



# URBAN TUNE IN

A CONVERSATION

**WHAT ARE THE  
CHALLENGES AND  
OPPORTUNITIES OF  
URBAN MINISTRY?**

By Maddy Voinea and Maryellen Hacko

## SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

Urban Tune In has been a listening initiative designed to begin a conversation about urban ministry in local Seventh-day Adventist churches within the SPD. It aimed to identify opportunities and barriers to ministry in urban contexts, as well as provide insight into perspectives of secular urbanites toward Christianity, and Adventism specifically.

Having compared and analysed responses from 15 in-depth interviews from Adventist church leaders across major cities in Australia and New Zealand, the primary findings can be summarised as follows:

### CHARACTERISTICS OF URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

Urban environments have three main characteristics in common:

1. **They are densely-populated ‘mixed bags’ of cultures and classes**, providing a wide variety of opportunities for meeting needs.
2. **They are secular**, making it difficult for Adventists to connect and communicate Jesus in ways people understand.
3. **They facilitate busy lifestyles**, making it difficult for churches to function and to compete with work commitments and entertainment.

### URBAN PERCEPTIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

This report reinforced findings by McCrindle’s Faith and Belief in Australia (2017) and Faith and Belief in New Zealand (2018) and the Seventh-day Adventist Church Perception Study (2022), that many secular urbanites view Christianity through an unfavourable lens.

#### Perceptions toward Christianity:

Specifically, this report highlighted three main characteristics of negative urban perceptions toward Christianity in general:

1. **Ignorance:** most people have little to no understanding of basic Christian concepts, and view the church as judgmental and outdated.
2. **Dissonance:** most people see a stark disconnect between the character of Jesus and the behaviour of Christians, fuelled by political topics in mainstream media.
3. **Relevance:** while many are open to spirituality, people perceive Christianity as having little value for human flourishing.

#### Perceptions toward Adventism:

Three main characteristics of urban perceptions toward Adventism were also highlighted by the respondents, which include:

1. **General ignorance:** very few people know what an Adventist is or what makes them different from other Christians.
2. **Unique and quirky:** of those who can identify Adventists, most know them for being vegetarian, not drinking alcohol or keeping Sabbath.
3. **Hospitals, schools or service:** most positive interaction with Adventism happens through hospitals, schools or ADRA.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND STRENGTHS

Opportunities and strengths were divided into two categories: those inherent to the city, versus those inherent to the church. These were explored separately.

### Opportunities and strengths of the city

1. **Cities expose a wide range and volume of needs**, which many churches have the infrastructure and manpower to meet.
2. **Cities are home to many existing groups and initiatives**, through which Christians can get involved and make connections.

### Opportunities and strengths of the Church

1. **Adventist churches have numerous existing structures**, like Pathfinders, ADRA, Sabbath school and health programs.
2. **Adventist churches have many attractive beliefs**, when communicated in a positive and relevant way.

## CHALLENGES AND WEAKNESSES

Challenges and weaknesses were divided into two categories: those inherent to the city, versus those inherent to the church. These were also explored separately.

### Challenges and weaknesses of the city

1. **Behavioural and lifestyle differences**, creating unrealistic expectations and routines for most secular urbanites.
2. **Scepticism, low biblical literacy and negative perceptions**, meaning that most find the Bible conceptually foreign or ridiculous or have issues with Christians' beliefs and positions regarding the LGBTQ+ community and other social issues.

### Challenges and weaknesses of the church

1. **Low gospel fluency**, assumptions informing how the gospel is communicated using insider language and focusing on elements which people find irrelevant to their lives.
2. **Insular 'us versus them' thinking**, creating a perceived need to separate from the world and take a programmatic, self-serving approach.
3. **Clinging to tradition at the expense of innovation**, causing the church to grow old, lose relevance and have no long-term vision.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPROACH

The recommended approach outlined in this report is to take a relationship-centred approach to reaching secular urbanites. This contains four steps, or stages:

1. **Empathise:** adopt Christ's view of people and have an attitude of openness, respect, genuine care and friendship
2. **Connect:** create safe spaces for genuine conversations and meaningful connection, characterised by accessibility and inclusivity.
3. **Serve:** listen to your community and choose one or two ways that you can fulfil their needs
4. **Reframe:** train your church community to know how to communicate the gospel in relevant and loving ways.

## CONCLUSION

Urban Tune In has highlighted some tremendous opportunities as well as significant challenges facing the Adventist Church in reaching secular urban communities.

This report highlights the negative or misinformed perceptions held by urban society toward the Church due to the influence of media, secularism, busyness, and a perceived contrast between Christian beliefs and behaviour. Yet many are still open to learning about Jesus and would welcome churches that are willing to respond to community needs and provide social connection.

As responses highlighted, secular urbanites often see the Church exhibiting characteristics opposite to the genuine care and belonging expressed by Jesus, either consciously through exclusive behaviour, or unconsciously due to existing church structures and traditions that impose barriers between the church and wider society.

In order to reach secular urbanites, respondents noted that Adventist churches must overcome challenges relating to low gospel fluency, insular thinking and a tendency to cling to self-serving traditions. A general lack of openness, forward-thinking and intentionality

in reaching unchurched people are underlying factors contributing to these challenges.

This report recommends adopting a relationship-centred approach to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges associated with reaching secular urbanites. This four step approach—empathise, connect, serve and reframe—provides a framework that churches can tailor to their own specific context and strengths.

Although pivoting Adventist churches to be effective in reaching secular urbanites requires overcoming many internal and external obstacles, there are also many opportunities that Adventist churches can explore and existing strength we can utilise. Having existing infrastructure—a group of Christian people, ongoing initiatives like Sabbath school, Pathfinders or ADRA, and a church building—is a tremendous advantage that, with strategic thinking, commitment and courage, can be redeployed to reach secular urban communities.

With prayer, teamwork, and guidance from the Holy Spirit, the Adventist Church can grow to be relevant to secular urbanites, and bring afresh the life-transforming gospel of Jesus to many people in our cities.

## PROJECT LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this project was to begin a conversation with ministry leaders on the front line of urban ministry. Although we believe that the responses and conclusions in this report are representative of a broader conversation amongst ministry leaders, several limitations of the research are identified for consideration. Firstly, the sample size of respondents is inadequate. Considering the population of the six cities in this report, a larger sample of ministry leaders would be ideal. Secondly, the ministry leaders selected for this report may not be representative of urban demographic

profiles. 13 of the 15 leaders interviewed were selected by their respective conference presidents based on their current ministry placement, urban ministry experience and availability. An equal spread of male and female respondents would have been more desirable, as well as a broader representation of members involved in ministry from a variety of backgrounds and professions. Regardless of these limitations, we hope that the information gathered from these leaders resonates with your ministry experience and that you have been inspired by the conversation.

