
When Home and Church Don't Hold

Rethinking Family as the First Line of Discipleship

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The numbers should trouble us. According to Barna Group research published in David Kinnaman's *Faith for Exiles*, 64 percent of young adults raised in Christian homes have walked away from church involvement by their late twenties. That figure has climbed from 59 percent in just seven years. Nearly two out of every three young people who sat in our pews, sang in our choirs, and memorized their memory verses have quietly slipped out the back door.

But before we blame the world, the culture, or the screens in their pockets, we need to ask a harder question: What was happening, or not happening in our homes and in our churches that left them so loosely tethered?

The Home That Holds

Ellen White wrote with striking clarity: "The restoration and uplifting of humanity begins in the home" (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 349). Not in the church foyer. Not in the Sabbath School classroom. In the home. The family unit was always meant to be the first school of faith, the place where doctrine becomes daily life and theology is translated into how we treat each other at the dinner table.

Yet for many Adventist families, faith at home has been reduced to a Friday evening ritual, a candle lit, a song sung, and then silence until the next Sabbath morning. Worship has become something we attend rather than something we live. And our children have noticed the gap.

The Barna research identifies a small but significant countertrend: roughly 10 percent of young adults raised in Christian homes remain what Kinnaman calls “resilient disciples.” These are not young people who merely attend church. They are actively involved in community beyond Sabbath morning. They hold a high view of Scripture. And—critically—they want a faith that connects with the real world rather than retreating from it.

What distinguished their formation? Relationships. Not programs. Deep, sustained, intergenerational relationships where faith was modelled, questioned, and lived out in the open.

This is a family conversation.

The Church That Connects

If the home is the first school, the church is meant to be its partner—not its replacement. Too often in our conference, we have treated the church as though it were solely responsible for the spiritual formation of children and young adults. We drop them off at Sabbath School and Pathfinders and assume the work is being done. But formation by delegation is not discipleship.

The resilient 10 percent were not products of better programming. They were products of environments, home and church working in concert, where adults took genuine interest in their questions, where doubt was not treated as disloyalty, and where faith was Christ-centred rather than culture-bound.

For our Alberta Conference families, this means rethinking some assumptions. Are our homes places of authentic spiritual conversation, or just religious routine? Are we building intergenerational bridges, or are we age-segregating ourselves into irrelevance?

What Must Change

Three shifts deserve our urgent attention:

First, we must move from performance to presence. Families need permission to be honest—about their struggles, their doubts, and their failures. A home where

children see parents wrestle with faith and return to Scripture is infinitely more formative than one where every question is met with a proof text.

Second, we must move from programs to partnerships. The church cannot disciple what the home does not model. Family Ministries must become less about events and more about equipping parents, grandparents, and guardians to be the primary faith-shapers in a child's life.

Third, we must move from attendance to belonging. The 64 percent did not leave because they were never in the building. They left because they were never truly in the family. Belonging is forged through relationships, mentors who remember their names, congregations that make room for their questions, and worship that speaks to their real world.

A Call to Our Conference Families

The 64 percent are not a statistic. They are our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, our Sabbath School students who once coloured pictures of Daniel in the lions' den and now will not return our calls. And the 10 percent who remain resilient are not spiritual accidents. They are the fruit of homes and churches that did the slow, relational, intentional work of discipleship.

The restoration and uplifting of humanity still begins in the home. But the home does not work alone. It works hand in hand with a church that is willing to be as real, as present, and as persistent as the God we serve.

The question before every Adventist family in Alberta is not whether our young people will face an exilic culture. They already do. The question is whether we will form them, in our kitchens, at our tables, and in our sanctuaries, to be resilient in it.

Source: David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Baker Books, 2019). Research conducted by Barna Group.