EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent research studies have found alarming declines in the number of young adults who are actively involved in a local church. Almost half of white North American Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) members are 60 years of age or older (Sahlin & Richardson, 2008), while the median age for the general population of the United States is currently 37 (US Census, 2010). Unless something is done to reverse the trends of the last two decades, the alarming exodus of young people from the church will only intensify.

The purpose of this research project is to help the Seventh-day Adventist Church discover the levels of local church connection or disconnection among recent SDA university graduates, to provide some understanding of why connection or disconnection takes place, and, most importantly, to provide insights into effective ways to retain and reclaim young adults as active members of local Seventh-day Adventist churches. The Adventist Connection Study (ACS), commissioned by the General Conference Future Plans Working Group and conducted by the Robert H. Pierson Institute of Evangelism and World Missions at Southern Adventist University, surveyed 1153 graduates between the years of 2001 and 2012 from Southern Adventist University (SAU), Oakwood University (OU), and Pacific Union College (PUC).

In Phase One, ten focus groups were held with active, inactive, and former Adventists. After analyzing the themes mentioned by Phase One focus group participants, ACS researchers developed a 70-question, quantitative questionnaire which in Phase Two was made available online using SurveyMonkey. The survey was publicized by e-mails, newsletters, and Facebook during April 2013.

In their analysis of ACS Phase Two responses, researchers discovered eight important themes:

1. **This sample revealed that there is a large group of connected and active young adults in the Adventist Church today.** Respondents, in general, expressed support for an Adventist understanding of biblical inspiration, the ministry of Ellen White, the health message, and Adventist doctrines like the Sabbath and salvation. They attend church and return tithe regularly, and have positive views of Adventism. Family worship, reading the Bible together,
and attending Sabbath School together were also high. This is good news for those who believe that the millennial generation is completely lost.

2. **The strength of one’s devotional life had a clear correlation to the strength of one’s acceptance of Adventist doctrines and lifestyle.** Regular personal devotional practice is an essential factor in church retention. Prayer is practiced very often, but very few are spending quality time in the Word of God on a regular basis. Strengthening the personal devotional life of its members should be one of the highest priorities for the Seventh-day Adventist church.

3. **Young adults prefer to attend medium- to large-sized churches which have full-time pastors.** Most of the survey respondents attended larger churches. This result is supported by a study by the Barna Group (2009) which found that the majority of young adults attend large churches. Further research needs to be done in this area to better understand this finding and its implications for the future of the church.

4. **While young adults showed strong support for some doctrines, their support for other doctrines seems to be weakening.**

   Table 11 shows that young adults have maintained their belief in God as Creator, Jesus as Savior, the Sabbath, and the law of God. Even focus group participants who self-identified as “ethnic” Adventists still lived differently on Sabbath than on other weekdays. Doctrines which had less support include a six-day literal Creation, the inspiration of Ellen White, the sanctuary, the pre-Advent judgment, and the remnant identity doctrines.

5. **Young adults are questioning the Church’s stance on homosexuality; at the same time they generally accept the Church’s teachings on heterosexuality.** This was one of the most surprising finds regarding the disparity between the Adventist Church’s ethos and many young adults’ ethos on the issue of homosexuality. Overall, there was a more favorable view of homosexuality than there was toward cohabitation. The majority of this sample does not support premarital sex.

6. **Adventist media has little influence on young adults.** The majority of young adults do not interact with Adventist TV, magazines, and other SDA media outlets. This is an important
form of connection that is not reaching this demographic group of Adventists. Additional research can determine whether young adults lack interest in Adventist media or lack access to Adventist media. Because millennials get much of their information from the Internet, the Adventist church needs to research why its media is not reaching young adults.

7. There is a lack of evangelistic outreach being carried out by young adults. The data showed that respondents are not involved in evangelism and do not invite their friends to church events. They do not see the Adventist church as welcoming toward other faiths and may not want to expose their friends to this environment. Also, there are fewer first-generation Adventists than there are those whose family lineage goes back five generations or more. This will have repercussions for the future of the church if the Great Commission is not actively being fulfilled and new disciples are not being created.

8. The transitory lifestyle of many young adults negatively impacts their connection with local churches. About half of the respondents are single, three-fourths do not have children, and many are in graduate school. They struggle to find time to connect with local churches.

This transitory nature is a major reason why many young adults’ official membership is not at their current church. Statements in the comment section reveal that many young adults do not feel like their life is settled enough to commit to a church. The church must think strategically about how to connect with the new realities of a generation that is increasingly mobile and unattached. Further research should be done across North America to discover connection strategies that are working in individual churches.

Recommendations

Although the results from this study provide some data on what is taking place with recent graduates from North American Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities, there are still many variables that need further exploration. First, researchers should look at young adults who dropped out of Adventist schools and those who did not attend an Adventist college or university. The Pierson Institute would like to expand the Adventist Connection Study to Adventist young adults who graduated from secular colleges and universities and to Adventists who started but did not complete their university education.
Another area for further study is where young adults choose to live and why they prefer worshipping with larger churches. More research should also be done on how social media affects the way young adults connect or disconnect with local churches. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Adventist young adults retain their connection with other Adventist young adults through social media and through social and spiritual gatherings outside of the official church.

Also, more research should be done on the attitudes of young adults regarding church school and homeschool. Survey results show weak support for Adventist K-12 education, especially in the area of boarding academies. The stronger support for an Adventist college education (61%) is encouraging but needs further study to understand how attitudes are changing in this area.

Further information will be available after a thorough analysis is done on the 3,500 comments made by respondents and on the more than 700 written answers to open-ended questions that specifically asked what the Adventist church could improve upon and why young adults leave.

The Adventist Connection Study provided an opportunity for young adults to share their concerns about the church. One respondent wrote, “As I am filling out this survey, I am hesitant to be contacted, but if I change my mind, I'll e-mail the above address. I would enjoy dialoguing with someone about my experiences (as long as there's no pressure to ‘please come back’), but I really haven't found the right person/people with which I can open up that conversation.”

It is our belief that one of the most important needs today is for Adventist Church leaders and members at every level to humbly seek out young adults and listen to them without judgment and without prejudice. Our data suggests that many Adventist young adults have not given up completely on the church. Many who appear to have disconnected continue to be connected in a variety of conventional and unconventional ways. Church leaders and members still have an opportunity to reclaim many, but the window of opportunity is limited and will be quickly shut if we do not approach young adults sincerely, genuinely, humbly, and acceptingly.