HOLDING ON TO THEIR FAITH: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SDA CHURCH MEMBERS IN SSD

PRESENTORS: ARCELI H. ROSARIO & SUSA B. OPAO
AIIAS/MVC
SSD DEMOGRAPHICS

Membership – 1,175,324/12% of total population

14 countries (Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Timor Leste, Brunei, Laos)

9 unions

57 missions/conferences
Summary for Age in the faith
(SSD Survey, 2013)

Distribution of Q1.10*

Weighted Percent

- below 6
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 15
- 16 to 20
- 21 to 25
- 26 to 30
- 31 to 35
- 36 to 50
- 41 to 45
- 46 to 50
- 51 to 55
- 56 to 60
- above 60
Summary for Church life characteristics that may cause leaving of local church for another faith—No intention of leaving despite undesirable church life.
(SSD Survey, 2013)
THE RESILIENCY FRAMEWORK

Kumpfer’s Resiliency Model

Internal self resiliency factors such as cognitive competency, emotional stability, behavioural/social skills, physical well-being, and spirituality.

Spirituality or motivational characteristics
  ◦ religious faith—belief system
  ◦ internal locus of control—perception of being able to influence their current environment and future destiny
METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology

- Purposive sampling, 224 participants from 7 countries, 6 churches per mission/conference, 2 participants each church
- In-depth interviews
Participants Criteria:

1. Must have been a church member for the past ten years.

2. Must have been actively involved in church activities and programs.
RESEARCH PROBLEM

1. What factors influenced the decision of Seventh-day Adventist church members to join the Church?

2. In what ways have their faith been nurtured?

3. What difference has being a Seventh-day Adventist made in their lives?

4. What challenges have they encountered in the Church?
5. Why have they decided to stay in the Church?

6. What else do they wish to experience in the Church?
FINDINGS – What factors influenced the decision of Seventh-day Adventist church members to join the Church?

The most recurring theme is influence of Adventist family, with 83 of the 224 participants (across all countries) indicating having both Adventist parents; 12 an Adventist mother; 1 an Adventist father; and 9 Adventist relatives.
Summary for Born to Adventist parents (SSD Survey, 2013)
Factors influencing decision to join the Church

The second top recurring factor is influence of Adventist church members specifically of friends, husband/wife, neighbors, co-workers. One participant said it was a child who invited her to the Church.
Factors influencing decision to join the Church

The third top recurring factor is Bible study. Six of the participants found God through personal Bible study and 23 studied the Bible with laymen, literature evangelists, pastors, and other church members.
Factors influencing decision to join the Church

The fourth top recurring factor is evangelistic crusade. This is especially true for participants from the Philippines and Indonesia.
Factors influencing decision to join the Church

The fifth top recurring factor is Adventist education.

“My third brother studied in an Adventist school in ____. He shared his faith with us by giving us Bible studies every weekend. After 6 months all of us brothers were baptized.” (C1)
Factors influencing decision to join the Church

Some participants testified they were led to God through extraordinary ways such a dream and critical life events.

“Through a dream. My husband is an Adventist. [He] was walking a road full of lights while myself walking in a very dark place” (A14).

“When I was in ___ (former religion), I was sleepwalking. I got out of the house and did not know anything.... It continued for many nights.... The doctor advised me to read some religious books. There was no other book I found.... I read the Bible of my brother who was studying in ____ (academy).... My sleepwalking stopped when I started reading the Bible” (E6).
Factors influencing decision to join the Church

Other factors are music, health message, Adventist publication, Voice of Hope/Voice of Prophecy, working in an Adventist institution, and radio/TV.
FINDINGS – In what ways have their faith been nurtured?

Almost one half of the participants indicated that their faith had been nurtured through personal Bible reading. E5 observed, “The more I read and read the Bible, the more my faith become stronger.” Another participant, D3 said, “I see God’s Word is my light. When I see other people do something that I don’t understand, I … study God’s Word by my own.”
Ways faith was nurtured

The second top recurring theme on faith nurture is attendance to church services. This is followed by participation in outreach programs, participation in church services, personal prayer, warm fellowship and support of church leaders and members, faith experiences (God’s revelation in times of trials), reading of Spirit of Prophecy books, attendance to seminars and special meetings such as youth congress and others.
Ways faith was nurtured

Among those who were nurtured through fellowship in the Church said:

“My church has love, warmth. There is belongingness” (C2).

“During my bad times... My son passed away. I blamed God... the fellowship in the church helped me cope with my loss” (C24).

“Someone was always interested in us (youth)” (G2).
FINDINGS – What difference has being an Adventist made in their lives?

Of the 224 participants, only one said being an Adventist had not made any difference in his life. Of the 223, 100 said there had been a change in their way of thinking and feeling which some of them labelled as being reformed, being revived.
Difference Adventism has made in their lives

Specifically, the participants mentioned satisfaction, peace, joy, hope, contentment, trust in God, life’s purpose. Among their testimonies are:

“I have found satisfaction even in a simple life. I am contented. In spite of financial instability, I trust that God will provide” (A102).

“There is a big difference. Before, I was not happy with my life. All were just worldly pleasures. Now, ... I am happy and contented. I may not be very blessed materially, yet I feel I am rich to bless others with what God has given me” (A55).
Difference Adventism has made in their lives

“Feeling of competition gone, feeling of luxurious life gone, feeling of a peaceful life” (A12).

“I learned to control my emotions” (A104).

“I was talking against people and arrogant... But now I am totally changed” (E4).
Difference Adventism has made in their lives

The second recurring theme on the difference being an Adventist has made on the life of the participants is change of lifestyle. They left behind them a life of vices and embraced a new way of life without drinking and smoking and worldly pleasures. A few lady participants said they didn’t wear sexy dresses anymore.
Difference Adventism has made in their lives

Specifically, the participants indicated their shift to healthful living.

“Being an Adventist, I have become more conscious of my health” (A94). “Those days, I drank and all other vices. I believe that being an SDA is a gift. The health teaching is a blessing. I am vegetarian now” (E6).
Difference Adventism has made in their lives

Other participants testified that the difference being an Adventist had made in their life were strength and meaning in times of trials.

“I don’t have to cope with [trials] and I don’t have to fight alone because God is always there for me... If I have to rely on myself all these things... all these 50 years, I would have committed suicide” (G5).

“Whenever problems come, I feel nothing is impossible with the Lord. The pain turns to wisdom” (C3).
FINDINGS – What challenges have they encountered in the Church?

The answers of these participants were widely varied. Some challenges ran across countries but some were specific to certain countries. The top recurring themes for all participants were conflict/misunderstandings in the Church, lack of support and participation of church members, lack of outreach programs, lack of unity, lack of spirituality, lack of nurture for the youth, members not attending church services regularly and/or coming to church late, unmet needs.
Challenges encountered...

While many expressed their concern for lack of nurture of young people, one participant lamented for the lack of response of the young people:

“I find the youths not motivated to do missionary activities. I fear that in the future, there will be nobody who would continue the work of our church. My work is to train young people to be medical missionaries, but only few among our youths are interested to participate” (C4).
Challenges encountered...

One participant took it a challenge of the church to motivate young people.

“They are learned and educated. They have questions. Why Jesus have to die? No need to die. Why Jesus have to create us? Who wrote the Bible? Humans. And why you believe? ... But one thing I realize, when they have problems, they ask, please pray for us. They still believe that there is a higher Being—at least they think” (G6).
Challenges encountered...

Some participants also articulated their concern that the Church had not met their needs.

“I feel the church has not met my need as a church member. The preachers in the divine service preach shallow topics” (C1).

“When I go to church, I want the spiritual lesson from the church. I think those who give the sermons... I seem not learning much.... Every time I participate I feel I am not quite satisfied with my spiritual experience” (G2).
Why have they decided to stay in the Church?

All the participants affirmed that they did not have any intention to leave the Church. One participant vowed her loyalty, “I am wed to the church.” More than half of the participants indicated that they would stay in the Church because they believed that this is the true church and the doctrines are founded on the Bible.
Decision to stay in the Church

Other themes: (a) waiting for the second coming of Jesus Christ who would bring them to heaven, (b) warm and supportive church members, (c) a life with Jesus is filled with meaning and beauty, and (d) love for Jesus.
Decision to stay in the Church

Two answers are strikingly different from the others.

“Because still God decided to stay with me.... My faith is like up and down all the time.... God is kind enough to be still there with me” (G5).

“I know that when we quit to believe in our God, our God not quit to me. I come back to church not because of me, but God who pulls me back. I only look to Jesus” (D3).
Decision to stay in the Church

A few participants expressed this view:

“I am certain this group will be saved because many are waiting for the second coming of Christ” (A70).

“The Lord will come again for the members of the SDA church” (A42).

“We have great hope that through this church we would be saved and be brought to His kingdom” (A43).
FINDINGS - What else do they wish to experience in the Church?

One-fourth of the participants expressed that they wanted to experience more outreach programs. Some indicated their desire to participate in spreading the good news but felt incompetent. They hoped to be trained and given more opportunities to preach, to sing, to give Bible studies, to conduct evangelistic meetings.
Wish to experience in the Church

“More women preachers” (F2).

I want to train the youth to sing to the Lord... to conduct a crusade and evangelistic meetings” (A20).

“That I could preach to other young people” (A26).

“Be a speaker in an evangelistic meeting sponsored by the Church—my wish” (A41).
Wish to experience in the Church

The second top recurring theme is to see revival and reformation in the Church with church members engaging in prayer and Bible study and attending meetings. One participant focused to her own need for revival and reformation. “I wish to change... myself. I feel far from the Lord. I wish to be closer” (C28).
Wish to experience in the Church

The third top recurring theme is unity and love in the Church. “To see no squabbling in the Church. To experience no indifference in the attitude and treatment of leaders and members” (A83).
Wish to experience in the Church

The fourth top recurring theme is more meaningful, creative, sacred, faith-nurturing services. One participant said, “My group—young professionals. Every time we want something to happen, it does not work. I like to have programs in the afternoon. But maybe all members are working all week and Sabbath afternoon is their free time. They want to rest.... We want more interesting programs. Something special.... Now they feel like you eat some food, the same every day, every day. You get bored” (G3).
Wish to experience in the Church

In some countries the need for a church building is keenly felt. “I wish to have a good church where we can worship comfortably. Our church has no walls, the roof is made of nipa, and the posts are about to fall” (A49).

“One of the wishes I want to experience is to have our own church building, to experience sitting inside the church while worshipping God” (B1).
CONCLUSIONS

1. The home and family strongly influence the decision of a person to the Church.
2. Bible reading and prayer, church involvement, and positive relationships in the Church nurture one’s faith.
CONCLUSIONS

3. Adventism makes a positive difference in one’s life as manifested in a reformed and revived life, that is, a new way of thinking and feeling and change in lifestyle specially in healthful living.

4. Belief that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the true church and that its doctrines are Bible based strongly influences one’s decision to stay in the Church.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Church leadership to respond to the call of the church members for empowerment and involvement in evangelism; more revival and reformation; more unity and love in the Church; and more meaningful, creative, varied, Spirit-filled, inspiring services.

2. The Church to devise programs to meet the various needs of the church members especially the youth and the educated.

3. The Church leadership to be sensitive and prompt in resolving issues that divide the Church.