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Reaching millennial generations

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EDUCATION NEWS

Reaching millennial generations

MINISTRY LEADERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD GATHER TO FOCUS ON MISSION TO YOUNGER GENERATIONS

BERRIEN SPRINGS, Mich.—On April 12–14, the Global Mission Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies (CSPS), in partnership with the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, hosted the Reaching Millennial Generations conference. More than 200 individuals from every division in the world church journeyed to Berrien Springs for the much-anticipated event.

“It’s time for us to talk about Millennials and the younger generations,” said

Kleber Gonçalves, CSPS director and Doctor of Ministry program director at the Seminary. “This is the future of our church, and there are so many opportunities in this new context that we live in. We need to start building bridges of communication with these generations.”

The conference featured James Emery White, author of *The Rise of the Nones and Meet Generation Z*. In addition, 20 plenary and breakout session presenters from around the world gathered to share their expertise, including church planters, a “digital missionary,” administrators, researchers and educators, many of whom are Millennials.

“The decision to bring younger practitioners was a major change from other conferences,” said Gonçalves. “These young people are making a difference in the world because they are passionate in what they do. People were able to see

that if we have passion in our hearts to reach these generations, God will open up opportunities.”

A. Allan Martin, teaching pastor of Younger Generation Church and lead research facilitator for the Adventist Millennial Study done by the Barna Group, delivered the first plenary presentation. He explained the sobering statistics of young adult disengagement with Adventism and why he was convicted to do research and equip churches to understand and reach young people.

“I wasn’t going to flip a coin to see whether or not my daughter would belong to the church I’ve given my life to,” he said.

At the end of his presentation, attendees partnered to pray by name for the young adults they each know who have left the church.

“Reaching these generations is a big challenge for all countries,” said Edilene Araújo, a youth and young adult worker who traveled from São Paulo, Brazil, to attend the conference. “We can’t just stop and watch the youth leaving the church. I’m returning to Brazil with new energy because of what I’ve learned and experienced here.”

Keynote speaker James Emery White presented, “The Rise of the Nones,” exploring the 25 percent of Americans and 50 percent of young adults who claim no religious affiliation.

“The vast majority of the ‘nones’ are happy without a religion,” said White. “One person said, ‘I’m not an atheist. I don’t even care anymore. I’m an apathy-ist.’”

In his second plenary presentation, White focused on Generation Z, those born between 1995–2012, who comprise the largest generation in modern U.S. history.

“Gen Z is the first in history to find whatever they need to know without the help of intermediaries,” he explained.



▲ At the Reaching Millennial Generations conference (left to right): Kleber D. Gonçalves, director, Doctor of Ministry program, Andrews University, and director, Global Mission Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies, Office of Adventist Mission—General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists; Andrea Luxton, president, Andrews University; Homer Trecartin, director, Global Mission Centers—Office of Adventist Mission, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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"They have instant access to any information but little access to wisdom."

White delineated the challenges of reaching Generation Z, the first "post-Christian" generation, which he calls a "lost generation."

"There is profound spiritual emptiness," he said. "But if we change where we need to change, there is hope for the church."

One area that White encouraged church leaders to master is social media.

"Gen Z are digital natives who can't remember a world without constant, immediate, convenient access to the web," White said. "If you are not putting the focus of your outreach efforts through social media, wake up!"

In his breakout session, Justin Khoe, creator of the YouTube channel "That Christian Vlogger" which has more than 50,000 mostly non-Adventist subscribers, echoed the importance of social media to reach next generations.

"Millennials spend an average of 18 hours behind a screen every day," Khoe said. "Digital is the most important mission field if you want to reach Millennials in the western world. Every single day thousands of people are questioning their core convictions, and they are looking for advice online. Where are you in that conversation? Where am I?"

In his final plenary presentation, "Rethinking Evangelism and Apologetics in Light of What We Know About Generation Z," White explained that evangelism techniques must develop and change in response to the decreasing biblical literacy of younger generations.

"People need you to very quickly move to the 'so what?' of Bible teaching," he said. "They have seen so few, if any, lives that have had their deepest needs met by Christ. They need to get a whiff of another world."

Gonçalves delivered the final presentation for the conference: "Sharing Our Faith with Millennial Generations: The



▲ James Emery White, author and pastor of the Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, N.C., was the keynote speaker for the Reaching Millennial Generations conference.

Power of Storytelling." A Stanford study revealed that stories are remembered 22 times more than facts alone.

"Stories are so powerful because they connect us to our humanity by linking our lives to the past and giving us glimpses of the future," he said. "They create empathy with other people, which affords tremendous opportunities for reaching Millennial generations."

For Gonçalves, who has invested nearly two years in organizing the conference, there is one takeaway point he hopes all conference attendees have grasped. "It's possible to reach these generations," he said. "There are so many opportunities if we have the passion and the vision from God. So, I hope they think to themselves, 'I can do this. It's possible. I can connect with them.'"

The conference was recorded by the Adventist Learning Community and videos will be posted on the CSPS website, csp.globalmissioncenters.org, when they are available. For more information, visit millennialglobalmission.org and follow @theCSPS on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. ■

Samantha Angeles, Seminary student writer

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