

# REACHING THE “MILLENNIAL” GENERATION—

## *A Necessity for Adventist Education*

**C**hildren born between 1978 and 2002 are the next great generation. They can't imagine a world without instant messaging and MTV. Their world has been defined by school massacres, September 11, and worldwide terrorism. They're family-centered, morally thoughtful, and want to be committed to a cause. They value tradition and are determined to be successful. At the same time, they often feel lonely and detached from the world of adults. They can detect hypocrisy at a glance, and long for meaningful connections and authenticity. They are powerfully influenced by teachers and church leaders whose lives demonstrate integrity.

Why must these millennials become the focal point of Adventist education? They currently represent one-fourth of the U.S. population (81-82 million). Why should this group be listened to and engaged in service for the church? Because they will be the most affluent, the most confident, and best



educated of all living generations. Their desire to be involved and to use their extensive talents and abilities to serve others makes them potentially a powerful force for good.

While they may appear to be more openly spiritual than their parents, millennials are, or are likely to be, less committed to Christianity and to Adventism than their predecessors. It is predicted that the older they get, the less they will attend church. That's why Adventist educators, pastors, administrators, and members must make connecting with and evangelizing this current generation a top priority.

Let's begin our examination of the older members of this group by analyzing their characteristics. Then we will look at some proven principles that can be used to reach this generation for Jesus.

### **Who Are the “Millennials”?**

Scholars generally agree that the millennial generation began with those born about 1978 (some put the inception as late as 1982) and ends with those born around 2002. This

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group has many distinct characteristics and concerns that differentiate it from three previous generations in the 20th century (the “builders,” born prior to 1945; the “boomers,” born between 1946 and 1965; and the “busters,” born between 1966 and 1977). Considering the unexpected impact of events like the fall of the Soviet Union and 9/11, it’s probably risky to make assumptions about the future of younger millennials, but research has revealed some telling facts about those who are in their teens.

youth: (1) They use technology as a way of life. Cell phones, computers, MP3 players, TV, instant messaging, and E-mail keep them in touch with friends around the world. As a consequence, they have poor verbal skills because they don’t talk to others as did previous generations. (2) They are “passionately tolerant.” They don’t condemn any concept or idea that is different than their own. (3) They are interested in spiritual things and very “god conscious.” The bad news is that they don’t know which “god” to pur-

the popular culture.

Recent research also reveals other major trends relating to this group. In a worldwide study of some 27,000 12- to 19-year-olds called the Teen Planet Survey, millennials scored high on self-reliance. Having grown up feeling that “it’s up to me,” they are unlikely to look to others for help, whether parents, teachers, or the government. However, millennials worldwide have a strong attachment to family and friends, desiring to be with and to please them. In many ways, millennials view this group as their sanctuary against the world.

Finally, millennials are filled with hope for the future. Unlike the previous generation, today’s teens are not cynical or alienated, but quite optimistic, expecting to become happy adults.<sup>4</sup>

#### Cause for Concern—and Hope

Despite being called the next great generation, millennials have also become a great cause for concern. McAllister notes that, “We are in the middle of a historic transition from a conservative Christian foundation to a culture with Christian tradition but little actual faith.”<sup>5</sup>

Millennials are the first U.S. generation to grow up in a postmodern, post-Christian culture. While 61 percent of their grandparents and 39 percent of their parents were churchgoers,



In their book *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Howe and Strauss note that the current generation is not only expected to be the most highly educated and affluent, it’s also the most numerous and ethnically diverse generation in America’s history. “The name ‘Millennial’ hints at what this rising generation could grow up to become—not a lame variation on old Boomer/Xer themes, but a new force of history, a generational colossus far more consequential than most of today’s parents and teachers (and, indeed most kids) dare imagine.”<sup>1</sup>

Dawson McAllister in *Saving the Millennial Generation* says of these

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sue. (4) They are not quick to trust the older generation, condemning teachers, parents, and other adults for being less-than-adequate role models.<sup>2</sup>

Are millennials purely an American generation? No. They’re global, but a post-X generation is emerging in North America (U.S. and Canada) a few years in advance of youth in Europe and Asia.<sup>3</sup> Whether in the U.S. or elsewhere, Adventist millennials, like their peers, are significantly affected by

it is projected that only four percent of the 72 million American millennials will become Christians. Kimball<sup>6</sup> says that this generation of young Americans possesses no Christian experience or education. Their spirituality has been acquired from pop-culture icons, non-Christian parents, liberal media, and public school teachers who possess little or no faith. Sadly, they have not grown up in the church and generally do not trust preachers, Christian lead-

ers, or Christian education. Their post-modern worldview causes them to abhor absolutes, consider truth to lie “in the eye of the beholder,” and to reject any claim that seems exclusive or intolerant. They embrace whatever seems the most meaningful or “feels right to me.”

George Barna’s research on 2,867 teens, conducted between 1997 and 2000, reveals that when young people were asked to estimate the likelihood that they would participate in church life once they were living on their own, only about a third responded positively. Seventy percent of millennials feel there is no such thing as absolute truth, and two-thirds think that the devil is a symbol of evil, rather than a living being. “Placed in context, these results predict the lowest level of expected participation among teens recorded by Barna Research in more than a decade. If the projections pan out, this will signal a substantial decline in church attendance occurring before the close of this decade.”<sup>77</sup>

The millennials’ faith is shallow, and they are even less committed to Christianity than the baby boomer generation. As the millennials become older, they attend church less and less. But they will be the leaders of society, setting policies and making decisions that will shape our civilization in the 21st century. What will this mean for public policy and for the church?<sup>8</sup>

### How to Reach This Generation

Harold Lee, in a 1999 *Adventist Review* article entitled “Church Structure in 2025,” summarized the challenges facing Adventist educators: “For education, the new century looms ahead like white water, a test of nerves, skill, and resourcefulness.” He also noted that “If the purpose and work of Adventist education is to remain equal with the task of evangelism, both people and ‘systems’ must constantly improve.”<sup>9</sup> So, how must we shape the work of education in order to influence this millennial generation for Christ?

First, Adventist educators must continue to show that they care. As Ellen

White wrote: “All who are ordained unto the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men. Their hearts must throb in unison with the heart of Christ. The same

religious activities, they do want to find meaning in church, since they have a strong natural desire for spirituality. They are looking for something that will fulfill the deep longing of their

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longing for souls that He felt will be manifest in them.”<sup>10</sup> For well over a hundred years, since Ellen White wrote these words, Adventist educators have also consistently believed that “the work of education and the work of redemption are one.”<sup>11</sup> Following Jesus’ example, Adventist educators are called to proclaim the good news of salvation, redemption, justification, and reconciliation to our young people. But how should this be done today?

Although Jesus preached to huge crowds, He served as a teacher and mentor to only 12 men. This tells us a great deal about the way to carry out the modern work of Adventist education—we should teach and reach our students relationally. Millennials have a built-in distrust of adults. Educators, administrators, pastors, and even youth workers are viewed as “hired guns,” there to do a job but having little real interest in, or commitment to them as individuals.

Millennials crave authenticity and meaningful connections. Because they support tradition and values, they will listen to older generations, but lacking a trust relationship, they will not hear what they have to say. According to Josh McDowell: “The better you connect with your young person emotionally and relationally, the better equipped he or she is to sort through the pressures and temptations of life and make right choices.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, although millennials expect to spend less time than their parents on

heart. According to Howe and Strauss, millennials see church as a way to cut through the clutter of contemporary life, find relief from pop culture, meet like-minded members of the opposite sex, and do some good deeds. Barna backs this with research showing that of those millennials attending some sort of youth groups, 25 percent come to learn about God, 20 percent come for the activities, and 50 percent come to interact with friends.

Whenever millennials attend a function, they demand solid, personally applicable content. They want to learn



about faith and then apply it to serve church and society. At a recent meeting convened by Monte Sahlin, Columbia Union Conference administrators and educators met with millennials to dialog about their involvement in the life and mission of their church. In the *Visitor's* report entitled "Millennials Dialog With Leaders," young millennials, one after another, stated their firm desire to have their talents and abilities used by the church. In the words of Jonathan Nino, a youth chaplain at Garden State

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To that end, the Internet has become a very important relational tool. E-mail allows students to keep in touch with friends from school, while they search for new friends from around the world.<sup>17</sup>

Adventist educators must build strong, personal relationships with millennials, dealing with them in a way that addresses their special needs, concerns, interests, and problems. An article entitled "Even More Key Characteristics of Today's Teens" says that educators need to seek to understand millennials and their world. When adults devote their time and patience and interest to millennials over an extended period, these young people will respond favorably.<sup>18</sup>

Academy, "We need to know that the Church is willing to back us up and take a risk on us."<sup>13</sup>

### **Methods for Reaching the Millennial Generation With the Gospel**

In an article entitled "Seven Key Characteristics of Teenagers Today," Kent and Nita Curry stress that millennials are skeptical, shrewd, and knowledgeable about life because most have grown up with deep wounds from broken homes, abusive parents, income inequality, and shattered trust in adults. The Currys note that to have any influence, adults have to "care every day and every time you see them. You find out what they like, dislike, who they like, where they go after church, and what subjects they like/dislike in

school. It takes more time than it should, but then, most of them have been hurt deeper than they should."<sup>14</sup>

Unlike previous generations, millennials prefer to have a very few close friends. As McAllister notes, "They long for intimacy and connections because of the breakdown in the family."<sup>15</sup> Millennials are seeking for closeness, but for them, family means not so much blood relations as a circle of close friends. According to Egeler,<sup>16</sup> the central thing lacking in the millennial generation is the feeling that they are important to adults.

Millennials care for relationship above ideology and see themselves as skilled in forming lasting relationships. As Howe and Strauss emphasize, this generation will put an unprecedented value on community and togetherness.

Since millennials seem to be "skeptical, shrewd, and knowledgeable," one might expect them to possess good reasoning skills. But the vast influence of the media and advertising on them suggests otherwise. Information overload is a serious problem for millennials, as well as the rest of the population. Therefore, Adventist educators have a solemn responsibility to help these young people sort out truth from hype. They can do this by offering them practice in analyzing sources of information and applying knowledge to real-life situations.

Often, Adventist educators must mentor and correct bad behavior. No young people of any era ever appreciated adults telling them their actions were stupid or nonsensical. Millennials will welcome guidance and advice when it is given in a non-judgmental





way and when they are treated as persons of worth. Hopler, in an article entitled "Mentor the Next Generation," states that mentors should, "Notice each young adult's special qualities and compliment him or her on them. Encourage each young adult to put his or her God-given talents to use."<sup>19</sup> She also notes that adults should consider which mentoring style feels most comfortable: counseling, teaching, sponsoring, disciplining, spiritual guiding, or coaching?

Albert Einstein is reported to have stated that example isn't another way to teach, it is the only way to teach. Millennials need Christ and the gospel just like previous generations. We must be willing to meet them and mentor them where they are, and love them as Christ loved and mentored His disciples.

### Conclusion

The current generation has not outgrown a need for God. Indeed, these young people are actively searching for Him in many ways in many places: on the Internet in chat rooms, in conversations with family, and in sporadic attendance at youth groups and church services. Are they finding real acceptance and deep relationships? Or are they disgusted with the hypocrisy and bad behavior of the church's representatives? Are they crying to be

included in the church and yet are being shut out—their talents unused and wasted? As Trevor Osborn asked at the Columbia Union meeting of millennials and church officials, "How do you empower us? Just ask us. Give us something to do—and we will do it."<sup>20</sup>

The millennials are God's children. In the not-too-distant future, they will take up the leadership of the church. We, the church, as Christ's body, have the responsibility of passing on the faith to this generation. As Dr. Humberto Rasi, recently retired director of the General Conference Department of Education, summarized it: "Unquestionably what happens on Adventist school campuses today will define the quality of our leaders in the next generation, the strength of our global church, and the future of our mission. In view of these realities, Adventist teachers and students demand our utmost consideration and prayerful support as we enter the new millennium."<sup>21</sup> ✍



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