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S. Joseph Kidder

Andrews University, kiddersj@andrews.edu

Natalie Dorland

Andrews University, dorland@andrews.edu

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Getting Back on Track

Why some young men stay in the church and not others

WORD COUNT: 1,911



Church is lonely,” Matt summarized. “Nobody wants to walk into a church alone, sit by themselves, and then leave without anyone saying a word to them. That’s not going to be a spiritually enriching experience.” Our conversation had delved into the truth of what weekly church services are like for the few single young adult men who attend them. Weekly church services can be a deeply isolating experience. “No one really seemed to care that I was there. And no one would notice if I didn’t come back.”

Sadly, Matt’s experience is not unique.¹ It reflects the many conversations we had with young men about their perspectives on attending church. Numerous articles, books, and research studies explain why young adults in both the Millennial and Gen Z demographics are leaving the church as well as character traits of healthy churches that are attracting young men.

WHY HAVE WE LOST SO MANY YOUNG MEN?

In our research we discovered that in many Adventist churches, 55-65 percent of the attendees are women.² A Pew Research survey in the United States found that 60 percent of women said religion is “very important” in their life, versus only 47 percent of men.³

One proposed reason for this disparity is that Christian activities and religious practices often appeal more to women than men. Pew Research Center found higher levels of religiosity and interest in traditional church activities among women. This may be attributed to influences from both nature and nurture.⁴ Our interviews revealed the same conclusion.

Character traits and interest in specific types of activities can be similar for both genders, but the types of activities promoted in a local church setting may often appeal to more traditionally feminine traits.⁵

For example, worship songs sing of love for Jesus and of His kindness and gentleness. Sermons often discuss Jesus’ caring nature and healing presence, and our need to emulate such qualities. Small groups value vulnerability, and the outward expression of emotions is expected at agape feasts and yearly Bible retreats. Church outreach often centers on nurturing activities, such as clothing and feeding the needy. The lists of activities most churches offer their members often mirror what mothers would do to care for their children. And so the church is the mother that cares for the community. But what about

God's fatherly characteristics? What about Jesus' "masculine" traits? How can the church mirror those effectively too?

Our research was based on interviews with young men who shared that for anyone who relates to traditionally masculine activities, the aforementioned elements of church just aren't very appealing. Topics young men are often interested in vary. Career achievement, having an influence, being a good father, leadership development, and vocational discipleship are rarely incorporated into the life of the church. Few ministries are set up to address men's questions and issues in a way that appeals to them. Rather, young adult men are often portrayed as the porn-watching, video-game-playing, irresponsible demographic of society. These negative topics are often criticized from the pulpit, neither giving solutions nor taking the time to find out what other positive topics are truly of interest to young men. This may help explain why precollege teens don't come back to church after they graduate, and the few young men left in the congregation feel even more isolated and alone.

Today's young men grew up on social media and truly understand its power. They are passionate about changing society, are a more diverse generation than ever before, and have incredible social influence. Gen Z has strong opinions on matters of social justice, race relations, gender, and identity, and wants to be part of making positive societal changes.⁶ Because of this deep sense of calling to see justice in the world, they expect more from the church.

ROAD MAP TO SUCCESS

After numerous interviews with pastors, church leaders, and young men who have stayed with church,

we noticed a trend in the types of faith communities that are keeping their young men engaged.

Mentorship: The top solution we discovered is simple: young men need older male mentors.⁷ If you want to see more young men engaged in church attendance, find dedicated men in your congregation who can intentionally mentor preteen boys through their young adult years. Mentoring was the common denominator among all the young men interviewed who were still engaged in church.

Young men need someone they trust to talk to when they have romantic relationship questions, are discouraged, or when looming career choices are on the horizon. Mentorship is a lifestyle in healthy churches. Think of a few ways your church can grow in its capacity to mentor young men. Adult men can teach young men how to have a relationship with God, how they can make a difference in the world and in the mission of God's kingdom in practical ways.

Goal-driven Ministries: Young men enjoy project-based ministry that is meaningful, with a clear end date. Having a purpose in life is important for a young man, and this can be achieved through short-term projects that make a tangible difference.

Marcus moved to a new city for his job and found a church to attend. He envisioned upgrading the church's technology, but this would cost thousands of dollars, hours of planning and research, and the commitment of the church board. Randy, a retiree with a passion for young people, connected with Marcus and developed a friendship with him. Together they tackled the dream—Marcus with the vision, Randy with the church connections. Because of their genuine relationship and clear project, the church got on board with the vision, raised the money,

and installed the greatly needed updates to their system. This was successful because it had a clear goal, was supported by a mentoring relationship, and had meaningful ministry implications.

Growing Young research⁸ shows that ministry is what keeps young people in the church.⁹ Appoint a teen boy to your church board, listen to his ideas, and mentor him into his leadership potential. Let young men lead mission trips and plan outreach projects to build their faith. Have a young man lead a Sabbath School class or find other practical ways to help your community. Do not micromanage them; instead, do ministry in partnership *with* them. Let them make mistakes, and encourage them to keep going until they figure it out. Every church should be aggressively intentional about including young men in leadership ministry positions.

Outdoor Ministries: Engaging in the outdoors is both fun and deeply fulfilling for many young men. From camping trips to whitewater rafting, rock climbing, hiking, and more, the outdoors is where young men can explore the wilderness of the world and their own relationship with God.¹⁰ It's a great place to both play and pray together. After a long day of hiking, late-night talks around a campfire provide a natural setting to talk about experiences with God. Jesus connected with His disciples in nature as well.

Create a coming-of-age-style camping trip for preteen boys and their fathers or other mentors to explore nature and be discipled. Let young men lead a Sabbath outdoor activity at least once a month and invite families to join.

Church Atmosphere: Keeping young men actively involved in church life starts with the church atmosphere. Is your church grace-filled, nonjudgmental, accepting, and



In order to keep young men engaged in your church, its culture must be one of grace and authenticity.

loving toward anyone who walks through your doors? These elements of character and church personality are nonnegotiable if you want young men to attend your church.

In our own research we discovered that churches think they are more loving and welcoming than they actually are. When churches request a consultation to evaluate their effectiveness in reaching visitors, people from surrounding neighborhoods are chosen to attend the church anonymously and fill out a survey about their experience as a visitor.¹¹ In the vast majority of cases, visitors rank churches as less friendly and welcoming than the church leaders perceive themselves to be.

One of the most common reasons young adults say they left the church is “Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical.”¹² Young men need a non-judgmental, safe environment to explore their beliefs.

A healthy church, ready for growth, will be open to questions. If your teens or young adults are questioning the core and content of their faith, don’t run in fear. Study together, discuss their faith crisis openly, acknowledge that you also have questions, and walk with them in their spiritual journey. In order to keep young men engaged

in your church, its culture must be one of grace and authenticity.

CONCLUSION

Do you want to see more young men engaged in your local congregation? Change the culture of your church, develop a mentorship program, and create meaningful ministries.

Matt, our lonely friend from the beginning of this article, is now a pastor in North America. Despite the struggles of being a single young adult man in the church, he has stayed connected because of Jeff, who mentored him when he was a teen. Jeff still regularly calls him to talk about his relationship with God and other life topics. Because Jeff invested in a long-term friendship with him, Matt knows that his life is valued and that his spiritual outcome is important to someone.

There is hope and a solution to filling pews with missing young men. God will give you the inspiration and energy necessary to start these initiatives in your own church. Investing in young men may take a lot of hard work, and it may be years before you see significant growth—but the results are well worth the effort. Spend some time in prayer now as you contemplate how your church can reach more young men for Christ. ☺

¹ David Pullinger, “Where Are All the Men?” *Single Friendly Church*, Mar. 24, 2017, <https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/what-do-you-say-when/awhere-are-all-the-mena>, accessed Feb. 24, 2021.

² This statistic represents the average percentage of regular weekly attendees in many Seventh-day Adventist local churches. We interviewed more than 60 pastors, young men, conference and union leaders, and church members of various cultural and language backgrounds around the world. These interviewees were from the North American, Inter-European, Trans-European, South American, Southern Africa-Indian Ocean, Inter-American, and Southern Asia-Pacific divisions.

³ Pew Research Center, “The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World,” Mar. 22, 2016, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/#fn-25285-2>, accessed Feb. 24, 2021.

⁴ Travis Mitchell, “Theories Explaining Gender Differences in Religion,” *Pew Research Center*, Mar. 22, 2016, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/theories-explaining-gender-differences-in-religion/>, accessed Feb. 24, 2021.

⁵ Every individual is unique, and many church members don’t fit into the stereotypical boxes for what females or males might enjoy in life. But our focus, in this case, was young men who don’t feel they can fully express their masculinity within the church environment.

⁶ Tim Alford, “What Every Christian Needs to Know About Generation Z,” *Premier Christianity*, October 2019, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2019/October-2019/What-every-Christian-needs-to-know-about-Generation-Z>, accessed Feb. 24, 2021.

⁷ S. Joseph Kidder, “Mentoring: A Way of Life,” *Ministry*, March 2017, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2017/03/Mentoring-A-way-of-life>, accessed Feb. 24, 2021.

⁸ Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), pp. 50-87.

⁹ An interview with youth and young adult ministry specialist Steve Case on October 7, 2020, confirmed that the same principle applies to the Adventist Church. Adventist research, such as ValueGenesis in 1990, 2000, 2010, has confirmed the same findings.

¹⁰ All outdoor activities must be approved by the appropriate church board for insurance purposes.

¹¹ This work is done by Joseph Kidder as part of his church consultation.

¹² Aaron Earls, “8 Reasons Young Adults Leave Your Church (and 8 Reasons They Stay),” *Facts & Trends*, Jan. 23, 2019, <https://factsandtrends.net/2019/01/23/8-reasons-young-adults-leave-your-church-and-8-reasons-they-stay/>, accessed Feb. 24, 2021.

S. Joseph Kidder is professor of Christian ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in **Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.**

Natalie Dorland is a pastor in the Washington Conference in the **United States.**