Genuine discipleship empowered by acceptance

**Slide 1**
Introduction – ICM and still practitioner from the field (in the Czech Republic)

At this point there is no need for more statistics about young adults leaving the church. We have heard enough statistics...

The issue is what can people in local churches do so that teenagers, when they become adults and enter the world, they still consider their church as their family, stay connected with and are actively involved in the church. The issue is how can we help them to grow in love for Christ and become His disciples?

Kinnaman in his book You Lost Me comes to a conclusion that the real reason behind the dropout problem is a discipleship issue. “The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture,” he explains (p. 21).

I am offering a formula for one how to work with and how to work on retaining young adults. How much and how well does this formula work, it has not been directly quantified yet, but there are number of sociological studies working with similar ideas – and also the case study I am going to show you in a minute, might provide little demonstration.

**Slide 2**
Statement of the problem here: “The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.”

Books on Gen x 15-20 years ago: Just consider a title of a book written by Mark Regele - from 1995 called Death of the Church with a following cover quote: “The Church has a choice: to die as a result of its resistance to change or to die in order to live.” This book gathered clear demographic evidence that the coming change was different than many changes generations before, way out of prediction and out of the securities the world has been used to.

**Slide 3**
What is happening 20 years later? Young people are leaving church that seems to be at adds with their perception and their world. Their taste, their music, their values, their feelings, their priorities, their reasons, their moods, all that is just different.

- Amish factor - explain

Clift Jenkins on SDA: “while Adventists seem to place great importance on outward behavior, such behavior is a poor predictor of their relationship with Christ. Time and again we hear from young adults who are deepening their relationship with Christ (and people in the church) during a time when their outward behaviors are not in conformity to the church. In many cases they will later become further committed to the lifestyle standards of Adventist doctrine, but only after internalizing them rather than conforming to them.

Young people are leaving not necessarily because they are Godless but often because they want to believe in God – what a paradox.

**Slide 4** Church with its culture (that is priorities, manners, emphasis, history) does not make sense to them.

**Slide 5**
Discipleship is not so much about doctrines as it is about love. Discipleship requires time, discipleship requires to get dirty. If Jesus was Amish, he would never come from heaven to our earth in the first place because he would reject to mingle with the world and he would reject to accept culture of that time.
Discipleship does not happen without incarnation.

We are told in this new research on NAD young adults by Clint Jenkins: The themes of judgment versus acceptance are critical for young adults in SDA. Young adults are relational.

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One more quotation: “One challenge for the local churches to consider is how to leverage negative experiences. Instead of discarding the person or putting up barriers to “protect” others from their influence, how can the church not only embrace them, but also find a way for them—and others—to use their mistakes as learning opportunities?

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Tim would always sit quietly in the church but by age 12 years he struggled, did it against his will, just for his parents. When he was 9 years old, he begun to play drums and by age 14 he started his band Fake City with three other friends from school, playing Pop Punk, just for fun. They began to rehears in Generations Family Center. It almost seemed as he was using this music to get lost in the world, but God interfered in a miraculous way.

His friend who played bass guitar noticed Tim was different. He did not drink alcohol nor smoked marijuana and that got his attention. He found out Tim was a Christian and so he wanted to know more.

One day Tim came to his dad and asked if he can borrow a bible for his friend Pavel. “But dad,” he said. “Do not talk or persuade my friend as you like to do with people. Just let him read it on his own.” Well, dad did not talk with Pavel until Pavel contacted him on his own about a year later through Facebook and asked him for a meeting to talk about differences between various Christian denominations. At that time (December 2010) Pavel have read the Bible and googled enough information to know that he wants to follow Jesus and become Christian – Seventh-Day Adventist.

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They both attended quietly Church plant Sabbath meetings in the Family Center, dreaming to reach for more young people. Adults would help them with outreach various events, one of them Free Hugs campaign. It was fun. People on the street looked at them with suspicion but those who had to work during holydays appreciated the hug more.

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Couple months later major outreach event (Exit Tour 2012) was to happen in collaboration with two other churches. Youth evangelist came to train young Christians to share the Gospel and lead people to Christ few weeks ahead. Exit Tour was a program for high school students. Group of professional musicians and lectors came to our city and spent morning in one public high school one each day (Wednesday to Friday) doing some music and preventive care lectures. This was a great opportunity to invite students for follow-up activities in the afternoon into the outreach center. The picture shows humorous lecture conducted by a pastor in the outreach center.

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The event culminated on Friday evening with a major rock concert in a concert hall. Between the songs Californian band shared testimonies about their faith and at the end kids were asked to give their life to Jesus and to pray the sinners prayer for the first time.

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About 8 students (including Tim and Pavel) formed a group and started to meet once a week to talk about life issues and grow spiritually. Soon (summer 2012) four of them were baptized and since then have been meeting together for Sabbath morning to worship as well, reaching out to their friends too.

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One of their outreach activities was to visit homeless people, share with them food, their faith and if interested, our literature. (Christmas 2012).

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The original music band got transformed at the mean time with a new name – Home for Real. Although the music is hardcore (uncomfortable for many Christians), the message is spiritual, reaching young people who are far away from the church. I still do not accept the style of music but I accept them with their culture and BTW – I see that God is using them.

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They adopted values of Straight Edge movement, not smoking, drinking, no drugs, no sex before marriage and strict vegetarian diet. One may wonders, why Straight Edge, why not E.G. White writings and SDA teaching, but it may be because of the cultural gap as discussed earlier.

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The other two girls grew up in the local SDA church and were expected to support that church the same as their parents do. However, as it turned out, they were no longer connected with that church, and attended Sabbath worship services just because of their parents. According to their witness, joining the youth cell opened their hearts for Jesus and helped them to grow spiritually. Through baptism they decided to publicly state they are converted Christians and want to follow Jesus along with the youth cell.

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Although the Youth Generation adopted Seventh-Day Adventist beliefs, their emphases and expressions may differ. Learning about God is important to them, but they are not so involved in a deep Bible study and theological understanding, as one might have wished. On a scale from 1 to 5, the highest ranked items for Sabbath were “to be with people I love,” “to feel God’s presence,” “to sing songs and praises,” etc. Unlike the previous generations, they are more than anything else inspired during their worship service by pleasant atmosphere.

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In the fall of 2013 there was another Exit Tour event. While the first Exit tour was to evangelize these young people and form youth group, this time it was with formed group of young people ready to reach out and evangelized their peers. Prior to the program in public high school and the concert they were fasting and praying for four days.

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Many young people were leaving the Friday rock concert with New Testament in their hands; fifty of them indicated greater or lesser interest in learning more about Jesus.

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Follow-up meeting allowed Youth Generation to mingle with new-comers, listen to and share with them, build relationships and invite them for Sabbath meetings.

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Following Sabbaths five new people came. Bara (on the picture) was baptized in local SDA church several years ago but then dropped out. Having heard about Youth Generation and about outreach events, she came back!

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Youth generation has own leadership and events. After Sabbath worship they had their own outreach, went to the neighborhood city and were asking people on the street about God...
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What about the next generation? How different they are going to be? What challenges will they bring? How do we retain them? Let's hope that our formula will work for them as well: Genuine discipleship multiplied by empowering acceptance equals total retention provided greenhouse effect (amish factor) does not prevail over mission passion.