

An Epic Church Encounter

By: **Samantha Angeles**

“It seems reasonable to believe that at least 40 to 50% of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North America are essentially leaving the church by their mid-20’s,” says Roger Dudley, emeritus professor of Church Ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary on the campus of Andrews University. “This figure may well be higher. This is a hemorrhage of epic proportions.”



Not only are the majority of Adventist churches failing to retain their young adult population, but they are also unable to effectively evangelize secular young adults, resulting in the neglect of an entire generation of secular- and postmodern-minded people.

For Andres Flores, lead pastor of Chicago’s Epic Church (Epic= Every Person In Christ), this “hemorrhage of epic proportions” is unacceptable.

The church, which is the result of Andres’ God-given passion to reach young adults, began in 2012 as a 30-person church plant in urban Wicker Park, Chicago, and is now preparing to launch its second campus in Chicago’s suburban city of Lombard, Illinois. (Read more about how Epic Church began in [“The Makings of An Epic Church.”](#))

Now in its fifth year, Epic Church is living out the passion that God gave Andres: contextualizing the gospel to urban young adults.

“We do that relationally,” Andres says. “In Epic Church, we believe that the best context for gospel transformation is a relational one. This resonates deeply with the millennial consciousness and their deep value for community. We’ve been practicing this model as much as we can, trying to understand it better, trying to experiment with it. We don’t have a right to share content if we haven’t earned it through relationships.”

One way that Andres and his team accomplishes this is by “intentionally modeling a deeply relational environment through each of their ministries,” according to Andres. They have built this model into the very culture of the church, so that each member is a partner in creating a warm atmosphere. Epic Church has an “assimilation team” that focuses on welcoming, connecting with and following up with new attendees. However, this is not the extent of relational ministry at Epic Church.

“That could become a plastic ministry if the members were not on board,” he says. “It is the members that truly create the relational culture. They are intentional about making sure that people are greeted, treated, and loved.”

Ana Fuentes, an Epic Church charter member and young adult who is part of the assimilation team, explains: “When people come in, we try to really connect with them, not just greet them or say hello. I always make sure to exchange information, whether it’s phone numbers or social media contacts, and find things we have in common. If I can’t, I make sure to connect them with other members. We don’t want them to feel like they have to commit to being a part of us to feel loved. We want them to feel loved, safe and energized whenever they’re with us.”

The culture of the church has become relational by the same means Epic Church was founded: Through the

power of the Holy Spirit, and the compelling power of the vision.

“I don’t think I can over-emphasize the value of vision-casting, sharing stories of key moments when people were transformed because someone was very intentional about developing a relationship,” says Andres. “If I could do it all over again, I would have done that more in the beginning—communicated the importance of relationship in a winsome way. Now, we share these stories constantly, at every level, from staff to volunteer. We even have seasons of eight Sabbaths where we invite someone to tell their story in the main worship service so that people will not underestimate the power of an invitation, of noticing someone, and inviting them back.”

Along with developing a truly relational atmosphere, Epic Church develops this ministry through their Life Groups, their quarterly eight- to nine-week small group campaigns.

“The philosophy behind each group is to do life with Jesus and to do life with each other. It is a double-layered foundation of vulnerability and accountability. What anyone can expect coming to a Life Group in Epic Church is a place where people will listen, hear your struggles, sustain that process with Scripture, and point you back to Jesus. There are also frank, candid accountability conversations to help each other grow, overcome temptation, and take the next step.”

For Ana, who is not only a founding member of Epic Church, but also serves on the assimilation team, governance board, social media team, production team and Epic Kids, the combination of relationship and accountability is what enables her to minister and has helped her relationship with God grow.

“Being in Epic has helped me have an honest relationship with God,” she says. “It’s more than just being involved and participating in ministry. Having good friendships where you are held accountable is so important. We keep each other on track and help each other make our relationships with God a priority. That has made the biggest impact in my life. It’s because of that foundation that I am able to do everything else.”

The relational discipleship that happens in Life Groups is so central to Epic Church’s philosophy that every single Epic Church leader is involved in or leads a small group.

“We believe that the key function of an elder is to model relational discipleship,” says Andres. “They lead life groups, model discipleship in their lives and develop relationships outside of church functions and events. They are to model what it means to love like Jesus and grow in Jesus. They also develop, mentor and invest in developing a new Life Group leader, and train them all throughout the session.”

As a result, members have not only grown as disciples and as a community, but have also seen Life Groups work as an evangelistic platform. In Fall 2016, an elder mentored a new young adult to become a Life Group leader. Since then, that young man has formed a new Life Group, and has brought seven new, unchurched young adults into the Epic Church family, many of whom are already beginning to invite other unbelieving young adults.

However, Andres also knows that there are some who would assume that a relationship-driven church is theologically light.

“When I’m asked, I point back to the reality that the Advent movement was highly relational. Our historical roots are in this model. The basis for our small-group model is the early Adventist social meeting model that was patterned after the Methodist group meetings. They were relationship-oriented, accountability-based, vulnerable times when people got real with each other, shared testimonies and even called each other out. What we’re doing is not new. That’s how the Advent movement was born.

“I also point back to Christ, how he personally mentored his disciples. In fact, nearly every aspect of growth we see in the Bible is through relationship. Finally, I point to the Spirit of Prophecy. Ellen G. White advocates

for ministry that earns people’s confidence and then points them to Jesus.”

In addition, Andres is grateful that he does not have to worry about making the Adventist message relevant to young adults.

“Our Adventist theology is highly relevant,” he emphasizes. “Our community in Chicago’s Wicker Park is a postmodern, young adult, hipster neighborhood. Everyone is interested in veganism, in narrative, in the power of stories. I don’t compromise theological purity because I never compromise Jesus—we always bring our values, our teachings, back to Christ.”

The effectiveness of this model designed to evangelize and disciple urban young adults is evident not only in Epic Church’s thriving, growing congregation of millennials and families, but also in the fulfillment of the church’s mission.

“Our mission,” Andres says, “Is a re-telling of Matthew 28 that dictates our methodology and the reason we exist, which is to grow mature disciples of Jesus Christ who will make other disciples of Jesus. We will know we are truly making disciples when those disciples begin planting churches.”

And, at the five-year mark, this vision is now coming to pass. The Sabbath after Epic Church celebrates its five-year anniversary, they will plant a new Epic Church in Lombard, Illinois. (Read more about the starting phases of the new church plant at [“The Makings of an Epic Church.”](#))

To pastors in more traditional churches who may not have a young adult ministry or may not know how to start investing in young adults, Andres gives this advice:

“First, pray for a sense of urgency. If you notice a lack of young adults numerically and spiritually, and if you don’t really feel a sense of urgency about it, pray for God to give you that sense of urgency for young adults. And then, intentionally spend time with them. Ask questions. If your church is not ready for a young adult ministry yet, it’s okay—you just need to be able to love them, to listen to them. Because if we don’t have the heart for young adults, if we’re not listening to them—it will not happen. My fear is that we will have a lot of resources about reaching young adults and how to do it—but not the heart. Once you hear their stories and pray for passion, God will reveal the next steps.”

When asked about how to keep the church current in order to be appealing to young adults, Andres laughed at the idea that he could be current and relevant.

“Just be with them,” he says. “I think they care more about me caring for them than about me trying to stay cool. Having said that, I do read, am informed, and I try to be aware of the trends and the worldview that dominates the mindset of the secular world, which of course influences our young adults in an urban setting. It is incredibly powerful. I am aware of the cultural forces that threaten the gospel of Jesus Christ in the lives of young adults. I do a lot of theological reflection in terms of what’s going on in the culture that is counterintuitive to the gospel. I try to find out—what are the idols that threaten the spiritual lives of our people? What are the idols in the hearts of our people that resonates with the culture? The only way I can have a sense for that is by being with our young adults, spending time with them, and prioritizing being with them.”

For Further Reflection:

What is the state of young adult ministry in your church? How is your church discipling and evangelizing this generation?

How much time do you spend listening to, talking with and investing in young adults? Is there a young adult or group of young adults in your church you could begin investing in today?

On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your church's sense of urgency toward reaching young adults with the gospel? Is there a group of parents, other ministers or church leaders with whom you can pray to ask God for the urgency and passion to reach young adults?

What is one thing you can do to invest in positive, intergenerational mentorship in your church?

1 Roger L. Dudley, Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-Year Study (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 35.