

Growing Young Adventists in the MAUC

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Defining Reality

Leadership guru Max De Pree once said, “the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.”¹ We have to know what we are up against before we can make plans for action. In attempt to define our present reality, let’s talk honestly for a few lines. In 1965, Adventist church began studying the issue of why people leave the church. Since that study began, there have been over 37 million Seventh-day Adventists. However, over 15 million of them have left the church in that time.²

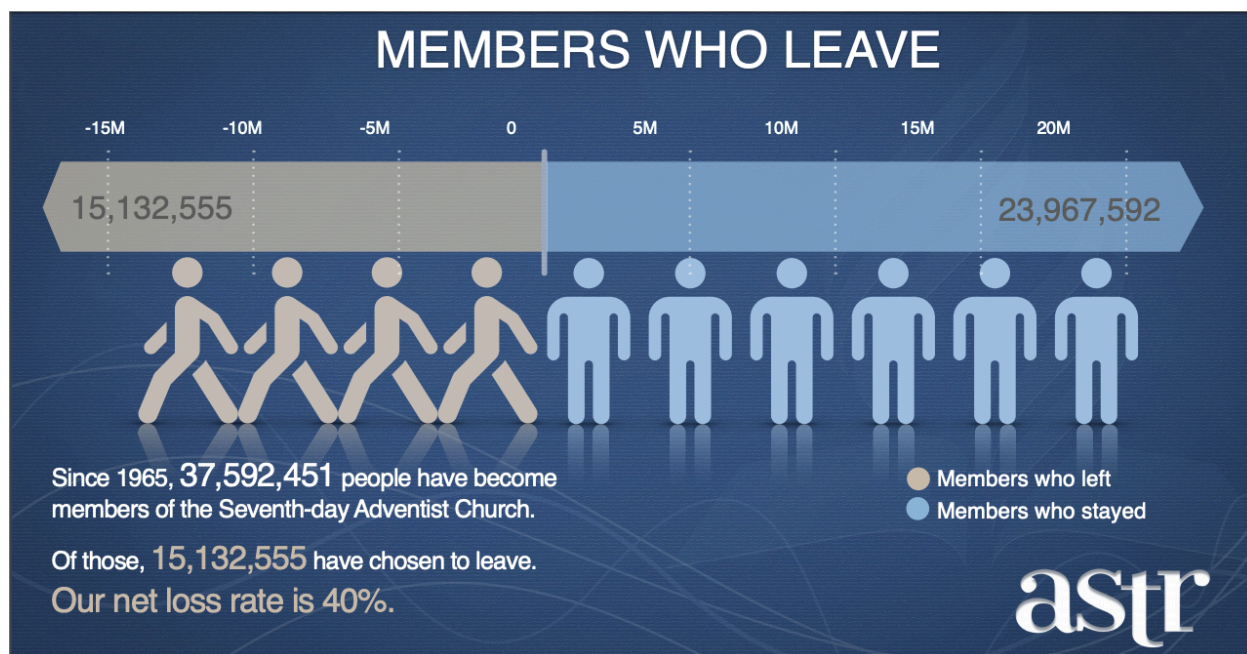
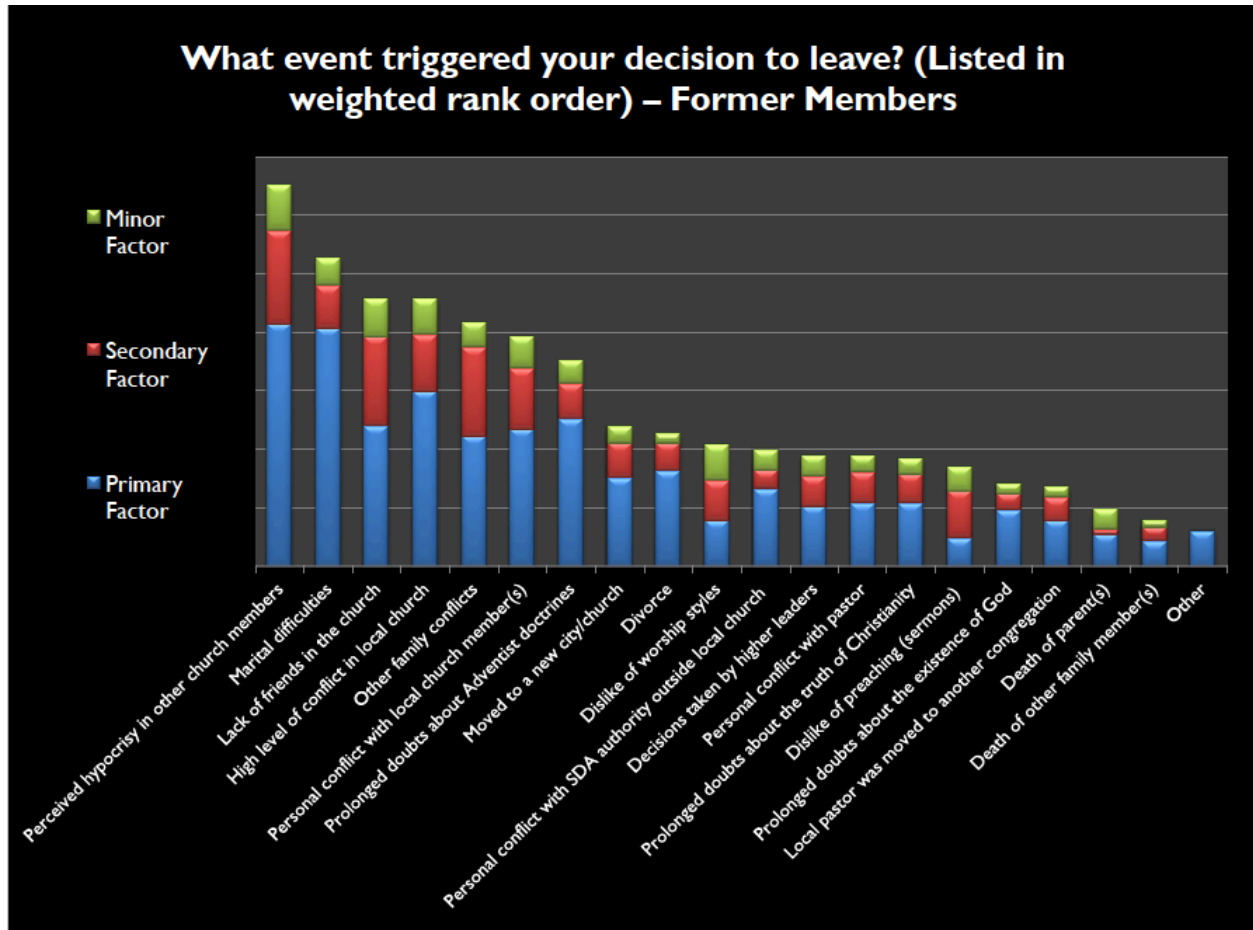


Figure 1: GC Nurture and Retention Report

¹ De Pree, Max. *Leadership Is an Art*. New York: Currency, 2004.

² Trim, David. *Nature & Retention*. General Conference Annual Council 2017: Adventist Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, 2017. [http://www.adventistresearch.org/sites/default/files/files/NR_Presentation_AC_2017_\(DT\).pdf](http://www.adventistresearch.org/sites/default/files/files/NR_Presentation_AC_2017_(DT).pdf).

When asked why they left the church, the majority of the reasons did not necessarily indicate a lack of belief or specific theological disagreement, rather their reasons pointed towards a relationship breakdown evident in a variety of behaviors or actions or perceptions.



Additionally, over 63% of those who have left the church were young adults when they left. That means that in every generation (at least since we started studying this in 1965), there has been a mass exodus due to a relational breakdown in their late teen and young adult age. As a church, we have not been supporting our younger generations well enough, so they leave. This is unacceptable.

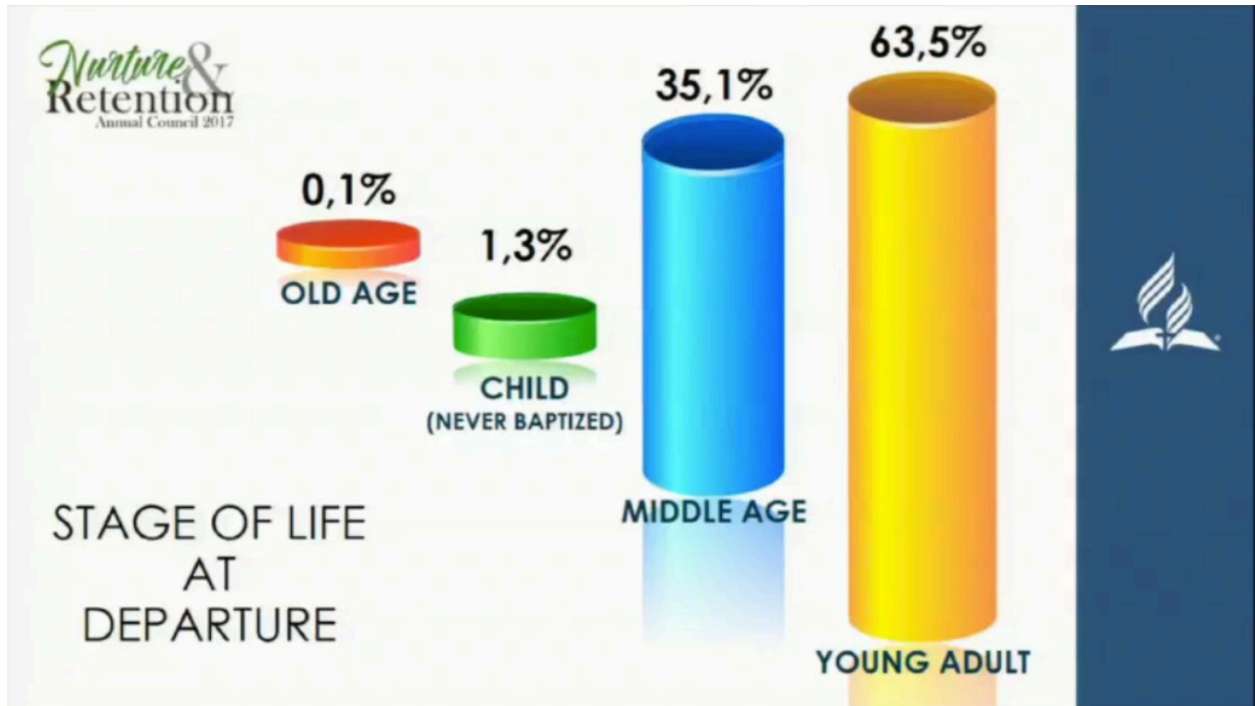


Figure 2: GC Nurture and Retention Report

The best case scenario data suggests that half of Adventists young people will graduate the church when they graduate high school. The younger generations who are actively making the choices to leave the church currently make up approximately 42% of the North American Division (NAD). While that isn't a majority, it is very close to half of the current church body and well worth investing a little extra time and energy and relational support in.

Members & Nonmembers by Age

North American Division

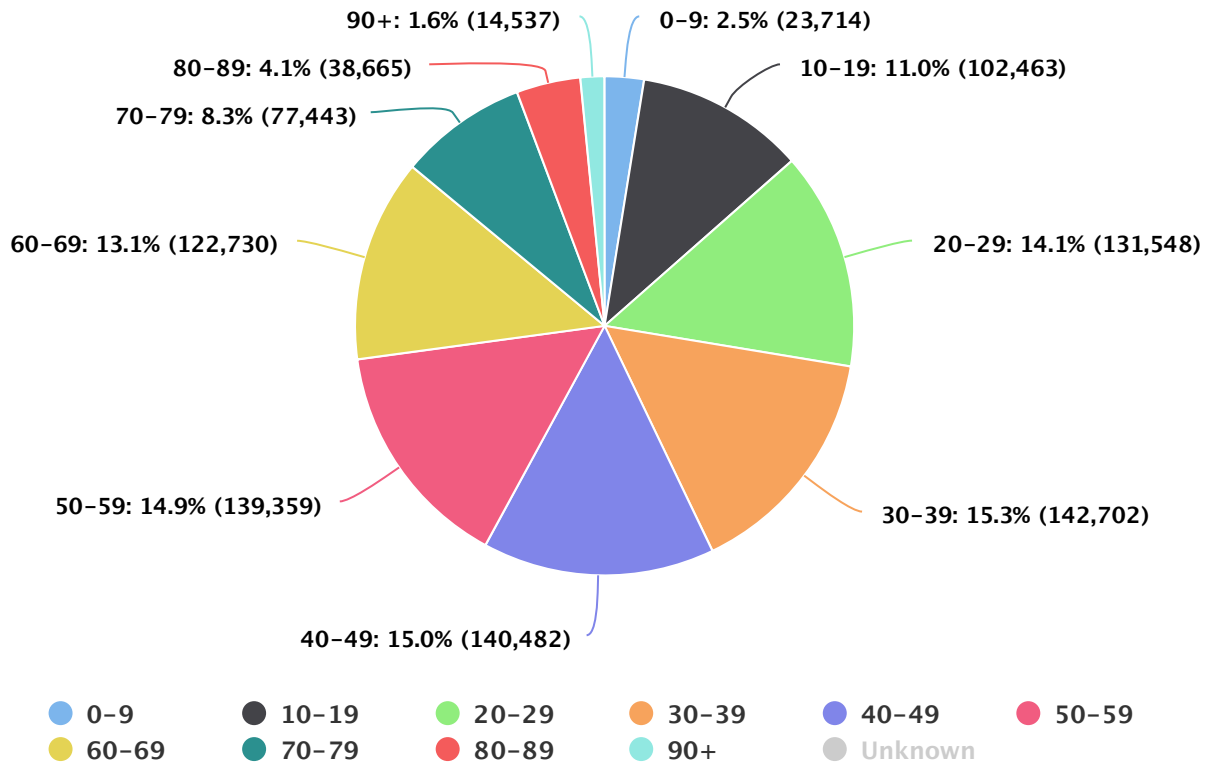


Figure 3: NAD eAdventist data

As a church, we have over 55 year's worth of data indicating that the younger generations are leaving in startling numbers, and we have invested a lot of resources understanding the reasons why they have left. We have so much research on this single issue within Adventism, and yet we have seen no change in the problem. This is the reality we face. The question is, what are we going to do about it? Will we continue business as usual, or invest in changing the culture that causes these losses?

Growing Young

In 2011 I read a book by Kara Powell called *Sticky Faith*, at the time I was working Forest Lake Academy. My campus ministry team and I were looking for a good resource for a new parent/student ministry we were about to launch. *Sticky Faith* focused on Intergenerational Relationships, Partnerships with Families, creating Safe Spaces for young people to ask questions and find answers in God's word. We were blown away by how many parents and students resonated with the lessons we extracted from that book! That was the year I became convinced that the author was being used by God to change young people's lives and their families.

Fast forward to August of 2016. When I heard that Kara had a new book coming out, I immediately pre-purchased it. To me, she had become a rare trusted source for effective youth ministry resources. I stalked my UPS tracking number until its status read "Delivered." My copy of *Growing Young* came in early September, two days later I had devoured it. I knew that this book was different. Immediately, it was evident that Kara and her team of researchers had hit on deep truths in youth ministry that was loaded with potential.

Kara's team had been looking at the same issue as the Adventist church's Nurture and Retention study, but within Christianity as a whole. 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 15-29, and are growing spiritually, emotionally, missionally, and sometimes also numerically. Fuller described these churches as "Growing Young."³ They studied congregations from across the US, from every ethnic group, and every demographic, of all

³ Powell, Kara Eckmann. *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016. 19.

shapes and sizes. As they studied, common themes began to emerge in the data. They identified six “core commitments” present in every one of the churches studied:

- Unlock keychain leadership. Instead of centralizing authority, empower others, especially young people.
- Empathize with today’s young people. Instead of judging or criticizing, step into the shoes of this generation.
- Take Jesus’ message seriously. Instead of asserting formulaic gospel claims, welcome young people into a Jesus centered way of life.
- Fuel a warm community. Instead of focusing on cool worship or programs, aim for warm peer and intergenerational friendships.
- Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere. Instead of giving lip service to how much young people matter, look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource, and involve all of them in all facets of your congregation.
- Be the best neighbors. Instead of condemning the world outside your walls, enable young people to neighbor well locally and globally.⁴

Beginning in 2016, a small group of Adventist pastors, teachers, Conference and Union leadership began studying the book, *Growing Young*, in effort to find a solution for our own challenges. Myself and twelve others joined a cohort for the purpose of becoming certified trainers and speakers for the NAD in Growing Young Adventists.⁵ Once we became certified trainers and speakers, our job was be a to mentor and resource coordinator to local pastors and their churches who wanted to improve their generational bonds.

Since beginning this effort, two of our churches in the Kansas-Nebraska Conference have decided to experiment with this model for church culture change. Leaders from the Wichita South and the KC Chapel Oaks church have read the book together, completed the online Church Assessment survey and they have begun making meaningful church culture change. Church culture change takes intentionality and a lot of hard work, but change is possible, these congregations have already begun to see fruit from their labors!

⁴ *Growing Young*, page 43.

⁵ For more information on Growing Young Adventists, please visit www.growingyoungadventists.org

Additionally, Growing Young Adventist Summits were held in November of 2018 in Kansas City and in October of 2019 in Saint Cloud Minnesota. These Growing Young Adventist Summits were a learning journey for local churches and leaders from across the Mid-America Union (MAUC) where leaders gathered to learn practical skills to improve intergenerational ministry in their local churches. Attendees learned practical ways of helping to build faith communities that will not only survive, but thrive in the years ahead.

Through the leadership of MAUC Youth Director Roger Wade, we are giving congregations practical knowledge and skills to help make change possible. We endeavor to not only stop younger generations from leaving the church, but to make local churches in the Mid America Union places that every member can flourish and have a tremendous impact on the world around them.

Hope for the Future

One of the most powerful takeaways I gained from the Barna collaboration in 2013 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.”⁶ 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 15-20 years, we will be a shadow of what we once were. Or, we could take the steps to change our church culture now and salvage what remains. When we put the teachings of 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

⁶ Barna Group. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Young Adult Study*. Silver Spring, MD: Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2013. <http://www.youngadultlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Barna-SDA-Millennials-Report-final.pdf>.

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.