August Visitor Asks, Why Are Adventists Joining the Ranks of the "Nones?"

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Part 1: Why Are Adventists Joining The Ranks of the “Nones?”

An increasing number of young Americans appear uninterested in being part of a church. In this August Visitor cover story, we ask, how can we reach them? This is part one of the two-part feature.

Story by Loren Seibold Published 8/5/2013

Andrea is 28 years old. She’s lively, fashionable and unafraid to speak her mind. She grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist family and still has generally positive feelings toward the church, though she attends only rarely. “Here’s how I see it,” she says. “I’m a spiritual person. I try to educate myself about spiritual things. But I just don’t think you need to go to church to have a relationship with God.” She reads Christian books, but admits she also enjoys studying Native American spirituality. Her fiancé, Vince, a few years older, agrees. “I’m content where my heart is,” he says. “But don’t you feel the need to be part of a structured church family like the one you grew up in?” I ask. “It’s not high on my list of priorities,” he says. “As long as you’re a good person, you shouldn’t have to declare yourself in one denomination or another.” Pastors often hear some version of this scenario, but never more frequently than now. The number of people, especially young adults, who have little interest in organized religion and claim no church affiliation is rising. Andrea and Vince are good citizens, loyal friends, loving family members and responsible employees. They aspire to a happy, loving life together. But, church doesn’t seem to them to be a necessary part of that picture.

Who are the “Nones”?

In a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center’s Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, they found an increase in the number of Americans unaffiliated with any faith community. Their research revealed that 20 percent of Americans listed their church affiliation as “none”—up from 15 percent in just five years. Even more startling: among the Millennial generation (born 1981-1994), 32 percent have no religious affiliation.

Extrapolating that trend line, Adventist sociologist Monte Sahlin, Ohio Conference’s director of research and special projects, sees that “by 2020 the ‘nones’ may be the majority of American young adults, and by 2050 a majority of all Americans.”

Many pastors say they have seen it coming. “Young adults tell me they love God and are serving Him in the real world, and they don’t need to be associated with anyone or any group to do that,” says Jennifer Deans, pastor of Potomac Conference’s Community Praise Center-Dulles church plant that targets this demographic in Dulles, Va.

Raj Attiken, Ohio Conference president, adds that the change in attitude toward religion is reflected in the faces you’ll see in most Adventist sanctuaries. “One can surmise, from the clearly evident aging of most of our congregations, that many of the young adults who are missing are likely to be ‘nones,’” he says. “The values, world views and thinking of emerging generations are being shaped by a societal and cultural context that is increasingly foreign and distant from our church culture.”

That doesn’t mean the unaffiliated are uninterested in spiritual things. Pastor Deans insists the young adults she meets “want an honest relationship with God.”

Sahlin points to a key finding of the Pew study: “Only 2 percent of the ‘nones’ are atheists, and only 3 percent are agnostics,” he notes. “Three quarters of the 20 percent are ‘spiritual but not religious.’ They believe in God and they pray, some daily, yet they do not see
religion as helpful in meeting their spiritual needs.”

Rajkumar Dixit, who for the past 11 years helped pastor Chesapeake Conference’s New Hope church in Fulton, Md., explains that even though they have spiritual interests, the “nones” process religious language differently. “When you use a term like ‘true believer,’ I understand that you mean a concrete, absolute, unchangeable theology. A ‘none’ doesn’t understand that. Their definition of truth is how it relates to their life. Whatever part of spirituality works for them is their truth.” He believes that denominational connection, seen by us as an asset, is to them a roadblock. “The effect of postmodernism, secularism and globalism means corporate identity isn’t very important,” Dixit adds. “They may still want the feeling of belonging, though not to a corporate brand, but to a group of people who have similar experiences.”

Are We the Problem?
Our pluralistic culture has played a large part in shaping these attitudes, but all of the leaders I talked to felt the church (Adventists and the others who’ve presided over Christianity during the rise of the “nones”) has to shoulder some of the blame.

Christopher Thompson, a young, associate pastor at Allegheny West Conference’s Ephesus church in Columbus, is blunt: “I believe that, at the bottom of all of this, is one main issue: the church is irrelevant to people’s everyday lives. Too many are convinced that the church is determined to ignore where they really live and what’s really going on in the world.” This disconnect hit him hard when he worked in urban Pittsburgh, a place with many Christian churches but little spiritual vitality. “The church is preaching a gospel of health, wealth and happiness, but poor urban dwellers are seeing none of it,” he says.

Rubén Ramos, Multilingual Ministries director for the Columbia Union Conference, sees a parallel dynamic in Hispanic congregations. “In immigrant churches, the first generation of young adults is very close to the church,” he says. But, as the church produces second and third generations, he believes these young people are influenced by American culture. “The immigrant churches don’t always meet the needs of their own new generations,” Ramos says. “So, disinterest in church affiliation is much the same as in American churches.”

Citing the Barna Group’s David Kinnaman, Attiken says, “New generations of Christians find the church to be overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive and doubtless (no tolerance for questions or doubt).” He adds, “Younger generations of Americans have been shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance. They have also been conditioned to be more eclectic in terms of religion and sources of authority. The Adventist Church, on the other hand, has offered a protective, predictable, staid experience to its members, with a high moralist content.”

Predictable and protective aren’t what the “nones” are looking for. What they value, says Pastor Deans, is authenticity. “The picture of the church they sometimes paint is of hypocrites who act one way when they are at church, and another the rest of the week—which isn’t necessarily true, but perception is 90 percent of reality,” she notes.

Perhaps that’s why the “nones” are more attracted to what Pastor Dixit calls “the bare product,” which is “following Jesus, not the denominational experience, culture or brand.”

Loren Seibold is a pastor in the Ohio Conference.

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