

Growing Young Adventists | BY TIMOTHY A. FLOYD

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Defining Reality

Leadership guru Max De Pree once said, “the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.”¹ In an attempt to define our present reality, let’s talk honestly for a few lines. In 1965, the Seventh-day Adventist church began studying the issue of why people leave the church. Since then, over thirteen million people have left the Seventh-day Adventist Church,² and 63 percent of those were young adults. According to David Trim’s team at the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, the top reasons given by those who left were perceived hypocrisy from members, lack of friends in the church, conflict, and doubts.

In 2013, the Church commissioned a research study by the Barna Group in an effort to better understand why our young people are leaving the church. The results of the study indicated that Adventist young adults who left the church did so because they perceived the church to be doubtless, exclusive, anti-science, overprotective, shallow, and repressive. This is not just an Adventist phenomenon either; according to Fuller Theological Seminary’s research, “no major Christian tradition is growing in the US today.”³ But when compared with other religious groups, the Adventist respondents indicated higher perceptions of dissatisfaction than the national norm in every category.⁴ In fact, Pew Research Center has discovered that the percentage of Americans who do not identify with any religious affiliation has risen from 16 percent in 2006, to 23 percent in 2016.⁵

While the youth and young adults are leav-

ing the church in staggering numbers, the older generations will only continue getting older, and will eventually begin to shrink the church membership from the other end. Andrew McClesney reported in the *Adventist Review* in 2016 that two-thirds of North American Adventist church members are over the age of fifty, while the average age in the United States is thirty-six.⁶ This “graying” of Adventism is exemplified by the fact that in more than 1,000 local churches in the North America Division, there are no children or teenagers whatsoever.⁷ Adding to the problem is the fact that our churches are not bringing in new members to fill these voids. Approximately 80 percent of all churches in North America have reached a membership plateau or are declining.⁸

As a church, we have over fifty-two years’ worth of data indicating that our church is mainly comprised of the older generation; the younger generations are leaving, and we know the reasons why they have left. It seems like we have more research on this single issue than we have proof texts for the Sabbath, and yet we have seen no changes being made to address the problem. If the current situation is allowed to continue, within fifteen to twenty years,⁹ one wonders what will remain of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, with the older generations dying off and the younger generations leaving. Will what remains be sustainable?

Facing Reality

This is the reality we face. Now is the time for action. Now is the time for leaders and members

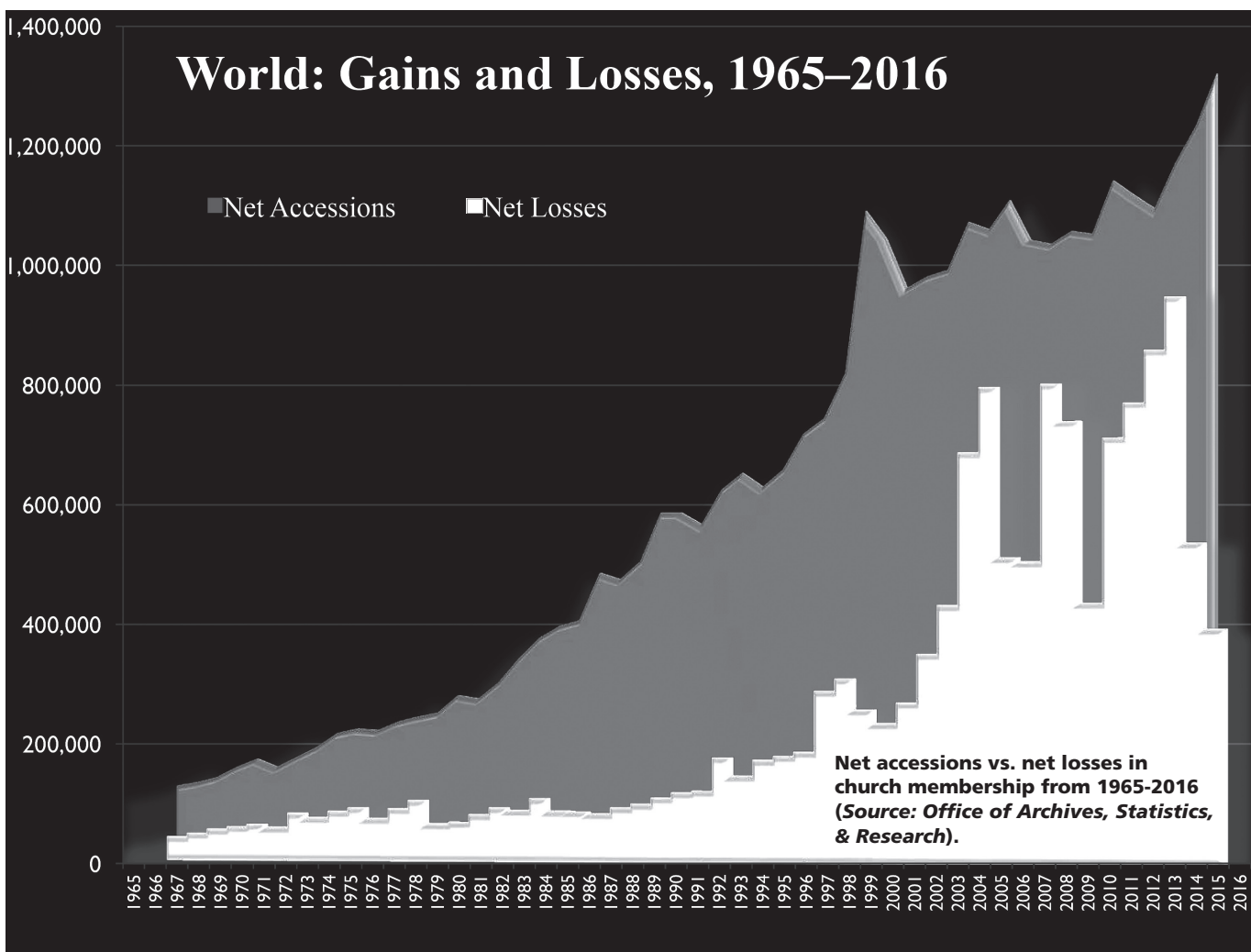


IMAGE SOURCE: OFFICE OF ARCHIVES, STATISTICS, & RESEARCH, GENERAL CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

to take ownership of their churches and make the changes necessary, so we can continue to share the good news of Jesus' second coming that we have been commissioned to share, and to be able to be a light in our communities.

The question that faces us is, what are we going to do about it? I can promise you that the solutions given at the recent General Conference Annual Council of "more literature evangelism" and "increase funding for Pathfinders" will only continue the business as usual mindset, and will accomplish nothing significant.

Growing Young

In 2013, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena CA, began looking at this issue within Christianity from a different perspective. They decided to stop focusing on the problem and start looking at what they call "Bright Spots" in ministry. These are congregations that are effectively loving and serving young people already. These congregations are engaging young people ages fifteen

to twenty-nine, and are growing spiritually, emotionally, missionally, and sometimes also numerically. Fuller describes these churches as "Growing Young."¹⁰ As they began studying, they determined that growing young churches doesn't require a precise size, trendy location, modern building, or contemporary worship service in order to be effective. They found congregations from across the United States, from every ethnic group, and every demographic, of all shapes and sizes, to be growing young. In their research, they discovered six core commitments present in the churches studied:

1. Keychain leadership unlocked, so instead of centralized authority, power was shared, especially with young people.
2. Empathy with young people rather than judgment or criticism of them.
3. Jesus' message taken seriously. Instead of asserting formulaic gospel claims, young people were welcomed into a Jesus-centered way of life.



IMAGE SOURCE: FOOTAGE FIRM, INC.

4. Warm and welcoming community. Instead of focusing on cool worship or programs, there were warm peer and intergenerational friendships.

5. Young people (and families) prioritized. Young people were involved in creative ways to tangibly support, resource, and be involved in all facets of the congregation.

6. Best neighbors. Instead of condemning the world outside, young people were at work with neighbors locally and globally.¹¹

Fuller admits that there is no guarantee that these six commitments will change your congregation. However, they have thoroughly researched and established their case for effective culture change within a congregation in order to grow younger.

Beginning in 2016, a small group of Adventist pastors, teachers, and Conference and Union leadership began studying Fuller's book, *Growing Young*, in effort to find a solution for our own challenges. As we began reading the book, it quickly became clear that this was a different approach. The problem I had with the Barna collaboration in 2013 was that it focused so heavily on what was

wrong, without providing any sort of hope or direction to move forward from the despair of where we are. That may sound hyperbolic, but as a leader who sees the effects of a church losing young people every day, this is my reality. Slowly, this study group began to dialogue about possibilities of *Growing Young* Adventists. We realized that there was something special, hopeful, in this discussion. There was something we all resonated with, that gave us a direction we could all pursue together. So, a proposal was formulated from within that group. That proposal turned into an approval. That approval resulted in a group of Adventist leaders who joined a learning cohort with Fuller, with the intent of becoming certified trainers and speakers to take the lessons learned in Fuller's research and apply it to the North America Division.

Thirteen certified trainers and speakers for the NAD are in the first phase, which is leadership training. Our certified speakers and cohort churches are in a leader learning process through this year. In March of 2018, we will finalize our training with Fuller, and will move into the teaching phase where we will begin *Growing Young* Adventist Congregations throughout the NAD. By 2020, we hope

to have case studies of success stories where Adventist churches changed their course and began to “Grow Young.” We will present these case studies at the 2020 Called Ministerial Convention, and at the 2020 General Conference Session. From there, the plan is that congregations across the NAD will become inspired to change the culture within their own churches, and request certified trainers to come to their church and help them Grow Young Adventists in their own community.

Conclusion

In the course of presenting Growing Young, I have been asked by church members, “Why do we need to focus so much on young people? What about us older people? Don’t we matter anymore?” I actually had one pastor tell me that he is losing members because they don’t want to be around “all of those young people.” Creating a hesitation for this pastor to do any level of focus on youth or young adults. This is actually sort of ironically funny; our church is literally dying, and this church refuses to accommodate the young people that it already has.

When Fuller looked at the power of churches that prioritize young people, they note this powerful statement—a statement that I think my pastor friend’s church could benefit from assimilating into their religious worldview. Prioritizing young people means:

Even when it means giving up preferences or shifting what in the past may have been considered nonnegotiable. Even when it means relinquishing traditional authority and power in order to embrace the young. Prioritizing teenagers and young adults has made the difference between ailing and thriving, not only for young people but also for the whole congregation.... Regardless of your context, our research has convinced us that the hinge point separating churches that grow old from those that grow young is priority. When churches

prioritize young people—and their families—everywhere, they take a step beyond both empathy and warmth. They allocate resources, energy, and attention to teenagers and young adults both inside and outside their walls.¹²

This should not be a surprise to any Adventist leader who has paid attention to young people over the last fifty-two years. Leadership author and speaker, Scott Cormode, told our Growing Young cohort, “leadership begins with listening.” When we listen to our young people, we all do better. When we listen to our young people, we realize that we have been putting them to the side, treating them as some “future church” rather than a present force in the Body of Christ.

One of the most powerful takeaways I gained from the Barna collaboration was a statement David Kinnaman made to the NAD: “You have to come to the point where you love your young people more than your traditions.”¹³ Until we are willing to make our young people a priority (with time, energy, budgets, authority, etc.) we will not change. Our churches will continue to decline, and within fifteen to twenty years, we will be a shadow of what we once were. Or, we can take the steps to change our church culture now and salvage what remains. When we put Jesus (not traditions) at the center of our church culture, we begin to empathize with all members, this drives a warmer community, where we prioritize our young people, and we mentor them in leadership opportunities. As a result of that we become better neighbors to our communities, and we grow ... but we are Growing Young. ■



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**Now is the
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Further Reading:

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Footnotes:

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9. Based on CDC's Average Life Expectancy data of 78 years old. CDC, "FastStats," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Last modified May 3, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/life-expectancy.htm>.
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13. Barna Group, *Young Adult Study*.



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