wealth, it had two effects on the country’s population. Besides improving the economic conditions of the population, it caused people to idolize wealth. In light of Jesus’s remark that it is the pagans who fall prey to consumerism (Matt 6:31-33), the new lifestyle that Russians so quickly acquired was pagan and paganizing (Hirsch 2006:111). In Russia, the Orthodox version of the Christian faith has been gradually re-adopted by the state as a new ideology, thus filling the vacuum left after the disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism. This new ideology, however, has deviated from such key values and images of the gospel as the narrow gate and the difficult way (Matt 7:13, 14), the need to lay up treasure in heaven and not on earth (Matt 6:19, 20), taking up one’s cross and following Jesus (Matt 10:38), and not following Caesar.
How did these shifts affect the church? As one looks back at the developments of the 1990s and 2000s, one soon realizes that Russian Adventists were too slow to change and adapt to the fast changes that were taking place in the social, spiritual, and intellectual realms of Russian society. Nobody taught us that adaptation and reshaping was necessary because of the changing social and spiritual landscape. Too many thought that any change was compromise. Somehow, we came to believe that “the present truth” works automatically, simply because it is “the truth.” We underestimated how competitive the “spiritual market” would become in a matter of a few years and how fast people would gain self-respect and critical eyes as to what to believe, which church to attend, which books to read, etc.

In the days of mass evangelism when a certain euphoria was imported by foreign evangelists, we became “number-possessed” trying to achieve the highest numbers of baptisms in the shortest time possible. Sadly, the quality of those baptisms left much to be desired, and the social body of the Church could not and did not “digest” the numbers of newcomers properly. It may have well been that the strategy of “advancing the message” by producing new baptisms was implemented at the expense of growing churches that would be sound spiritually and healthy socially.

Perhaps, we as Russian Adventists relied too heavily on the quality of spiritual bread baked on other continents and did not dare to offer our own recipes to bake a bread with Russian flavors in it. The more society changed the more we were alienating ourselves from it, and the more foreign we became as a religious group of people in Russian society. By an extreme emphasis on the “immanent end of the world” at the expense of being sensitive to the social needs of the society (for instance, its deep need of morally sound and academically strong education for children) we became more “unique” but less understood by the surrounding culture.

The dominant theological reasoning of those days was keeping the truth rather than offering the truth. In other words, by keeping the truth we wanted new comers to reproduce what we did as we had kept the truth in our semi-underground Soviet existence. It is true that the keeping the truth paradigm worked perfectly well during the decades of persecutions and did help the church remain close to its message. The message did have a liberating power in the lives of the believers. Later, however when freedom of expression was restored, the concept of keeping the truth became an obstacle. As the new Russian society emerged around us, the members of the Church did not know how to become more sensitive to the surrounding culture, and thereby did not produce a more nuanced approach to mission in a rapidly changing society. In the hidden and sometimes open clashes between the old keeping the truth paradigm and the emergence
of the new reality, the Church made theological gains but lost missiologically. For example, at times the issue of right belief became more important than obeying the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” In other cases, the issue of having a strong administrative and financial structure was more important than following Jesus’ teaching about receiving sinners and helping them grow and become disciples. There was also the issue of maintaining the right interpretation of Daniel and Revelation to the point that it became more important than teaching about following the Sermon on the Mount in everyday life. As a result, probably the greatest missiological failure was that by trying to keep the truth Adventists gradually developed a self-protective, semi-closed mentality and thereby hindered the development of an externally focused mission.

Youth in the Adventist Church in the Russian Federation

There are four unions of the Seventh-day Church in the Russian Federation today: the West Russian Union Conference (WRUC), the East Russian Union Mission (ERUM), the Caucasus Union Mission (CaUM), and the Far Eastern Union of Churches Mission (FEUCM) (fig. 10). With insignificant exceptions, the territorial borders of the four unions follow the administrative borders of the Federal Districts (FD) of Russia. WRUC includes Central, North-Western, Privolzhskiy, and Ural FDs; CaUM includes the Southern FD; ERUM includes the Siberian FD; FEUCM includes the Far Eastern FD. If taken together, the four Russian unions comprise about half of the 117,028 church membership of the Euro-Asia Division.

Figure 10. Four Russia-based unions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Source: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research 2014.

https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol13/iss2/9
Due to the numerous territorial reorganizations that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s, the membership statistics in each of the four unions is somewhat fragmentary and available with varying degrees of precision. To track the yearly growth patterns for the same timespan as has been done for the Euro-Asia Division is beyond the scope of this paper. At this point, suffice it to say that church growth/decline in the four Russia-based unions reflects the dynamics seen in the Euro-Asia Division in general.

In the following section, I will first compare the number of young people living in the territories of the Federal Districts of the Russian Federation (coinciding with the corresponding unions) to the general population. Second, I will compare the number of baptized young people (16-30 years of age) in each of the unions to the total membership in those unions. Third, I will compare the proportion of young people in all four Russia-based unions to the proportion of young people in the Russian Federation. This will give a better understanding of the demographic conditions of the church as compared to the demographic conditions of society.

Two additional things need to be stated at the outset. First, the total membership in each of the unions does not coincide with the number of those who actually attend church on a given Sabbath, for attendance is lower than the membership. Take, for example, the WRUC as the largest (in terms of membership) among the four Russia-based unions. As of the fourth quarter of 2013, there were 29,361 church members. The number of those attending Sabbath School was 18,155 on the second Sabbath of the quarter and 18,661 on the seventh Sabbath of the quarter (WRUC, Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department Report 2014). That means that roughly one-third of the official members did not attend church at all.

Second, there is a small, and I believe, acceptable statistical error in the following calculation. Prior to 2011, not all statistical data regarding young people was properly collected in the unions and it is therefore unavailable for comparison. Therefore, the comparison I make will be between the numbers of young people in the country as of 2009 and the numbers of young people in the four Russia-based unions as of 2012.

**Youth in Russia vs. Youth in the Russian Adventist Church**

As of 2009, there were 33,009,000 young people aged 15-29 in Russia, which is 23.3% of the general population of the country (UNICEF 2010:9). The number of young people living in the four Federal Districts (FD) covered by the WRUC (including Volgograd and Astrakhan regions) was 23,703,000 or 23.4% of the population in those Federal Districts (UNICEF 2010:11, 12). As of 2012, the number of young people in the WRUC was 3,614 or 12% of the membership which stood at 30,011 (Euro Asia Division 2013b). This percent is 1.94 times less than the percent of young people in the population in the four Federal Districts.
In the same manner, if similar calculations are made for each Russian-based union in correlation to the population in their respective Federal District(s), it results in the following percentages of baptized young people compared to the number of young people living in the their respective territories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Territory</th>
<th>Adventist Church Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central, Northwestern, Privolzhskiy, and Ural Federal Districts</td>
<td>West Russian Union Conference (WRUC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.8% (1.9x less)</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Federal District</td>
<td>Caucasus Union Mission (CaUM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.0% (2.0x less)</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siberian Federal District</td>
<td>East Russian Union Mission (ERUM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.6% (2.8x less)</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far Eastern Federal District</td>
<td>Far Eastern Union Churches Mission (FEUCM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.1% (2.9x less)</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Russian Federation</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.6% (2.3x less)</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*with the exception of Volga and Astrakhan regions

If the data for all four Russia-based unions are summarized, the percentage of young people to the general membership in the four Russia-based Unions is less than half the percentage of young people to the general population of the Russian Federation.

This index should create deep concern among church leaders, pastors, and educators because it states that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Euro-Asia is graying much faster than the Russian population in general, a population already considered old (Jackson and Howe 2008:3). In Russia, the retirement age for males is 60 and for females is 55, and the number of people in this age category or older is 13 percent of the general population, that is, 6 percent above the mark of 7 percent accepted as borderline between young and aging population. That means that every 8th person in Russia is older than 65. Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia that percentage is even higher, meaning that the Church is an old and further aging social body within a rapidly aging Russian society.

The general statistics collected at the local church and reported to the higher church administrative levels are not separated by age and gender.
From our analysis above this would be of significance to show who is coming in or leaving the church. To the best of my knowledge, the age profile of the church has never been analyzed in-depth and discussed publicly during church business meetings that I have had a privilege to attend. But it appears that such membership accounting would be vital for the planning and establishing of programs, especially to attract young people.

**Socio-Theological Reflection**

According to Paul, the church is Christ’s body (1 Cor 12:27). Is this a theological statement only or can it be interpreted sociologically as well? In my opinion, the latter is just as acceptable as the former. All who saw Jesus when he walked on this earth remembered him being a thirty-year-old male (Luke 3:23). Those who watched him dying on the cross remembered him being a thirty-three-year-old man. Other ages of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke mention him as a one-day and eight-day-old baby (Luke 2:7, 21) and as a twelve-year-old boy (Luke 2:42). As Jesus was shaping the nucleus of his religious movement, he surrounded himself with men and women of his age or close to it. Perhaps it was because of the itinerant nature of his mission and the demanding lifestyle that went with it. Youth seemed to be at the forefront of the early church mission. A good example was “a young man named Paul” (Acts 7:58; italics added).

The Jewish religious establishment struggled to accept Jesus who boldly proposed a rejuvenation of the Jewish religion as well as liberation of people from spiritual decline. Religious leaders of that time criticized Jesus, saying, “You are not yet fifty years old” (John 8:47). Thus, they showed their inability to embrace new thinking and realign the spiritual and theological values of their own religion. The novelty of Jesus’ teaching and freedom of his behavior could not and did not fit the dead religious forms. Old wineskins could not contain new wine. This resulted in the death of the Messiah and the tragic historical divorce of Judaism and Christianity.

Although it is true that history repeats itself, it is equally true that it does not have to do so. As one looks beyond Paul’s metaphor and takes into consideration the demographic picture of Seventh-day Adventists in Russia, two questions come to mind. First, figuratively speaking, What happened to Jesus’ young body, that is the Church that claims to be that body? Second, What can be done to rejuvenate the Church’s youthful potential?

The demographics picture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia shows that there is a dangerous lack of “young” followers of Jesus in the many Adventist congregations and companies scattered throughout Russia. True, there is no way for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to stop
or reverse the “global graying” trend. Neither is it the Church’s mission. On the other hand, silently sitting by is not acceptable for a church eagerly seeking to bring the Good News of Jesus to every corner of the world.

As time goes by and if Jesus does not return soon, Adventism in Russia will find itself at a critical crossroad. The options Russian Adventism has can be reduced to either retract or to rethink itself. The first option will cause Adventism to be even less flexible toward local cultural contexts and more vulnerable in the face of current and looming challenges. If Adventism wants to survive and be relevant in Russia it will need to become more aware and flexible toward the local cultural environments and less monolithic and homogeneous. Neither option is an easy one.

The first option will further stagnate the movement that used to be vibrant and appealing to the public. A rigid church will lose touch with the radical changes that have occurred in society during the last two decades. Those events have changed how people think, feel, behave, communicate, socialize, and who they really are, culturally, socially, economically, politically, and existentially. I believe that a preoccupation with prophetic charts and schemes at the expense of ignoring the fast changing cultural and demographic landscapes in the Russian Federation has contributed to the shrinking of the Adventist Church in Euro-Asia.

Notice what young Russians (age 14-30) usually do in their leisure time:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leisure Activities of Young Russians (as of 2009)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. social gatherings, visiting with friends</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. watch TV, listening to radio</td>
<td>64.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. listening to music, reading books, watch videos</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. resting, relaxing</td>
<td>49.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. going to countryside, out-of-door activities</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. spending time with computer, Internet, computer games</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. housekeeping, time with children, working at dachas</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. reading newspapers, magazines, and journals</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. going to café, bars, restaurants</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. going to nightclubs, other entertainments</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. sport clubs, sport activities</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. professional growth training, self-education</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. hobbies (needlework, photography, modeling)</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. <strong>going to church and other religious meetings</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. going to museums, exhibitions</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. music/dancing clubs</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. participate in public non-commercial organizations, associations</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. participate in political organizations, meetings, mass-meetings/rallies</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11. Sample of leisure activities of young Russians. Source: Gorshkov and Shereghi 2010:196-197.
One of the implications of the above picture is that religion and church, if presented to young people in an abstract way (as a concept, theory, or ideology) will not be understood by most young people, and will be even less appreciated and acceptable. A far better focus of the church’s mission would be to help people encounter God rather than the distribution of knowledge about Him. There is no other option for the church but to follow Jesus in meeting people where they are mentally, socially, virtually, and even physically.

If Adventism in Russia fails to interact in creative ways with local cultural contexts and does not produce locally appreciated patterns and practices of spiritual life, its members will become poorer and poorer intellectually, spiritually, and socially. The present methods of Adventist mission in Russian will only continue to attract people of a certain mindset, mostly elderly and retirees, but will close the doors for many others. “Fitting” in this context, is not a matter of moral choice and morality as such but a mental worldview picture the church generates and offers to spiritually thirsty people. If Adventism resists rethinking itself and prefers to keep reproducing itself in the exact forms and meanings of a 19th century eschatological movement, the church will be diminished in its relevance and eventually in its existence.

The danger of having old missiological clichés in presenting a “young Jesus” are two mutually exclusive and incompatible things, and the sooner the church realizes that the better it will be in the long run. To some extent, the preaching of the “soon coming of Jesus” and the “three angels’ messages,” that is, a message about a new, otherworldly reality violently breaking into this world order may have also led to the decline of youth in the church. A message about heaven sounds appealing for people who have already lived their lives on earth and who do not expect much more in this life. The idea of the soon coming of the Kingdom of God was very attractive in Russia when people suffered and were persecuted, but that message has lost its appeal for those who have just begun to live and mature and who want to experience life in all its fullness. A message of heaven does not provide answers to the challenges of daily life. If the message continues to keep its focus on transcendent issues of highly speculative theology and fails to touch people where they are, the result will be no better than what the church is experiencing today.

The worldview paradigm of nineteenth-century Protestant America into which Adventism was born and shaped, and the highly different worldview that Russians have created today, is so different that it is time to rethink and reformulate the Adventist identity and message. If Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8), why not try to understand him and his gospel anew, in Russia through Russian eyes?
is vital to decode Adventism and let God’s Spirit produce locally understood and appreciated religious meanings. By avoiding open conversations and honest discussions in formulating such a relevant and culturally-accepted message may result in the church becoming an obstacle in God’s mission instead of being its agent.

A second option, in which Adventism rethinks itself, is by no means an easy task. There is no such thing as shapeless truth. Religious truth that remains in the forms and rituals (including verbal formulas and methods of theologizing) of a bygone era and people in their 70s has the potential to create conflict and misunderstanding between older and younger generations, between archaic and modern worldviews, between modern and post-modern, faith and knowledge, universal and local, Western and non-Western, and between propositional truths and truths hidden in narratives, etc.

Perhaps, it would be helpful, in the context of Russian Adventism facing a demographically tough future, to introduce a concept of “emerging Adventism” and let it coexist with the conventional “growing Adventism.” In my view, this change offers some hope that, if enough thinking, thoughtful discussion, theological research, and prayers are given to the issue, the church will be able to redefine itself and be better prepared for the next historic era that may last longer than we expect.

To achieve such a goal and re-define Adventism will require that there be among other things, (1) a common understanding of what has gone wrong, (2) a genuine desire for biblically acceptable change; (3) patience to listen to and accept others regardless of their different views; (4) honest conversation about what has become theological “sacred cows.” This will eventually lead to the reformattting of Adventism in a way that allows it be more locally sensitive and spiritually responsible for the name and message it bears.

If one dares to offer some suggestions as to what needs to be done to help Russian Adventism face its demographic challenges, several important steps should be taken.

First, we urgently need to have an open, honest, and frank discussion about the methods and approaches the church has used over the last two decades of religious freedom. The wider this discussion is, the more painful the process will be. Yet the church has neither the time nor the moral resources to allow anything less than that. It is time to listen to local pastors, elders, and church members and let them speak, as the Spirit would tell them to speak. This discussion, I believe, will lead to a careful analysis of what has gone wrong in the past and what might be a long-term strategy of finding a way out. It is naïve, however, if not arrogant, to expect the Spirit to answer questions that we already know the answers to.
Second, it is time to have a long-range family and child/youth policy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia for the next 20-30 years. Helping young Adventist parents, especially those who have many children, to rear them in a Christian way must be considered as the missionary work. This demands the heavy and systematic support by the church, including the use of tithe monies. From a priority, family and children/youth work must become the priority of the church’s mission. If youth is not the focus, in twenty years the results will be much worse than the picture we see today that is itself the result of twenty years of significant under-appreciating the importance of these areas.

Third, it is time to include in church statistical reports age and gender information of church members in the local church, mission/conference, union, and division. This is not something difficult to achieve, but statistically speaking, this will help present a much better understanding of the demographics of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia. Here is a sample of what can be done by the church in terms of getting more accurate information about itself:

![Figure 12. Age and sex structure of Russian population as of January 1, 2012 (males left side, females right side). Source: Federal State Statistic Service 2013.](image-url)
No doubt, if such a demographic distribution chart of the Russian Seventh-day Adventist Church were made today, it would provide an eye-opening bit of information for all levels of the church organization. Just numbering baptisms and charting that information has become misleading and does not show the real picture. The church should take much more seriously the aging population of its members. If accurate statistics were available the church could then compare the percentage in each age bracket with the life expectancy charts for the various regions of Russia.

There is another issue that should cause concern: Most of the money given to the church is provided by elderly people who strongly support the church structure, church projects, church institutions, and church workers. According to a survey conducted by the Ministerial Association of the ESD in the fall of 2011, almost 80% of the local churches have a membership where the number of female church members is 70% and higher (Euro-Asia Division 2012). The church organization and its workers need to realize that they are primarily supported by one of the most vulnerable and often least protected social groups in Russia, namely babushkas (old women).

Fourth, a one-size-fits-all approach to mission has completely exhausted its potential. The older a person becomes, the more receptive they are to an eschatological message. However, the younger a person is, the higher the importance attached to a message of hope for life here and now. An eschatological message helps older people face their future encounter with death without fear and panic; a message of hope for the present gives meaning and fulfillment to life here in this world. As mentioned above, much of the “revival in Russia” evangelism focused on eschatological hope at the expense of practical, Bible-based knowledge on how to live this life with meaning and purpose now.

Fifth, Russian Adventists should remember their history, particularly the fact that it was the graying minds that brought their country, the USSR, to disaster and caused its disappearance. Gerontocracy is just as dangerous as immaturity in leadership.

Finally, it is time to read anew Jesus’ parable regarding the old and new wineskins. Jesus said, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better’” (Luke 5:37-39 NKJ). If this parable was true regarding Judaism during Jesus’ days, why would it not apply also to 21st century Adventism in Russia? There is no shame in acknowledging the fact that in Adventism, there is both old and new wine, and, perhaps, there are both old and new wineskins. It is time to develop a locally meaningful Adventist “theology of change” that could help avert
the very possible grim future the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia will otherwise face.

There is a great need to look at Adventist theology and decide: What are the key essentials that make us Adventists? Are they all equally Bible-based? How detailed should they be spelled out? In my view, these essentials must transcend time, culture, and history. They should not be too numerous, too complex, too specific, or too abstract. Yet, they must be spiritually profound, practically applicable, well-articulated, and well understood in each given time and culture. A good example of this approach is Acts 15:28, 29 where it says, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us [church leaders], to lay upon you [‘the brethren who are of the Gentiles’] no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”

Just as the Adventist pioneers were able to extract key essentials from the Bible in the 19th century that shaped a new religious understanding, so too must the Church today be more proactive in the ongoing task of seeking God and his will in and for a given culture and context. The members at the grassroots level of the Church must have more freedom to articulate what they see in the Bible, how they understand it, and how they plan to follow its precepts. There should be more spontaneity in theologizing as well as in practicing what the Bible teaches. No doubt, the theological/doctrinal framework of the Church must be universally agreed upon. At the same time, within that framework there must be enough room for creative theological and missiological inputs from the local churches and their believers.

Presently, many church members feel alienated from much of what takes place in their church. There is a sense of alienation from the giving and use of tithes and offerings, from the process of developing and elaborating the church’s strategies and plans, from the process of appointing or moving local pastors, etc. These areas of alienation lead many church members to feel alienated from the church’s mission. Eventually, this leads to the costliest loss, the loss of ownership of mission, when people no longer think and feel that it is their mission and their responsibility to reach out and bring the gospel to all people. Without overcoming these and other areas of alienation, there appears little hope for significant progress of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia in the foreseeable future.
Conclusion

Being an international and highly diverse community of believers, the world-wide Seventh-day Adventists Church has always struggled with maintaining its identity in a fast-changing world. This is natural, and much credit is to be given to several generations of church leaders for success in this regard. Nevertheless, after the seeds of Adventism have been liberally sown all over the world and as the seeds have grown, it is time to let those plants share more responsibility for their own future. Paternalism and top-down strategizing is no longer adequate to facilitate the spiritual rejuvenation of local forms of Adventism.

To experience the refreshing power of the Spirit is clearly the work of God. It is time to ask him to give us courage to re-think our Adventist message and identity both universally and locally. Otherwise, as it has been demonstrated in this article, the Adventist Church will keep producing one-sided results that simply do not have a future. This is at least true for Russia. If an inspiring image of a “young Jesus” emerges in the heads and hearts of people who claim to believe in him and who want to follow him, most likely the result will be an emerging Adventism, renewed in the image and likeness of a “young Jesus.”

Works Cited


After receiving a PhD from Andrews University (2008) Yuri Drumi has been serving at Zaoksky University in Russia. As a missiologist he keeps working on building bridges through publications, lectures, sermons, and personal witnessing so that the gospel (evangel) of Jesus Christ can more easily be communicated with people in contemporary Russian culture.