



SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH



ADVENTIST YOUTH MINISTRY

SYL  
SEMINAR 3

CURRENT ISSUES

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ADVENTIST YOUTH MINISTRY

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## CURRENT ISSUES

### *The Need for Specialized Youth Ministry*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

##### BIBLICAL BASIS FOR SPECIALIZED YOUTH MINISTRY

During our research for a biblical basis for youth ministry, our attention was drawn to two elements that could be considered as biblical anchors for youth ministry.

a. The first one is to “Love the Lord Your God...” (Deuteronomy 6:5) as a foundational element of personal spiritual growth. It was to be taught in Israel by parents to their children from birth until adulthood. It is considered in the New Testament as the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37, 38) with “love your neighbor” as second to it. The outcome should then be a good connection with the Creator and respect for other human beings. It is important to grasp that youth ministry starts with the home in partnership with parents and is extended to the church family with other leaders.

b. The second element is found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 where the Apostle Paul highlights the importance and value of every part of the human body, describing the church as the body of Christ. Paul uses this metaphor to indicate that there is a need for diversity in the body which is the community of believers. He goes on to say that there is also a need for interdependence among the members and that all members are important to the proper function of the body.

Everyone is needed and has something important to share. We should be comfortable advocating specialized youth ministry because Paul’s metaphor of “human body” gives us room to value and integrate all parts of the body irrespective of age, income, social status, family structure, gender, and physical characteristics. This is a challenge for the church as a community and for the leaders, but isn’t this exactly what the church is all about, the body of Christ?

#### 2. SEMINAR OBJECTIVES

This module of study will seek to gain a basic understanding of why we need specialized youth ministries and how they have functioned up to now. We will seek ways to further develop our youth ministries today with models based on growing awareness of the developmental needs of youth, intergenerational dynamics, and an understanding of cultural and societal trends that are impacting youth.

#### 3. PRINCIPLES OF SPECIALIZED YOUTH MINISTRY

Over the years, the leadership of the church has sought to accommodate the youth and establish new structures and protocols to answer to the need wherever it was possible. But it did not manage to slow the lack of interest of young people in church life. This recurrent situation that is affecting youth ministry all over has caused some youth professionals to engage in serious analysis to understand the reasons our youth are drifting away. In the process, the leadership of the Adventist church in North America has come up with a study that was conducted by the BARNA GROUP and that we must take seriously into consideration.

They estimated that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be “disengaged” by the time they are 29. Barna Group president David Kinnaman describes the reality in stark terms: “Imagine a group photo of all the students who come to your church in a typical year.



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Take a big fat marker and cross out three out of every four faces. That's the probable toll of spiritual disengagement as students navigate the next two decades." We must be alarmed by such a result and adopt a course of action to try to reduce or reverse the trend and create a safe environment where our youth can grow and learn to develop a close relationship with Christ.

### How CAN WE MAKE THE YOUTH MINISTRY MORE RELEVANT TO OUR YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY?

We agree that the main goal of youth ministry should be exactly what it is for the adult in the community. Therefore, Adventist Youth Ministry which is a specialized ministry of the church should (1) seek to address expressed needs of young people in their own environment and respond to them as they are, and (2) incorporate them into the fellowship of the church as a caring Christian community. But when we do a reality check we are faced with some troubling facts among our youth community. It is very important to undertake diligently a course of action to alert the leaders worldwide to make youth ministry a priority on their strategic planning. Let us take time to read an excerpt of what Ministry Magazine (an international journal for pastors) reported about the survey of Adventist millennials done by the BARNAB GROUP in 2014.

"In his book "You Lost Me," Barna Group's president, David Kinnaman, details six perceptual grievances that millennials in general tend to harbor against "the church" (meaning any church of any denomination) as a cultural institution. These grievances hold that the church is intolerant of doubt, elitist in its relationships, anti-science in its beliefs, overprotective of its members, shallow in its teachings, and repressive of differences.

In surveying of Adventist millennials in particular, these grievances hold true to an even greater extent when it comes to the Adventist young adult perceptions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

**Doubtless** U.S. 10% Adventist 28%

**Exclusive** U.S. 22% Adventist 34%

**Anti-science** U.S. 25% Adventist 47%

**Overprotective** U.S. 23% Adventist 36%

**Shallow** U.S. 24% Adventist 29%

**Repressive** U.S. 25% Adventist 37%

The percentages of respondents who say their experiences fit these descriptions are higher than the national norms—for all six perceptions. For example, while one in four of United States (U.S.) millennials with a Christian background say that Christianity in America is repressive of differences, almost four in ten of Adventist millennials say this is true of Adventist churches.

Data: Comparing U.S. millennials with a Christian background to Adventist millennials, percentages of respondents who "agree strongly" that each descriptor describes their church experience.

Reason #1 Churches seem overprotective.

Reason#2 Teens' and twenty-somethings' experience of Christianity is shallow.

Reason #3 Churches come across as antagonistic to science.



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Reason #4 Young Christians' church experiences related to sexuality are often simplistic, judgmental.

Reason #5 They wrestle with the exclusive nature of Christianity.

Reason #6 The church feels unfriendly to those who doubt.

#### 4. WAYS TO CHANGE THE STATUS QUO

Henceforth, Youth Ministry should be a place of choice to engage the youth in conversation, debate and open study, to tackle those issues and help them see how they can connect their faith in Christ to the reality they live daily. Our youth need a safe haven where they can voice their concerns and challenges and express their doubts and questionings without the fear of being judged or rejected.

In the book *Education*, page 17, Ellen White says: "Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. The men in whom this power is developed are the men who bear responsibilities, who are leaders in enterprise, and who influence character. It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought" (emphasis added). This can occur only when youth leaders are intentional about creating that safe zone where the youth can be challenged in their thinking and exposed to a sound biblical worldview in a positive, open, and welcoming way.

It is important that youth leaders do not limit themselves to a unique way of doing ministry but explore different avenues and approaches more adapted to the millennials.

Dr. Tim Elmore in his book *iY Generation* identifies today's youth as an "over-connected, overprotected and overserved generation" and gives some practical solutions to their greatest challenges. Based on his experience leading millennials, he has created an acronym that summarizes and identifies what makes this generation so unique. He calls them EPIC generation. These are four characteristics that any youth leader should be familiar with if they want fully and effectively lead the millennial workforce of the future at all levels. EPIC generation stands for:

##### E---EXPERIENTIAL

Millennials are experiential in their learning. They aren't looking for a polished and professional speaker with an impressive PowerPoint in a classroom to learn from. They want to learn from someone walking alongside them who has experience in what they are doing.

##### P---PARTICIPATORY

Dr. Elmore brings up a good point with this characteristic. He reminds us that this generation has grown up in an age of entertainment and technology that is interwoven together. When a millennial can see how their action affects an outcome, they get fired up and motivated to make the outcome even better.

##### I---IMAGE RICH

Between Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, millennials have images every time they look at their phone. They have also grown up with music videos, websites, digital cameras, and cell phones. Special attention should be placed on that specific trend that has become a vital part of millennials' lifestyle. As leaders, if we are not on social media or not able to communicate with simple "smiley face



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icons”, better known as emojis, we are missing out on a connection with the largest generation in communities today.

## C---CONNECTED

More than any other generation in the past, millennials are connected. They are connected socially and technologically. With their cell phones, they have a constant connection with the world around us and their circle of friends. These generations understand the immense power of connection. They know that with one tweet or one snapchat they could go viral. Anything they say or do could be viewed by millions upon millions of people across the globe. The question that comes to our mind should be, how can we work efficiently with this EPIC generation in our churches, in our local youth ministries?

Primarily, we need to recognize that while this social media is an awesome technology at the core of our youth culture today, there is a great responsibility that is attached to it and which must be emphasized in our activities. Secondly, as youth leaders, we can use this age of connection to bring about a movement of Christ’s disciples and fellowship across the globe in which youth reach out to other youth in any part of the world, where they are facing challenges of all kinds. “God wants the youth to become men [and women] of earnest mind, to be prepared for action in His noble work and fitted to bear responsibilities” (Messages to Young People, p. 21).

## 5. INTEGRATED OR SEGREGATED YOUTH MINISTRY?

Finally, let us remember that the church is the body of Christ and that each part plays a vital and unique role in its functioning. That takes us to the idea that as a church we should be intentional in integrating every specific group within our church family. The word family is pivotal in our understanding of Christian faith.

As a family, the focus should be on developing healthful relationships amongst the different generations that are intermingled in the composition of our community. We should make it a priority to pay attention to our youth and put our emphasis on their spiritual development and their integration in the community.

It is urgent for our leaders to pray and seek God’s guidance in creating bridges between the youth and the adults that will help pass on experience, knowledge, and expertise. At the same time, we must initiate an authentic intergenerational dialogue, give them room to express creativity, and facilitate access to leadership positions within our communities in a meaningful way. The outcome for our youth would be a greater sense of belonging and ownership of their community and an active part in the great commission.

“In order that the work may go forward in all its branches, God calls for youthful vigor, zeal, and courage. He has chosen the youth to aid in the advancement of His cause. To plan with clear mind and execute with courageous hands demands fresh, uncrippled energies. Young men and women are invited to give God the strength of their youth, that through the exercise of their powers, through keen thought and vigorous action, they may bring glory to Him and salvation to their fellow-men” (Gospel Workers, p. 67).

## How?

David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, in his study of millennials has identified the following five areas as key elements that contribute in helping young adult stay connected to their communities.



1. Make room for meaningful relationships: Those who stayed were twice as likely to have a close personal friendship with an adult inside the church (59% of those who stayed report such a friendship versus 31% among those who are no longer active)

2. Teach cultural discernment: A second important ministry outcome for today's millennials is helping them develop discernment skills—especially in understanding and interpreting today's culture...

3. Make reverse mentoring a priority: Young people want to be taken seriously today—not for some distant future leadership position. In their eyes, institutional church life is too hierarchical. And they're not interested in earning their way to the top so much as they're wanting to put their gifts and skills to work for the local church in the present—not future—tense. Mrs. White addresses this, too: "The youth must be impressed with the idea that they are trusted. They have a sense of honor, and they want to be respected, and it is their right" (Fundamentals of Christian Education, p. 114).

4. Embrace the potency of vocational discipleship: Teach them a more potent theology of vocation or calling. Millennials who have remained active are three times more likely than dropouts to say they learned to view their gifts and passions as part of God's calling (45% versus 17%).

5. Facilitate connection with Jesus: Church communities can help millennials generate a lasting faith by facilitating a deeper sense of intimacy with God. The version of "Jesus in a vacuum" that is often packaged for young people doesn't last long compared to faith in Christ that is not compartmentalized but wholly integrated into all areas of life."

"Millennials need the help of faithful believers from older generations if they are to make sense of it all and move meaningfully forward in their life and faith." These new elements in addition to previous curriculum in youth ministry could equip leaders with more tools and reflection tracks to minister to the needs of our youth across the globe. The youth leaders should see that:

- Young people should be involved more often in intergenerational activities that are intentionally inclusive and participative
- Always keep in mind the essential needs of youth in your strategic planning
- Empower them and meet them where they are in terms of their personal issues and spiritual growth
- Create opportunities to mobilize their skills in useful projects for their local communities as well as abroad.
- Encourage interaction between generations; it will help create synergy, mutual enrichment, and spiritual fellowship. "Young men should have broad ideas, wise plans, that they may make the most of their opportunities, catch the inspiration and courage that animated the apostles" (Messages to Young People, p. 24).

## 6. ANOTHER STUDY AND ITS INSIGHTS

During another study conducted with a sample of young adults, three positive fields were identified and should be considered as relevant to improve the development of relations and help the youth better connect with the rest of the community.

1. Intergenerational relationships. The first key is intergenerational relationships. For so many of our respondents, their relationship with the church was determined by their relationship with older members. It was noted that most local churches do not need to figure out how to make intergenerational relationships happen; they are already happening. However, it is important to note that these intergenerational

relationships can work both ways—both negatively and positively. The goal for local leadership can be to create a church culture that reinforces the positive interactions and reduces the negative interactions.

2. Forgiveness and acceptance. Nothing drives teenagers and young adults from the church faster than being rejected, and nothing draws them in faster than being accepted. Both are currently happening in spades in Adventist churches around North America. Unfortunately, this issue is not exclusive to the USA. It is present in various continents and regions of the world including developing countries. Luke 6:36 defines Matthew 5:48's admonition to be "perfect as God is perfect" as "be merciful as your Father is merciful."

3. Platforms for sharing. There is a power in experiencing God's love and strength. There is a power in sharing that experience with others. And there is a power in hearing the story of another person's encounter with God. We need to remember as well that developing connections with a younger generation can help older adults feel a greater sense of fulfillment. In fact, linking older adults with youth can provide advantages for both groups.

## 7. CONCLUSION

We live in a society in crisis; our youth are facing great challenges and a significant number of them are leaving the church. Nevertheless, youth ministry is still relevant today and can play a decisive role in their spiritual growth. Leaders should be open to address the issues and the needs of the youth from an intentional, inclusive, intergenerational perspective. This generation needs to be embraced through authentic relationships, generous mentoring, and a strong connection with Jesus. The various studies mentioned in this presentation, and the issues raised, may not fully correspond to the experience of all communities throughout the world church. However, it is interesting to take note of it and to continue the reflection according to the cultural specificities and challenges of your own region.

The influence of social media is gaining ground more and more and providing access to countries that are difficult for the gospel to enter. I humbly invite all youth leaders to initiate diligently a conversation with the leadership of their local churches to create an awareness that is paramount to the development of our youth ministry. Youth leaders should also engage young people in open discussion to encourage them to put God first in their lives and become active witnesses of Christ in everything they do.

## 8. ACTIVITIES

### INDIVIDUAL:

A. What are the Six reasons identified in the survey about the millennials launched by the BARNA GROUP.

B. Name and explain the acronym used to define this Generation.

### GROUP:

C. Discuss how youth ministry leaders can engage their youth in networking with other youth across the globe using social media to impact the world with the Gospel.