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## Churches of Refuge

BY RON WHITEHEAD

**D**o you want to belong to a church where no one talks to you, a church where no one remembers your name, a church that doesn't care if you're not there on Sabbath morning, that doesn't notice if you stop coming altogether? Do you want to attend a church that has no impact on the community and is known for being exclusive and does not include young people? Do you want to attend a church that talks about love, but never shows it? A church where visitors are ignored? Do you want to attend a church where your personal struggles and spiritual questions are the subject of chatter? Well, neither do our emerging adults.

Significant numbers of young people leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church every year for a variety of reasons. Roger Dudley, who has researched the church-going habits of Seventh-day Adventist young people and young adults for more than 30 years, reports that 40–50 percent of those who are baptized members in their mid-teens will drop out of the church by the time they are halfway through their 20s.<sup>1</sup>

This is not a problem just within our denomination. A recent study found that more than two-thirds of young church-going adults in America drop out of church between the ages of 18 and 22.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, this national trend cannot be ignored.

Do you know someone who has left the church? Latoya Wolfe's experience highlights a great need.

"I grew up in a family that went to church one Sabbath, and then another Sabbath we wouldn't go; but somehow, I still decided to give my life to Christ at the age of 11.



Things began to fade when I started to live a more secular life. In my 20s, I just started doing a lot of things that I thought were more fun. Though I had this really great job and I had friends, I still felt that something was missing and I was really depressed. One day, I found myself on the kitchen floor in a fetal position, and I couldn't stop crying. I thought about some of the things that my grandmother had repeated again and again [when I was] growing up. I remembered this Bible verse: 'I am the way and the truth and the life'

(John 14:6 NIV).

"I knew that [because of] the lifestyle I was living, I was heading toward death as opposed to life. And so, I decided to go back to church — just because I had no other options. I knew what the world was offering, so I thought I would try church again.

"When I went back, there was such community there. People were accepting of me and just really understanding



that I needed support and some answers. It became a place where I began to find some of those answers I was looking for in the world. I live a very peaceful life now.”

Latoya’s story has a happy ending, but it breaks my heart how many young people are leaving our local churches; and, in their searching, are unable to find a place of refuge as Latoya did. But there’s good news! In order to reverse this trend and make the local church an essential aspect of senior youth’s and young adults’ lives, I’m happy to tell you that the Center for Youth Evangelism, located on the campus of Andrews University, within the Seminary, has launched a new ministry called “Church of Refuge” or COR. In ancient Israel, cities of refuge were secure, conveniently located, inclusive, spiritual communities for individuals seeking a safe haven. Similarly, churches of refuge are safe, friendly, accepting faith communities that welcome young people. We support local churches in providing meaningful, Christ-centered ministry that attracts and retains young adults — and older ones, too!

We have two primary goals: 1) to provide support for your local congregation that will attract and retain senior youth and young adults; 2) to market and highlight your congregation to young people all around the world through the Internet and in print material.

The nine COR values that form the foundation of Church of Refuge can be grouped into four broad areas:

**Spiritual Growth** — that includes a meaningful Sabbath experience and discipleship through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Worship of our Creator must be in spirit and in truth. Discipleship is a personal, collective endeavor occurring in the prayer closet, home groups, the worship service and in all areas of life.

**Social Connections** — that are based on accepting people as Jesus did, build a sense of community and provide support for young adults in their life challenges. We were created to share life. Everyone needs a community where

it is safe to laugh, pray, share, cry, ask questions and grow.

**Community Impact** — by demonstrating God’s love through acts of service. As Christ’s hands and feet, we are all called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned and sick, care for the orphaned and defend the rights of the powerless.

**Support Factors** — that enable empowerment by valuing young adult leadership, investing money in young adult ministry, and committing to change that leads to improved young adult ministry. Meeting spiritual, social and service needs requires leadership, innovation, and an investment of time and money.

The Center for Youth Evangelism provides support and resources for living the nine COR values through on-site and telephone ministry consultation. Each year we host a training summit at Andrews University in conjunction with 180° Symposium (see [www.adventistyouth.org/180](http://www.adventistyouth.org/180)). The Center for Youth Evangelism provides a forum and resources on its website, and tools to help guide the congregation through a process of strategically evaluating every aspect of its ministry in light of the needs and characteristics of young people in a local area.

There are several COR congregations active in the Lake Union and yours can be one of them. The first step is to become a member and begin the certification process that will prepare your church to receive young people from all around the world.

For more information, visit [www.churchofrefuge.org](http://www.churchofrefuge.org) or call 1-800-Youth2U.

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Ron Whitehead is executive director of the Center for Youth Evangelism.

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1. Dudley, Roger, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories from a 10-year Study*, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Md. (2000).

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2. T. Rainer and S. Rainer III, *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts*, B & H, Nashville, Tenn. (2008).