

**Office of Information and Research
Report 20**

A Ten-year Study of Youth Retention

Seventh-day Adventist Church
North American Division of the General Conference
12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring MD 20904

This report was written by Roger L. Dudley, director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University. The North American Division contracted with the Institute in 1985 to conduct a study to answer the questions that are often asked about young people who grow up in the homes of Seventh-day Adventist Church members. How many drop out of the church? How many remain faithful to the Adventist message and loyal to the church? Are we successfully transmitting our values and faith to new generations?

In order to provide more definitive answers than can be had from a one-time survey or anecdotal case studies, a sample of 15 and 16-year-olds was selected and then re-contacted each year for ten years. Now that sample of is 25 and 26 years of age. These young people have made the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and we can answer some questions that it was only possible to guess about up to this point.

This is a preliminary report. Dr. Dudley is presently at work on a book-length treatment of this rich mine of information. In it he will combine data from the ten annual surveys. This report includes only the data from the tenth year of the longitudinal study.

Monte Sahlin
Director
Office of Information and Research
Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America

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**A TEN-YEAR STUDY OF YOUTH RETENTION IN THE
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

THE TENTH YEAR

The Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) has previously reported on the first nine years of a ten-year study of over 1500 Adventist teenagers and their relationships with the church [see Roger L. Dudley and Janet Leigh Kangas, *The World of the Adventist Teenager* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1990) for a complete report on the first two years. Reports on subsequent years have appeared in the *Adventist Review*, the *Journal of Adventist Education*, and *Ministry* among others. See complete listing at the end of this report]. This project is being sponsored by the North American Division, particularly the Youth and Young Adults and the Education departments. The present paper reports the findings of the tenth year of the study.

ADVENTIST YOUTH SURVEY 10 contained 71 questions on four pages. The 1996-97 study asked the respondents how active they had been and now were in various areas of church life. It explored attitudes toward doctrines and life-style standards of the church. It requested information on devotional practices and secular activities. Standard demographic questions were included, and participants were given a chance to comment about their religion and their church.

Tracking the Subjects

One important reason for sending out a yearly survey is to attempt to maintain contact with the young adults before they slip out of the range of the study. In a project of this kind the researchers must develop a long-term relationship with the subjects. Part of encouraging this relationship is to keep track of any residential changes. People today are highly mobile, and after a year the postal system will no longer forward mail. Also, name changes occur among women because of marriage. So the very first question asked was: "Is the name and address on the envelope in which we mailed this questionnaire still your correct one?" A third (34%) answered "no," indicating the high rate of change in just one year. Those answering "no" were instructed to fill in the correct name and/or address in the blank space provided.

Keeping track of these address changes is a major job for ICM staff. Scores of letters have been returned undelivered because the addresses were no longer correct and no forwarding addresses were given. When the first mailing of the tenth-year questionnaire was sent out in June 1996, these young people were 24 or 25 years of age (the study had begun with those 15 or 16 nine years before). As the year passed by, a number turned 26. Most had left home. Some had joined the military. Nearly half had married. Close to a quarter had children of their own. In some cases even their parents did not know where they were at present. ICM then is attempting to find current addresses by contacting church clerks, searching church directories, or using computer look-up programs. Even with this effort, ICM has not been able (at this writing) to obtain current addresses for over 200 members of the sample. While only one regular questionnaire is prepared each year, construction,

mailings, follow up, and processing of the survey has been a year-around job for the ICM staff.

ICM had expected that some attrition would occur. Indeed, this was why such a large sample was selected in the beginning; to be sure that a sufficient group for appropriate analyses would remain at the end of ten years. In addition to those for whom no current addresses are available, another 76 have asked that their names be dropped from the study. In June 1996, the tenth-year survey was mailed to all those (1245 members) in the original sample for whom addresses were available or who had not asked to be dropped from the study even though only 653 had completed the ninth-year survey. All non-respondents were sent a second mailing in August, a third mailing in October, and a fourth mailing in January. Only those who had completed the ninth-year questionnaire but who had still not responded to tenth-year mailings were sent a fifth appeal in April.

By June 1997, at the time of the data analyses, 679 usable questionnaires had been received, and a few others have since trickled in. This number represents about 45% of the original sample (1523) that began in 1987. If, however, those for whom no valid addresses are known and those who have requested to be dropped from the sample are deleted from the pool, this would leave 1245 potential respondents and make the return rate about 55%.

Another way to view this is to calculate that the 679 respondents are 104% of the 653 who completed the ninth-year survey and 99% of the 684 who completed the eighth-year survey. The response rate for the second, third, and fourth years was about 83% of that of each previous year. In other words, the study suffered an attrition of about 17% each of these years, but for the fifth year the attrition was only 3%, for the sixth year it was 6%, for

both the seventh and eighth years it was 9%, and for the ninth year it had dropped to only 5%. The most rapid drop off came in the first few years, the sample was quite stable during the fifth and sixth years, the attrition rate increased slightly during the seventh and eighth years, and in the ninth year returned to the lowest level since year five.

Now, in the tenth year, for the very first time the response has exceeded that of the year before and nearly equaled that of two years ago. However, ICM is still looking for more data to complete this study. We have a list of over 500 names and addresses of original sample members for which the addresses are presumably still good. That is, letters sent to these young adults have not been returned as undelivered, and these sample members have not asked to have their names removed. However, while all of these responded to the original questionnaire and many to subsequent questionnaires, none have returned the tenth-year survey.

If their present status in relation to the church could be determined, then all of the earlier data could be used to predict outcomes, making the study more complete. Therefore, we designed an abbreviated questionnaire which asks only a few questions about relationship to the church. ICM is employing the Adventist Information Ministries (AIM) to attempt to locate telephone numbers and conduct a phone survey with each non-respondent who can be located. Hopefully, this will result in allowing the majority of the original sample to be included in the final analyses. This report will not include the telephone survey results which will be given in a later report.

While it is regrettable that many who filled out the original survey are either "lost" or no longer active, the really good news of this study must not be overlooked. Nearly 700

adolescents have contributed yearly to this project over the ten years they matured into young adults. That is a record unmatched by any church study of which we have knowledge. These 679 will constitute the basis for this report.

Some Personal Information

Respondents for the tenth year were 37% male and 63% female. Since the original sample was 43% male and 57% female, it is evident that the male response rate has been somewhat less than the female rate. Ethnic backgrounds (close to the same proportions as the previous year) were as follows:

Asian/Oriental	8%
Black	12%
Hispanic	11%
White	66%
Other	3%

The survey then asked for their present marital status.

Single with no definite plans	45%
Engaged to be married	9%
Living together	3%
Married	40%
Divorced and not remarried	3%

A year ago, 55% were single without definite plans. This has dropped ten points in one year with 9% more being married and 1% more being engaged. Still, even though these young adults were in their mid-twenties, nearly half were still single with no definite plans.

This supports studies of the general population that indicate that people are marrying later than they did a generation ago. A second observation is that in a society where living together without marriage has become one of the fastest growing household arrangements, only 3% of this sample (20 people) were in this situation. Only 22% of the sample had children; the other 78% did not.

Reflecting the Adventist emphasis on education, the sample was well-educated. Virtually all (99%) had finished high school or academy and 94% had gone on to college. More than half (58%) were college graduates, and 18% had taken post-graduate work. Many were still pursuing education as revealed by a question about their present occupation.

In college or university	28%
Work at job	52%
Home maker	7%
Other	13%

This then is the group upon which this report is based. Even with the considerable attrition from 1987, 679 young adults told the church about themselves. That is still a large study. Here is what they said.

Relationship to the Church

The main purpose of the ten-year study is to discover how this representative sample of young adults has related to the church. First, three yes-or-no questions were asked which are given below in abbreviated form. For full wording check the questionnaire in the appendix

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Are you at present a member of the Adventist church?	85%	15%
Have you ever dropped out of the church or stopped attending?	52%	48%
If you did become inactive, have you renewed your commitment?	40%	60%

These three questions are key to the entire study, but they present some inconsistencies. To the second question, 354 people answered that they had, at some time in the past, dropped out of the church or stopped attending services. However, the third question was answered by 362 people which means that 8 persons who said that they never dropped out also said they became active again. To have 8 out of 679 (1%) misunderstand the question is not too serious. More troubling is that 323 indicated that they never became inactive, and 146 stated that they renewed their membership. This total of 469 is 108 short of the 577 who claimed to be members of the church in the first question above.

The solution seems to be that these 108 had stopped attending, have not renewed their commitment, but still consider themselves as members of the church. As a check on this, note that 354 reported having dropped out, but only 146 as having returned. That leaves 208 inactive. This compares well with the 101 who reported that they are not presently members plus the 108 who are inactive but who still count themselves as Adventists or a total of 209 (because a few did not answer certain questions, exact congruence is not possible).

If we then accept that 208 of this group of 679 are essentially out of the church, that would be a dropout rate of 31%. However, remember that this rate is for those who filled out and returned the questionnaire. It would be reasonable to suppose that the 844 young

adults who did not respond to the tenth-year survey might have a higher dropout rate. After all, many have lost contact with their local congregations. Some asked to be removed from the study. Some have not replied in years. It would be conservative to estimate that 50% of them are no longer practicing Adventists, though, of course, we cannot verify that at this point. This is what we hope the telephone survey will help establish.

If, however, we accept tentatively the 50% figure, then we could add another 422 dropouts to the 208 figure from the tenth-year survey, making a total of 630 or 41% of the original sample. On the basis of our present data, it seems reasonable to believe that at least 40% of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North America will essentially drop out of the church by their middle twenties. Actually, more drop out, but some will return (perhaps a fifth of the dropouts). More may return later in life, but, of course, more may also leave. This study does not provide data to suggest what may happen beyond the mid-twenties.

As suggested above, membership means different things to different persons. Therefore, the survey included a list designed to determine the degree of activity the young adult was experiencing in the church. The list was introduced with the statement: "How active are you in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as measured by the following activities?"

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Attend church services regularly	56%	44%
Attend Sabbath school regularly	35%	65%
Attend other meetings (prayer, youth, small group)	25%	75%
Hold some type of church office	22%	78%
Serve on one or more church committees	13%	87%

Participate in share-your-faith activities	21%	79%
Attend church social functions	43%	57%
Pay tithe on income regularly	44%	56%
Give offerings other than tithe to church projects	49%	51%

Earlier we noted that 85% claim to be members of the Adventist church, but that 31% were actually inactive, leaving no more than 69% of these respondents as members in any real sense of the word. Here the situation is even worse for only 56% say they attend church regularly. Since regular worship attendance (with this age group) is part of the definition of being an active member, it would be reasonable to assume that some 44% are not really plugged in to the life of the congregation. If we remember that inactivity is no doubt more pronounced among the non-respondents, it seems conservative indeed to say that the church is suffering a loss of between 40% and 50% of its young adults.

Being an active church member, however, involves more than simply attending the Sabbath worship service. As meager as worship attendance is at 56%, Sabbath school attendance at 35% is 21 points below that. And Sabbath school is the place where one studies the Bible and learns the tenets of faith. Still further down, only 25% attend any other kind of meeting regularly. The percentages holding church office, serving on a congregational committee, or participating in out-reach activities are even lower.

These are no longer teenagers. They are in the prime of young adulthood at an age (25-27) when many of the older generation held major church responsibilities. Whether the low level of involvement results from their own choice, or whether they have not been given responsibilities is not clear, but the situation presents a major challenge to the church. The

disengagement of such a large percentage of well-educated young adults who should now be assuming leadership in the church threatens the future viability of our movement.

Youth and Adventist Doctrine

While correct belief is not all there is to being an Adventist, it is certainly core. Without our distinctive message, there is little reason to remain in our particular faith community, especially if friendship ties are broken.

Therefore, the young adults were presented with six key Adventist doctrines and asked to indicate their extent of agreement with them on a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In the table below the two agree positions have been combined and the two disagree positions have also been combined. The extent to which the two percentages fail to add to 100% represents the "uncertain" position.

	<u>AGREE</u>	<u>DISAGREE</u>
The Sabbath	91%	4%
The Second Coming of Jesus	92%	3%
The State of the Dead	88%	3%
The Heavenly Sanctuary and the 2300 Days	62%	7%
Ellen White is a true prophet	73%	9%
The Adventist Church is the true church	69%	14%

Agreement is very high on the first three items. Even though some fall-off occurs on the last three, even here an average of two-thirds agree, and disagreement is below 10% except for the last statement. Much of the drop in agreement has been because of uncertainty rather than disbelief, especially on the Heavenly Sanctuary item where 31% were uncertain. Disbelief in Adventist doctrine does not appear to be a major cause of dropout for youth and young adults.

Youth and Church Standards

What about life-style standards? The question read: "To what extent do you agree with these perceived standards of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?" In the list below the same notations are employed as in presenting the responses to doctrines.

	<u>AGREE</u>	<u>DISAGREE</u>
Not use illegal drugs	93%	6%
Not use tobacco	92%	4%
Keep the Sabbath holy	88%	4%
Not drink alcoholic beverages	77%	15%
Dress modestly	75%	12%
Sex should occur only within marriage	74%	14%
Not wear cosmetic jewelry	33%	49%
Not listen to rock music	32%	52%
Not dance	22%	60%
Not attend movie theaters	16%	71%

To better illustrate a pattern, the list has been arranged in descending order of agreement rather than in the order the items appeared in the questionnaire. Agreement on the top three items is very high. Most young adults oppose drugs and tobacco and see the sense in Sabbath observance (though their way of keeping the Sabbath may vary from that of previous generations). The next three items on alcohol, modest dress, and sex in marriage have somewhat lower agreement but are still affirmed by approximately three-fourths. The big gap comes with the last four. In line with previous research, a third or fewer agree with Adventist standards on jewelry, music, dancing, and movies. The latter is opposed by nearly three-fourths.

Personal Religion

One question asked: "How important is religious faith in your life?" This measures what social scientists generally refer to as *salience*. Answers were as follows:

Very important	52%
Quite important	30%
Slightly important	15%
Not at all important	3%

This is quite amazing. In this sample, 82% said that religious faith was either very or quite important--far higher than the percentage that is active in the church. In spite of the dropout rate, only 3% felt that religious faith was not important at all. This may indicate that contemporary young adults tend to view religious faith apart from institutional commitment. It may also suggest that inactive young adults may be open to fresh approaches to religious faith.

Another measure of personal religion is frequency of devotional practices. The subjects were asked how often they engaged in four devotional behaviors. In the following list D = daily, W = weekly or oftener, M = at least monthly, and RN = rarely or never.

	<u>D</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>RN</u>
Personal prayer	59%	23%	9%	9%
Personal Bible study	13%	30%	21%	36%
Read religious literature	10%	31%	30%	29%
Family worship	12%	17%	15%	56%

Most of these young adults pray, at least on a weekly basis. The majority, however, do not engage in other spiritual disciplines very frequently. A special concern is family worship for it is in this period of life that adults are setting up homes and developing the patterns that will govern them. Less than 30% have family worship as often as once a week.

Perhaps the most important question on the survey was: "How likely is it that you will remain a Seventh-day Adventist for the rest of your life?"

Definitely plan to	61%
Probably will	19%
Not sure	11%
Very unlikely	9%

This is very positive assessment since 80% indicate a good chance of remaining in the church, and only 9% are negative to the idea. Indeed, it seems too rosy in view of the fact that 44% do not now attend church regularly, 78% hold no office or service position in the church, and fewer than half support the church financially. It seems likely that many youth and young adults have an identity with Seventh-day Adventism but do not translate this ideological concept into institutional involvement. The hopeful message is that this generation may be open to renewing their commitment to the church if fresh and relevant approaches to them can be devised.

Spiritual Influences

The question read: "As you look back on your early life, how would you rate the influence of the following people on your spiritual development?" In the following list HEL = helpful, NEU = neutral, NEG = negative, and NA = not applicable (youth had no such person in his/her life).

	<u>HEL</u>	<u>NEU</u>	<u>NEG</u>	<u>NA</u>
Your mother	80%	12%	6%	2%
Your father	62%	20%	11%	7%
Teachers in an Adventist school	50%	28%	13%	9%
A particular pastor	56%	32%	8%	4%
Your closest friends	42%	41%	13%	4%
Adults in your local church	31%	41%	24%	4%

Mothers contributed the most to spiritual development by far. Only half felt that their Adventist teachers were a positive influence in their spiritual development. Adults in the local congregation were not very helpful and drew relatively high negative scores. Teachers, pastors, and church members must ask themselves: How can we improve these ratings for future generations?

Attitudinal Questions

To further explore attitudes toward the church six questions were posed.

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Would you like your children to be raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?	88%	12%
Will you send your children to Adventist schools?	72%	28%
Will you teach your children that Ellen G. White was a prophet?	74%	26%
Do you feel accepted by members of your local church?	74%	26%
Do you feel that your church is just as much yours as any other member's and that you have equal input?	56%	44%
If you are married, does your spouse have different views on how to practice religion than you do? (56% checked "not married")	18%	26%

In spite of their own lack of participation large majorities wish to rear their children in the Adventist faith, including providing an Adventist education. Three-fourths feel accepted by the church, but only a little over half believe they have equal input into its operation. This continues the theme that while many in this generation have become inactive, they still have feelings for the church. This group should be good candidates for re-conversion if the right approaches are used.

Ordinary Activities

In order to better understand these young adults, it may be helpful to explore the so-called "secular" activities in which they engage. After all, the Christian life is more than just

church and the sacred. How are our subjects spending their free time? They were asked: "How often do you participate in the following activities?" In the list below 1 = nearly every day, 2 = several times per week, 3 = at least every month, 4 = rarely, and 5 = never.

	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Watch television	59%	21%	9%	8%	3%
Listen to rock music	39%	19%	10%	18%	14%
Attend the cinema	0%	3%	49%	40%	8%
Rent movies on video	1%	9%	56%	30%	4%
Watch MTV	4%	7%	11%	26%	52%
Participate in social dancing	0%	3%	15%	38%	44%
Use recreational drugs	1%	1%	2%	4%	92%
Drink alcoholic beverages	2%	3%	16%	25%	54%
Play video games	2%	7%	13%	29%	49%
Surf the World Wide Web	6%	10%	13%	17%	54%

Watching television and listening to rock music are very frequent activities. While going to the movies or renting films on video are not as frequent, the majority engage in them on at least a monthly basis. Most of the young adults do not very often watch MTV, play video games, or surf the Web. Neither is social dancing very popular. Only small minorities use alcohol or recreational drugs frequently.

About a third (34.5%) of these mid-twenties adults are not sexually active. Whether this is because of conscientious convictions or lack of opportunity cannot be determined

from the present data. Also 14% indicated that they had, at some time, suffered from an eating disorder.

All of the data presented above reveal a great deal of information about these 679 young adults. The next major task in this study will be to put the data sets from all ten years into a single file and develop a series of predictive equations. This process will identify what early experiences in home, church, and school are likely to identify which youth drop out of the church and which ones remain and are active. From this information the church can better shape its ministry to adolescents.

Free Response Questions

Following the multiple-choice questions, six open-ended questions were asked to gather information about reasons for staying in, dropping out, or returning to the church and to elicit general attitudes toward the church. Questions will be listed one at a time with the transcribed answers following each question. Answers will be identified by a code number which is meaningless to the reader but which allows the researchers to connect the comments to the other data supplied by the same individuals.