

CLINT JENKIN AND A. ALLAN MARTIN

ENGAGING ADVENTIST MILLENNIALS: A CHURCH EMBRACING RELATIONSHIPS*

“What does it take to engage with the Millennial generation?” Fortune 500 companies, media firms, major faith communities, and many more are asking this question with piqued interest. The North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church¹ recently commissioned a study by The Barna Group to investigate how its congregations can more effectively maintain engagement with this age group (defined as those born between 1980 and 2000).

The Barna Group, a Christian research firm, is the world leader in understanding Christians, attitudes toward Christianity and Christian organizations, and spiritual perspectives in general. They surveyed Millennials who were (or had been) part of an Adventist congregation in order to understand their common experiences and attitudes. The survey was followed by multiple moderated online discussions with Adventists and former Adventist young adults.

Negative Perceptions

In his book *You Lost Me*, The Barna Group’s president and owner, David Kinnaman, details six perceptual grievances that Millennials tend to harbor against “the church” as a cultural institution. These grievances hold that the church is (1) intolerant of doubt, (2) elitist in its relationships, (3) anti-science in its beliefs, (4) overprotective of its members, (5) shallow in its teachings, and (6) repressive of differences.

Based on this survey of Adventist Millennials, these grievances hold

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true to an even greater extent when it comes to the Adventist young adult perceptions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The percentages of respondents who say their experiences fit these descriptions are higher than the national norms—for all six perceptions (see Figure 1). For example, while one in four (25%) U.S. Millennials with a Christian background say that Christianity in America is repressive of differences, almost four in ten (37%) Adventist Millennials say this is true of Adventist churches. And while just over one in five (22%) U.S. Millennials with a Christian background say that Christianity in America is like an exclusive club, more than one in three (34%) Adventist Millennials say that Adventist churches are exclusive. Almost twice as many Adventist Millennials say that Adventist churches are anti-science (47%) compared to U.S. Millennials with a Christian background (25%). Adventists also score much higher among Millennials when it comes to being overprotective (36% vs. 23%) or intolerant of doubt (28% vs. 10%).

Keep in mind, these respondents were recruited from young adults who still have some connection to the Adventist church; indeed, some are still very active in their local congregations.

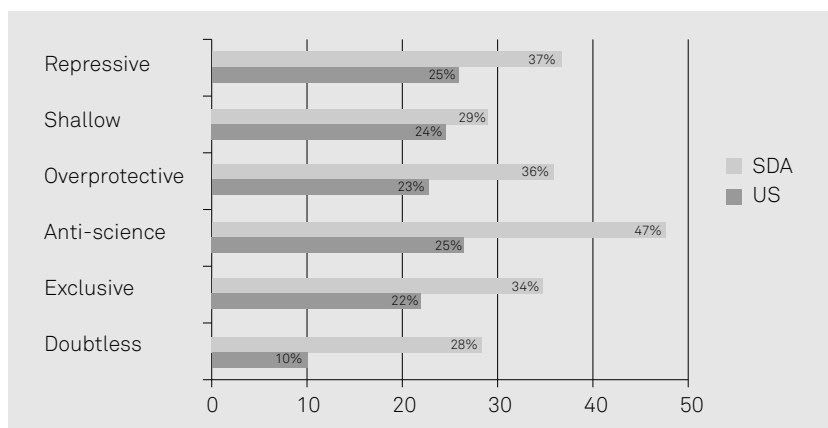


Figure 1. Comparing Adventist Millennials to U.S. Millennials with a Christian background. Percent who “agree strongly” that each descriptor describes their church experience.

Attitudes and Behaviors

Based on their responses to various questions in the survey, respondents were categorized as either “engaged” or “unengaged” from their local congregations. Engaged respondents were those who attend services at least monthly *and* indicated that church is relevant for them. Unengaged did not meet one or both of those criteria. Key differences between these two groups then were extracted from the data (see Figure 2).

Compared to the engaged young adults within the Adventist church, those who are unengaged have much weaker *positive* experiences—particularly when it comes to the church they attended as a child. The biggest differences were in the areas of feeling like “I can be myself” (72% of engaged agree strongly, but only 46% of unengaged do), and feeling like “doubts are tolerated” (58% of engaged, but only 35% of unengaged). Engaged Millennials were also much more likely to strongly agree with descriptive statements of church such as “compassion for the less fortunate,” “teaching is relevant,” “helped me understand my faith,” and “people are authentic.”

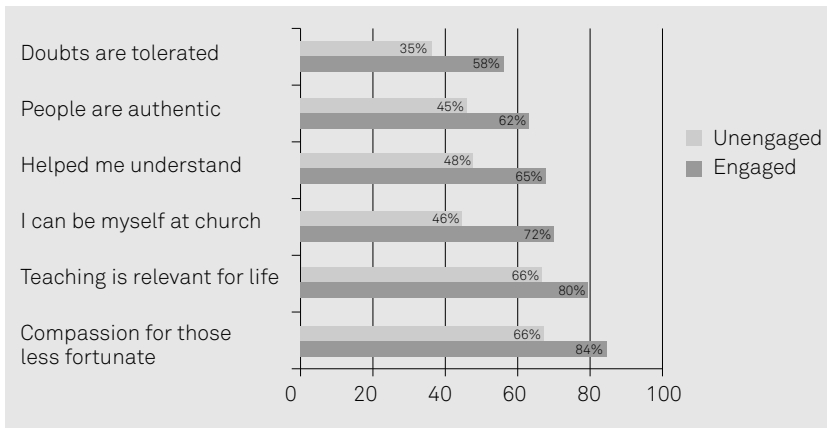


Figure 2. Percent who “agree strongly” that each statement describes their childhood church.

Conversely, unengaged young adults have much stronger negative experiences with their childhood church (see Figure 3). The largest differences were for the statements “leaders are repressive of ideas” (45% of engaged strongly agreed, while 68% of unengaged did so), and the church is “overprotective of its young people” (44% compared to 68%). Unengaged respondents were also much more likely to agree with the ideas that their childhood church “seemed like an exclusive club” and “the teachings seem shallow.”

Both groups were later asked about similar experiences with their current church; if anything, the differences observed here became even more pronounced as they answered questions about their current church.

However, there were no significant differences between the *behaviors* of the engaged and unengaged young adults when they were children and teenagers. In other words, we cannot look at the level of activity among the children and teens and then predict which ones will disen-

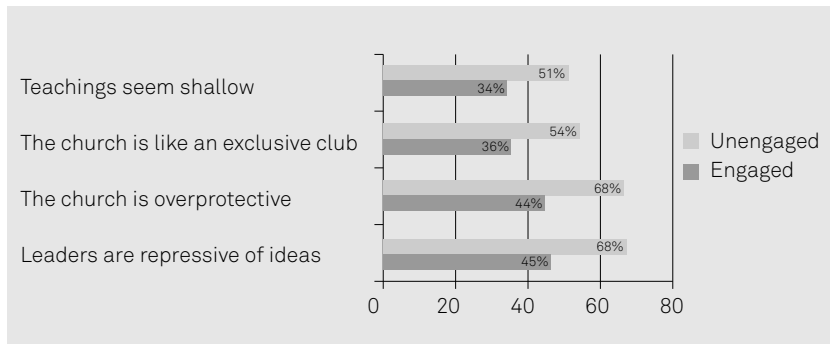


Figure 3. Percent who “agree strongly” that each statement describes their childhood church.

gage from the church as young adults. But negative experiences with their childhood church (specifically with the leadership and adult members) are strong predictors of such disengagement.

What’s Next?

If a key factor in maintaining engagement among young adults is positive experiences and relationships with older Adventist members and church leadership, the next question is, “What does that look like?” To find out, we conducted two discussion groups via an online platform.

Each young adult discussion group lasted for three days. One group focused on college-aged Adventist Millennials, and the other focused on post-college Adventist Millennials. All the young adults in the groups were still connected in some way to the Adventist church, but some had cut ties with their local congregation to one degree or another.

The groups were amazingly insightful. As we listened to the stories of these young adults—hearing about the good and the bad in their upbringing and current situation—we were alternately excited and dismayed. The excitement was from hearing so many stories of transformation and spiritual vibrancy, and how these experiences happened in a social context of love and acceptance. The dismay was from hearing so many stories of personal rejection and angst. Over the course of the discussions, several themes emerged that point the way for local congregations to create a positive environment for their youth and young adults.

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. These were even more important than peer relationships in many cases (especially as members transition from teenagers to young adults).

The experience of Carla², one of the members of our college-age discussion group, exemplifies this: “When I was younger and we started putting on Christmas plays, there [was] a group of elderly women who would travel to Florida every year for winter, and they would stay . . . long enough to see the play.”

Story after story would affirm the poignancy of relationships between the generations and the impression it made on Adventist Millennials. Notably, local churches don’t 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. Many of the other observations and ideas that follow are based on a foundation of positive intergenerational relationships.

Jasmine recounts a conversation she overheard that reinforces the power of this type of supportive culture:

Recently, I overheard someone talking about a young man who was coming to the church and was trying to get a career as a bartender. I really admired the way she spoke very neutrally with him, despite thinking that he should not become a bartender. She didn’t even let on that she thought it was wrong. She just welcomed him to come closer to Jesus. *She knew that Jesus could do so much better of a job leading the young man on the path his life needed to take than she did* (emphasis added).

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.

Jessica’s experience captures both extremes—and in the same Sabbath!

I once visited to a church near my home church which has a reputation for being really liberal. Everyone was so welcoming and casual (everyone was wearing jeans) and I felt so free from peer pressure. They sang a song that said “There is freedom in the house of the Lord” and I just started crying. That afternoon I went back to my home church and one of my dad’s friends came up to me and asked me why I was wearing jeans and why I didn’t go to church.

In one discussion group we noticed that the same people were sharing both types of stories—how they felt accepted at first and rejected

later. When we probed on what caused the transition, they told us, in paraphrase, “the more they knew about me the more I felt rejected.”

It seems that older adults tend to look at specific struggles and assign a judgment of the young person’s heart or intentions. But the young people often told us that God was using these struggles to draw them closer to Him. This is a process the older adults couldn’t see.

Tracy shared her story of how a poor decision she had made left her feeling judged by the church as opposed to feeling comforted. Unfortunately, she then felt defined by a single instance of sin:

In one of my past relationships I let my boyfriend take me too far . . . and I really can’t forgive myself. I am praying God helps me forgive myself. It is tough to overcome something that has gone against your beliefs and I was stupid enough to let it happen. Each day I pray I can overcome this.

The stories and the surveys suggest that what is needed is the patience to form solid relationships which exude forgiveness and acceptance—trusting God to make the necessary changes and recognizing that change also needs time. We should never discard someone in the midst of a personal struggle, for it may be just what God is using to make them into who He needs in the church.

Platforms for Sharing

In addition to the relationships, many of our most engaged respondents pointed to crises—in their own lives or the lives of loved ones—as turning points in their spiritual walk. There is a power in experiencing God’s love and strength. There is power in sharing that experience with others. And there is a power in hearing the story of another person’s encounter with God.

Callie’s story is both an encouragement to her and a testimony to others:

I almost died when I was young due to an infection. I remember waking up in the middle of the night and hearing my dad cry as he whispered prayers into my ear. . . . I also remember the doctors telling my parents that they didn’t understand what happened, but that I was healed.

Thomas’s story is less sensational, but no less personally powerful:

God spoke to me in such an amazing way that night. I was standing in the sand, out of reach of the encroaching water, looking up at the stars and talking with God. I asked Him a question, and hoped that if His answer was “yes,” that I would know without a doubt. As soon as I said that, the water touched and went past my feet. That was a big moment in my life.

Some of our respondents shared stories of healing, and others shared stories of struggle. Both types of stories were extremely encouraging to the other young adults in the discussion group. Their shared testimony could be what keeps young people engaged with the Adventist church, enriched by the relationships that sharing stories affords. In light of this, how can a church make it acceptable for members to share not only their victories but also their struggles? How can Adventist faith communities make sure that its members have platforms to share with others how God has worked in their lives?

Sharing Stories, Experiencing Grace, Intertwining Lives

The findings of the research may not seem profound or extraordinary, yet this does not take away from their powerful relevance as the Seventh-day Adventist Church takes an honest look at engaging next generations. As Adventist faith communities, church leaders, and adult members seek ways to keep young adults active and vibrantly involved with their church, they would do well to consider that the key might be found in intertwining lives together. Fostering supportive intergenerational relationships, expressing forgiveness and acceptance, sharing experiences—might this be a viable alternative to the departure so many young adults are taking from church? For the Millennials surveyed, the answer appears to be an adamant and heartfelt “Yes!”

May generations of Adventist believers weave their stories together, and find that sharing the grace-filled embrace of authentic relationships³ changes the lives of Millennials and older members alike.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some things that are “standard church procedure” that facilitate healthy relationships?
2. What are some things that are “standard church procedure” that stymie healthy relationships?
3. Why do you think intergenerational relationships are so important?
4. How can a church maintain standards without being judgmental?
5. What is the best medium (sermons, cell groups, etc.) to make a positive relational impact?
6. What are some opportunities churches could give their members that would allow them to share how God has worked in their lives?

About the Research

The research cited in this article originated through a study conducted by The Barna Group of Ventura, California. The study was commissioned by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists (NAD). A total of 488 online interviews were conducted among the population of young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who currently attend the Seventh-day Adventist church or who attended as a child. The survey was conducted between September 16 and September 24, 2013. The sampling error for 488 interviews is +4.3 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level.

E-mails inviting participation in the study were sent to a list provided by NAD; a hyperlink to the survey website was embedded in each email. Additionally, a link was posted on Facebook. The vast majority of the interviews (394) were conducted with young adults who came to the survey via Facebook; the remaining 91 took the survey through the email invitation. The surveys, which took an average of 16 minutes to complete, were conducted using web-enabled survey software.

The discussion groups were conducted in September 2013 with 24 of the survey participants. Discussion group members were recruited based on their survey answers in order to include a variety of spiritual histories. There were two discussion groups—one for ages 18-22, and one for ages 23-29. Each group lasted for three days.

About The Barna Group

The Barna Group (which includes its research division, The Barna Research Group) is a private, nonpartisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. It conducts primary research, produces media resources pertaining to spiritual development, and facilitates the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries.

Located in Ventura, California, The Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors since 1984. Additional research-based resources are also available through their website, www.barna.org.

Notes

¹The North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists represents this larger worldwide Protestant faith community, particularly as it

is expressed in Bermuda, Canada, Micronesia, and the United States (www.nadadventist.org). Today, as one of the fastest growing Christian Protestant churches, 18 million baptized Seventh-day Adventist members live in 204 countries of the world. This includes nearly 1.2 million in the North American Division.

²All study participants' names have been changed for privacy reasons.

³Provocative parallels can be found in the emphasis on intergenerational church relationships noted in this survey and the work of Dr. Roger Dudley, professor emeritus at Andrews University, whose study of youth and young adults spanned over four decades. See <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2009/01/embracing-those-who-reject-religion>