21st Century Adventist Connection Study Report
Young Adults and the Church

“Unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt.”

ACS History

- Invitation from GC Future Plans Working Group, January 2011
- Opportunity for Pierson Institute of Evangelism and World Mission to become a Research Center for the Seventh-day Adventist Church
- ACS contract signed in Fall 2011
Phase 1
Focus Groups

- Ten Focus Groups
  - Six held at SAU
  - Four held at OU
  - 66 senior or alumni participants

- Types of Focus Groups
  - Seven “active” Adventist
  - One “inactive” Adventist
  - One “former” Adventists
  - One “dropout” students
  - One “active” and one “inactive” group were invited back for follow-up sessions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Related topics and codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themes 1: Growing into or away from the Adventist Church:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity Issues</td>
<td>Inter-generational (14), Family (14), Parents' role (19), People (20), Youth (8), The members (3), Age and generation difference (2), Generation (5), Spouse (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>School (12), Education System (3), Southern (22)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Born vs. Drafted Adventist (9), Personal choice (10), Sense of Identity/Ownership (7), Responsibility (3)</td>
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<td>Coming of Age/Identity with church separate from family</td>
<td>Baptism (is it the right age, is it real, is there a two-stage identity) (4), Decisive Time/Rite of passage (3), Going with the flow (motion, apathy)/Good/Front (6)</td>
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<td>Seclusion</td>
<td>Adventist being different than others (5), Adventist hub (circles, institutions) (5), Sheltered (6), Out of touch with world (5), Isolation/separation/foreign (11), Relationship to non-SDA's (elitism, peculiar people, (7), Other Denominations (22), Stupid (8), Non-Adventists (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Diverse in People (4), Diverse in Thought (4)</td>
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<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Divorce (1), Homosexuality (17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Expectations/High Standard/Pressure (9), Guilt (7)</td>
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<td>Image/Appearance</td>
<td>Look (8)</td>
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<td>Called out on appearance (9), Cookie cutter mold (2), Dress (24), Jewelry (15), Diet (8), Alcohol (8), Vegetarian (7), Meat (9), Food (3), Liberal/Conservative (Women in the church (3), Liberal vs. Conservative (7), Politics (6), Tradition vs. mainstream (5)</td>
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<td>Temporal Challenges</td>
<td>Materialism (2), Work situations (17), Regional/Cultural Differences (7), Boredom (8), Worldly/Secularization (1), Single and SDA problems (10), Post-collegiate pre-kids (4), Tiredness (3), Reason for Leaving (7)</td>
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<td>Tithe</td>
<td>Tithing (3)</td>
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<td>Worship</td>
<td>Sermon (15), Music (13), Worship Atmosphere (8), Dead church (2), Worship Service (12), Worship (11), Predictable (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Perceptions of Church worship Services</td>
<td>24/7 Church (Activities (4), Church (7), Social Gatherings (5), Pathfinders (2), Church Outside of Divine Service (5), Fellowship/social aspect (6)</td>
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<td>Genuineness</td>
<td>Genuine (25)</td>
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<td>Adventism</td>
<td>Value as an Adventist (7), Stereotypes (5), Culture (2), Good Adventist (17), Lingo (7), Proud (3), Mindset (2), Identify with Adventist/Adventism positive (8), Identify with Adventist/Adventism negative (6), Dispelling False Myths, Opinions, Stereotypes of Adventists (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church Discipline</td>
<td>Church Discipline (3)</td>
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<td>Church vs. Jesus</td>
<td>Restriction and burden vs. freedom and privilege (13), Conflict between church and God (11), Doctrines (19), Gospel (10), Death (5), Ellen White (13), Second Coming (5), Creation (6), 2300 days (1), The sanctuary (1), Spirit of prophecy (1), Jesus God (6), God (12), Holy Spirit (3)</td>
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<td>Connection</td>
<td>Connection Personal Relationships (13), Disconnect (10), Engage (3), Connection (knowing common people) (11), Definition: Active (5), Definition: Inactive (9), Connection (24)</td>
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<td>Discipleship</td>
<td>Pastor (5)</td>
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<td>Theme 3: Where is the Love?</td>
<td>Acceptance/Intolerance (4), Acceptance (10), Judgment and Criticism (8), Petty Issues, Debatable Issues (4), Embarrassment/Shame (3), Gossip (5)</td>
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<td>Community</td>
<td>Community Outreach (6), Community Atmosphere (12)</td>
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<td>Nurture</td>
<td>Born in Faith (13), Baptism (4), Childhood (12), Familiarity (1), Upbringing/raised/grow in church (6), Family-like Church (11), Friends (10)</td>
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<td>Safety</td>
<td>Love (14), Fear (1), Joy/Happiness (3), Lack of Safety (9)</td>
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<td>Security</td>
<td>Believe (10), Salvation (16), Real vs. Spiritual World (4), Satan (8)</td>
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<td>Talk about similar struggles</td>
<td>Safety with struggles (8), Uncomfortable talking about (5), Doubt (9), Fear of thought (7), Frustration, Pettiness (10), Close-minded vs. Openness (9), Struggle/Fighting/Debating (9), Perfection (6)</td>
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<td>Welcomed</td>
<td>Welcoming friendly atmosphere (11), Making others feel comfortable (4), Nice and friendly (4), Welcomed (16), Noticed (8), Shunning (1)</td>
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A lot of times I feel like as an Adventist you have to be like perfect or your family is perfect. . . . I’ve never felt comfortable coming to an Adventist or even my parents for that [matter] to say “I’m dealing with this.”
I believe everything that we're teaching. I believe in Adventism, but when I'm sitting there every week and I'm getting this message that if you're having any type of struggle, you're messed up. I'll leave in fury. . . . If I wasn't still struggling, I could leave [the Lord]. But it's because I struggle, that I stay with him. How can I bring other people here when they are gonna get bashed for being a broken person, instead of reassured that the fact that they are a broken person is why Christ came to save them?
I just feel in the church we don't embrace people looking at both sides. It's like if we're open-minded to other people's ideas then there is that danger that we might prescribe to those ideas and really stick to them. I think that it works both ways in that, by allowing your youth to know what's on the other side, there is a chance of losing them to the other side but by not allowing them to really interact with the other side then there is that danger of losing them to the other side because they don't know.
I love all the Adventist beliefs, but I hate how we present them. I totally believe in the Adventist beliefs, I love them, but the way we're presenting them is what's drawing people away and not allowing people to stay.

So I agree with what beliefs they stand for. I believe in what the Adventist church believes, but I don't agree with necessarily what the Adventist church does.
Some of my best friends are gay and it's so hard to... I don't really self-identify as an Adventist anymore because of issues like that.
I totally believe that Jesus is coming, but I see a different approach on how to get that word out. And when my approach is different, that's when they say "Wait a minute, wait a minute, what are you doing? We are right. Not only in our belief, but also how we do things." and so it's just this disconnect and this fear of like "Oh, they have new ideas and new things are coming in."

I really believe that where the love has gone, it's that it has been replaced with fear. We're afraid of each other, we're afraid of each other's culture, of each other's differences. We're afraid to engage with each other, we're afraid to take any risks. I think that a lot of people are depressed.
Adventism is a tight structure, rigid, controlled

It’s a brick-walled box and you can’t take any of those bricks out unless it involves falling or you getting kicked out.
Phase 2

- 70-question survey sent out in April 2013
- More than 3,000 respondents participated in survey
- 1,153 respondents within parameters of study
  - Southern Adventist University (864)
  - Oakwood University (115)
  - Pacific Union College (174)

**Total number for each individual question however will vary since participants were allowed to skip questions**
### Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious affiliation</th>
<th>Number of responses (Percentage of total)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Seventh-day Adventist</td>
<td>928 (86.1%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>2 (0.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>2 (0.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>25 (2.3%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No affiliation</td>
<td>64 (5.9%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>57 (5.0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,078 (100%)</strong></td>
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Participants: Age at Baptism

Never... Younger... 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 or older
Generation of Adventism

- First-generation Adventist: 5%
- Second-generation Adventist: 17%
- Third-generation Adventist: 38%
- Fourth-generation Adventist: 27%
- Fifth- or more: 12%
Type of Elementary School Attended

- Adventist School
- Non-Adventist Private School
- Public School
- Homeschool

Grade: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th
Type of High School Attended
Church Attendance

- Every week: 58.6%
- Once a month: 19.2%
- 2 or 3 times a month: 12.6%
- Once or twice a year: 5.0%
- Never: 0.2%
- Additional 110 reported not attending church on another question, and “never” group is actually about 6% of total sample.
Church Membership

- Church I currently attend: 47%
- Church I previously attended: 18%
- Church I grew up in: 21%
- University church: 2%
- Conference church: 1%
- No longer hold membership in: 4%
- I don't know: 3%
- Other: 5%
Agreement with Adventist Doctrines

- God created the world: 84.5%
- Jesus' death important for salvation: 78.6%
- Ten Commandments still apply today: 77.0%
- Sabbath is 7th day of the week: 76.0%
- Great Controversy: 74.3%
- The Trinity: 73.8%
- Death is sleep and there is no immortal soul: 72.1%
- Nature of Sin: 69.8%
- Marriage between man and woman: 62.8%
- OT sanctuary modeled after heaven: 57.2%
- God created the world in 6 literal days in recent: 55.7%
- Ellen White and gift of prophecy: 46.8%
- Pre-Advent judgment about defending God's: 44.4%
- 1844 and the pre-Advent judgment: 43.5%
- Marriage between those with same beliefs: 43.5%
- Adventist Church is last-day remnant church: 40.0%
Acceptance* of non-practicing and practicing homosexuals and cohabitating couples in church

*Based on number of responses that said "always" or "usually acceptable"

N=1,066
Percentage agree with statement “I will be an Adventist 10 years from now”
Conclusions

1. There is a large group of connected and active young adults in the Adventist Church today.
2. The strength of one’s devotional life had a clear correlation to the strength of one’s acceptance of Adventist doctrines and lifestyle.

*Strengthening the personal devotional life of its members should be one of the highest priorities for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.*
3. Young adults in our study attended medium- to large-sized churches.

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

5. Young adults are questioning the church’s stance on homosexuality; at the same time, they generally accept the church’s teachings on heterosexuality.

Conclusions cont.
6. Adventist media has little influence on young adults.
7. There is a lack of evangelistic efforts being carried out by young adults.
8. The transitory lifestyle of many young adults negatively impacts their connection with local churches.

Specialized connection strategies need to be developed to provide a place of refuge and stability for those whose lives are constantly shifting.
Recommendations for Future Research

1. Continue to study data from ACS
   A. Analyze more than 4,000 written comments
   B. Analyze more than 2,000 responses from graduates of institutions other than SAU, OU, and PUC
2. Repeat ACS with SDA graduates from secular universities.
3. Repeat ACS with university drop outs.
Recommendations for Future Research

4. Repeat ACS with randomized sample
5. Research geographic and career distribution of recent SDA graduates
6. Research church choices of recent graduates
   - Are smaller churches losing a disproportionate percentage of young adults?
   - Almost 50% of our respondents attend medium-to-large-sized churches. Only 15% attend small churches.
   - What happens to Adventists who graduate from secular institutions or those who drop out?
Recommendations for Future Research

7. Research how social media affects church connection and disconnection
8. Research changing attitudes regarding Adventist Education
One of our most important needs 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.

Without exception, young adults thanked us for the opportunity to participate in our focus groups and survey. One focus group participant told Dr. Douglas Jacobs, “This study may be the most important thing you do in your life.”
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. We need to exponentially increase connection points with young adults and we must update the often outdated connection points we still have. Church leaders and members still have an opportunity to reclaim many young adults, but the window of opportunity is limited and will be quickly shut if we do not approach young adults sincerely, genuinely, humbly, and acceptingly.
And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

(Luke 1:17 NIV)