

NEW MEMBER RESEARCH

HOW AND WHY PEOPLE JOIN THE CHURCH

REPORT TO THE NORTH NEW SOUTH WALES CONFERENCE

Alwyn P. Salom

Institute of Church Ministry and Evangelism

September 1990

NEW MEMBER RESEARCH:

HOW AND WHY PEOPLE JOIN THE CHURCH

NORTH NEW SOUTH WALES CONFERENCE REPORT

Introduction

In the church there is often a tendency to plan for the future on the basis of wet fingers held in the breeze, "guesstimates", and "gut" feelings. Frequently, we are not as ruthless as we could be in evaluating what has been happening, and thus our strategizing for the future goes astray. This happens at the local level of the church, but higher levels are not immune to this problem.

Scripture provides ample support for careful analysis of the facts and for encouragement to lift ourselves above the "fog" that so often encompasses our thinking. "Any enterprise is built by wise planning, becomes strong through common sense, and profits wonderfully by keeping abreast of the facts" (Proverbs 24: 3,4 TLB). Wise planning, common sense, and keeping abreast of the facts--this is certainly good admonition as the church--local or higher level--looks toward the year 2000.

New Member Research

In harmony with the above philosophy, the North New South Wales Conference commissioned the Institute of Church Ministry and Evangelism to study their new members to discover how and why they have joined the church and what can be learned about the success or otherwise of various evangelistic methods which are currently being used.

This research has now been completed and ICME is happy to be able to render its report.

Organization of the Research

The concern of this study was not to look at transfer growth or "biological" growth (young people of church families joining the church), but "kingdom" or "conversion" growth as it took place in the North New South Wales Conference. To this end, attention was focussed on adults from the community joining the church.

From Conference records the names and addresses of all adults baptized or joining by profession of faith during a five year period were obtained. For the purpose of this study "adults" were taken to be those listed as such on the baptismal certificate stubs returned to the Conference by pastors.

The time frame for the study was the five year period from January 1984 to December 1988. This period was determined by the need to keep the study as recent as possible and to eliminate, as far as possible, the problems caused by out-of-date address records held by the Conference.

In April 1990 material was sent to each adult baptized in the above time period. This included a letter from the Conference President authorizing and endorsing the study and encouraging participation. There was also a letter from the Director of ICME explaining the reason for the study and asking for the assistance of the individual (see appendix for copies of these letters). The package was completed with the four page survey form (see appendix) and a stamped, addressed envelope for returning the survey.

A total of 475 persons were included in the North New South Wales survey. The addresses of 91 persons (19 percent) of those to whom the survey was sent were incorrect and the surveys were returned by the local post office. These names were forwarded to the Conference office that they might endeavour to correct their records. Of those who actually received the survey, 112 (29 percent) completed it and returned it to ICME. This is a fairly typical response rate for a mailed-out, one-contact survey.

Demographic Profile of the New Adventist in North New South Wales

Of adults joining the church in North New South Wales during this five-year period, the two largest age brackets were 36-45 (23 percent) and 26-35 (19 percent).

This last age bracket is particularly significant because this is the most common age for joining a church. The reason is that this is the age during which young adults are in the lifestyle-changing mode. They are making major decision which affect them for the rest of their lives. During this period of life they are making decisions about their life's work, marriage, having their first child, and buying their first home--to name but some of the important decisions they face. Thus a decision about religion and joining the church may be part of a series of similar decisions. As a result, research consistently shows that this is the age group which should receive special attention ("targetting") by local churches in their use of evangelistic methods.

The third largest age bracket was 56-65 (17 percent). More than half (59 percent) of the new converts came in these three age brackets. The remainder were distributed with no particular significant concentrations.

The male:female ratio among the new members was 38%:62%. This is identical with the results of a recent study in the North American Division.

Those married were 65 percent of the group, 16 percent were still single, 10 percent were either divorced or separated, and a further 10 percent were widowed.

The largest proportion of new members was represented by those of Anglo-Saxon background (91 percent). A further 5 percent were from a continental European (non-Hispanic) background and 1 percent each from Aboriginal, Asian, Hispanic, and Maori backgrounds.

Socio-economic Profile

Among the new members 37 percent had an annual family income (head of family plus spouse) in excess of \$15,000 and 20 percent of the group had an income in excess of \$25,000. There was no one with an annual family income over \$50,00. Of those who joined the church during this period, 42 percent had a family income of less than \$10,000 and 63 percent were under \$15,000. The church appears to be attracting primarily people in the low to middle wage brackets. The percentages among new converts is lower for both low and high incomes than is true for New South Wales generally.

This suggests that the church is not succeeding in winning middle income (and above) families. More intentional planning could be given to localities and people groups which are not responding to current evangelistic methods. This may mean looking for evangelistic ministries which target more specifically the needs of such people.

The educational background of the new members also indicated a low to middle class population. In the group, 71 percent had received a partial or full secondary education, but a further 13 percent had received only primary education. A significant factor was that 13 percent had received a tertiary education.

Occupations reflected the educational backgrounds of the new members. Nearly one-third (32 percent) identified themselves as housewives, 23 percent were pensioners, 15 percent were professionals or para-professionals, 9 percent were in some form of clerical or commercial work, 6 percent were students, and 6 percent were farmers or mechanics.

The point that is made by these reflections is that the church in North New South Wales appears to be focussing its attention, probably unconsciously, on low to middle bracket people. At the same time a large percentage of the population is being neglected. Ministries that serve the rest of the population need to be initiated by local churches. Such ministries need to be "incarnational"; that is, they should be designed to meet the people at the point of their specific needs. The Conference, through the Department of Church Ministries, needs to encourage local churches to take up the challenge of ministering in ways and places which, unconsciously, we may have been avoiding.

Religious Background of New Members

Of the new converts in the North New South Wales Conference during the last five years 73 percent came from other denominations (61 percent Protestant and 12 percent Catholic). Add to this a further 14 percent who were raised in Adventist homes but left the church at an early age, and the result is a high 87 percent. Only 12 percent came from

non-church backgrounds. In the State of N.S.W. 20 percent of the population are in this category.

This represents only a minor advance into the unchurched community where the bulk of the secular world lives. The church is evidently not having notable success with current evangelistic methods in reaching people who have no current Christian experience. More attention could be given to reaching such people at the point of their needs.

Among those from Protestant backgrounds, 28 percent were from the Anglican Church. Of the remainder, the larger groups were represented by the following churches (in descending order of percentage): Uniting Church (14 percent), Baptist Church (10 percent), Presbyterian (3 percent), and Salvation Army (3 percent).

Greater attention needs to be given to sharing God's love and the Good News with the secular, unchurched part of the population. At the bottom line, this will mean that evangelistic strategies and the witness of church members must be geared to people who, at this point in time, may have no interest in the Bible or religious things. The church needs to start its evangelistic process further back than it traditionally has done. It cannot wait for these people to develop an interest in the Bible or spiritual matters before it begins its intentional ministry to them.

Bridges must be built to these people so that God's love can be shared with them. Such bridges may be built by strengthening friendship relationships with those who are already part of the non-Christian "networks" of our church members. Network evangelism was "the Master's Plan" for sharing the Gospel with unreached people.

How New Members Joined the Church

What were the immediate influences that led people to join the Adventist Church in North New South Wales in the last five years? Far and away the most dominant factor cited was the influence of Adventist church members who were friends, relatives, neighbours or acquaintances of the prospective member.

In three separate areas of the survey this fact surfaced consistently. When asked to identify the influence various factors had toward joining the church (Question 4), 72 percent of the respondents identified the influence of their Adventist "network" as being dominant in leading them to become members of the church.

This result harmonizes with the research of the Hewitt Research Foundation which discovered, that in the North American Division, 82.6 percent of new members in a recent year identified the influence of their church-member friends, relatives, and acquaintances as the basic reason for joining the church.

This says something very important about the necessity for church members to create and/or strengthen friendly relationships with non-Christians and others in a way that will provide opportunities for them to demonstrate how God's love operates. As such relationships

develop this will also provide openings for the Christian witness to be given. This was "The Master's Plan for Making Disciples."

Of those who attended some form of public evangelistic meetings prior to becoming an Adventist (60 percent of the group), 61 percent attended at the invitation of a friend, neighbour, acquaintance, or relative who was a church member (Question 6). This was, by far, the largest response to the question on evangelistic advertising or invitation. Again, the relational role of the "network" member was the key factor in the process that led ultimately to the new member joining the church. Only 22 percent of those attending received advertising in the mail or at their door or saw newspaper advertising.

Various types of Bible study situations (Home Bible Fellowships, individual Bible studies, church Bible classes, public Bible teaching) all played important roles as people found their way into church membership.

The influence of the pastor ranked high in the thinking of new members. They considered his work for them to be of importance as they made decisions to join the church.

It is well known that people who go through times of "transition" such as life-changing or life-shaking experiences have a time of receptivity to spiritual things which lasts for a period of up to three years. During the twelve months just before they became Adventists 63 percent of respondents to the survey had experienced such disruptions in their lives. These included (in descending order of percentage): a personal or family emotional crisis; moved to another area; death or serious illness of a close friend or relative; personal illness or injury; divorce or marital problems; change to a different line of work; marriage; retirement; birth or adoption of a child; legal problems.

As church members build relationships with their "networks" they should be sensitive to these times of receptivity. It is at times like these that the influence of the Holy Spirit is felt strongly and the cooperation of the Christian witness can be most effective.

Current Spiritual Status of New Members

Among the new converts in the North New South Wales Conference, 46 percent identified their present relationship to the church as either "Very active; on fire for God" or "Strong; participate regularly in most activities". A further 36 percent indicated that their relationship to the church was "Average". But 8 percent said "Somewhat lukewarm" and a further 10 percent said "Very weak; just hanging on." Thus, almost one-fifth of those baptized in the last five years are in need of urgent pastoral care.

While 72 percent of new members felt that the church they had joined was either "Very warm and loving" or provided a "Friendly atmosphere; I've made some good friends", 21 percent had found it difficult to develop close relationships in the church. And 7 percent had found the church to be definitely "Cold and exclusive; I don't feel at home." Serious "cries for help" were found among 13 percent of the respondents and 7 percent had in fact left the church.

By far the three most helpful resources in strengthening the spiritual life of new members were: Church service (87 percent), personal Bible study (81 percent), and Sabbath School (80 percent). The Ellen White writings rated 69 percent, the Signs 61 percent, and the Record 56 percent.

New members are often among the most enthusiastic in their witnessing activities. One of the reasons is that they still have a large network of non-member friends, relatives and acquaintances. In the North New South Wales survey 80 percent of respondents indicated that they have been sharing their personal witness of what God has done for them with relatives, friends, acquaintances or neighbours.

Inviting a non-Adventist to public meetings or to church was a method of witnessing by 67 percent of the new members and 64 percent were engaged in sharing Christian literature. Of the new members, 38 percent were working in community services, 37 percent were teaching a Sabbath School class, and 19 percent were engaged in video evangelism and Revelation Seminars and 15 percent were giving Bible studies.

This is one of the most encouraging results of the study--to see the witnessing involvement of the new members. Intentional planning must be done by the local churches to which they belong to ensure that these people do not lose contact with their non-member networks.

Conclusion

The study of new members in the North New South Wales Conference over the five year period has indicated clearly where success is being achieved. However, it has also identified areas where the church and church members are failing to make an appreciable impact.

As the Global Strategy Consultation has made clear, we now encourage "congregationalism in mission." This means that the local church is challenged to fulfill its role as an evangelistic centre and to plan and operate a continuous range of outreach ministries which meet the specific needs of the people groups in its community. The responsibility for the fulfilment of the Great Commission rests not so much on the higher levels of organization (including the local conference), but on the local church. This philosophy of mission needs to receive increasing attention in the churches of the Conference.

A greater awareness of the "network" principle of evangelism, together with training of church members in this field, is likely to produce greater results in growth. (See the ICME training for churches in "The Master's Plan for Making Disciples"). Of those who expressed themselves concerning what the Adventist Church meant to them, more than half (54 percent) wrote in terms of the relational importance of the "family of God" concept, of fellowship and friends. This is what they perceived the significance of the church to be to them.

More attention needs to be paid to the large percentage in the community who are not interested in the Bible and are not likely to come to public evangelistic meetings or Revelation seminars. The influence of sharing God's love on a personal level may be the only effective way to break through the secular barrier.

At the level of personal relationships between church members and their networks, greater sensitivity needs to be developed to the times of receptivity of these people. This will make it more likely that fruitful cooperation with the Holy Spirit can take place.

The Commission is still today as it has been since Jesus gave it:
Go . . . make disciples . . . baptize . . . and teach.

NEW MEMBER SURVEY

1. Before you became a Seventh-day Adventist, what was your religious background? (Circle the number.)

- 12.4% (1) No church membership
 14.3% (2) Raised in an Adventist home
 60.0% (3) Protestant (please specify denomination) _____
 12.4% (4) Catholic
 1.0% (5) Other religion _____

2. Which factor most attracted you to the Adventist church? (Circle just one number.)

- 11.0% (1) Raised an Adventist and simply accepted parental values
 8.0% (2) Warm fellowship among the members
 26.0% (3) Personal effort of a minister/evangelist
 51.0% (4) A church member who is a relative, neighbour, friend or acquaintance
 4.0% (5) Adventist radio or television program

3. Did any of the following events disrupt your regular life pattern during the 12 months just before you became an Adventist? (Circle 1 for yes and 2 for no. Answer each item.)

- | | YES | NO | |
|-------|-----|----|--|
| 11.4% | 1 | 2 | (1) Personal illness or injury |
| 14.0% | 1 | 2 | (2) Death or serious illness of a close friend or relative |
| 4.4% | 1 | 2 | (3) Marriage |
| 8.8% | 1 | 2 | (4) Divorce or marital problems |
| 3.5% | 1 | 2 | (5) Birth or adoption of a child |
| 1.8% | 1 | 2 | (6) Son or daughter leaving home |
| 4.4% | 1 | 2 | (7) Retirement |
| 0.9% | 1 | 2 | (8) Loss of job |
| 7.0% | 1 | 2 | (9) Change to a different line of work |
| 14.9% | 1 | 2 | (10) Moved to another area |
| 7.9% | 1 | 2 | (11) Severe financial difficulties |
| 2.6% | 1 | 2 | (12) Legal problems |
| 18.4% | 1 | 2 | (13) Other personal or family emotional crisis |

4. Please indicate how much of an influence each source listed below was toward your joining the Adventist Church. (Answer each item and circle the appropriate number.)

No Influence

Some Influence

Fair Amount of Influence

Great Deal of Influence

- | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
|--------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 74.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (1) Minister |
| 16.0% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (2) Literature Evangelist |
| 5.7% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (3) Medical or health personnel in an Adventist hospital |
| 12.3% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (4) An Adventist member whom you did not know witnessing door-to-door |
| (| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (5) Adventist relative |
| 87.7%(| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (6) Adventist neighbour |
| (| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (7) Adventist work, business, school or professional acquaintance |
| 5.7% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (8) Seventh-day Adventist Community Service Centre |
| 24.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (9) Bible correspondence lessons |

(question continued over page)

Question 4 continued

- | | | | | | |
|-------|---|---|---|---|--|
| 59.4% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (10) Bible studies with a church member in your home |
| 32.1% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (11) Bible classes in the church |
| 32.1% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (12) Series of public meetings (such as evangelistic meetings in the church or in a public hall) |
| 8.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (13) Ingathering |
| 8.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (14) Adventist school |
| 8.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (15) Adventist radio programme |
| 18.9% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (16) It Is Written television programme |
| 7.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (17) Focus on Living television programme |
| 50.0% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (18) Worship services in Adventist church |
| 51.9% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (19) Sabbath School |
| 3.8% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (20) Vacation Bible School |
| 23.6% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (21) Signs of the Times magazine |
| 42.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (22) Other Seventh-day Adventist books, magazines or other publications |
| 14.2% | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | (23) Health programme or classes, such as: Five-Day Plan to stop smoking, cooking school, etc. |

5. Please enter the number of the one source from the list in question #4 through which you FIRST became attracted to the Adventist Church.

5+6+7 = 40.0% (The highest single score was #5 = 22.1%)

6. If you attended evangelistic meetings or Seminars (eg. Revelation) prior to becoming an Adventist, how did you learn of them? (Circle the number)

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 15.6% | (1) Advertising in the mail or at your door |
| 6.3% | (2) Newspaper advertising |
| 1.6% | (3) Radio or TV advertising |
| (| (4) Invitation by a relative |
| 60.9%(| (5) Invitation by friend or acquaintance |
| (| (6) Invitation by neighbour |
| 15.6% | (7) Invitation by church member whom you didn't know |

7. How many years before baptism did you attend Seventh-day Adventist schools on each of the following levels? (Count a part of a year as a full year.)

- | | | |
|-------|--------------------|-------|
| 5.6% | (1) Primary school | _____ |
| 3.7% | (2) High school | _____ |
| 0.9% | (3) College | _____ |
| 89.7% | (4) None | _____ |

8. How helpful do you find each of the following resources today in strengthening your spiritual life and Christian experience? (Answer each item and circle the appropriate number.)

Not Helpful

Somewhat helpful

Very Helpful

- | | | | | |
|-------|---|---|---|---|
| 80.2% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (1) Sabbath School |
| 87.9% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (2) Church Service |
| 48.1% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (3) Prayer Meeting |
| 81.1% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (4) Personal Bible Study |
| 68.9% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (5) Ellen White writings |
| 55.7% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (6) <u>South Pacific Record</u> |
| 61.3% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (7) <u>Signs of the Times</u> magazine |
| 21.7% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (8) Other magazines (Please name: _____) |
| 8.5% | 1 | 2 | 3 | (9) Adventist radio and television programmes |

9. Since becoming an Adventist, have you used the following methods of witnessing for Christ? (Answer each item; circle 1 for yes and 2 for no.)

	YES	NO	
15.1%	1	2	(1) Giving Bible studies
67.0%	1	2	(2) Inviting a non-Adventist to public meetings or to church
64.2%	1	2	(3) Giving out literature
80.2%	1	2	(4) Sharing your personal testimony of what God has done for you with relatives, friends, acquaintances or neighbours
37.7%	1	2	(5) Working in community services
36.8%	1	2	(6) Teaching in a Sabbath School class
18.9%	1	2	(7) Video evangelism
18.9%	1	2	(8) Revelation seminars

10. Which statement below comes the nearest to describing the type of fellowship you have found in the Adventist church? (Circle just one number.)

7.4%	(1) Cold and exclusive. I don't feel at home.
21.3%	(2) People are friendly, but I haven't developed any close relationships
34.3%	(3) A friendly atmosphere. I've made some good friends.
37.0%	(4) Very warm and loving. Like a family.

11. How do you rate your present relationship to the church? (Circle a number.)

10.0%	(1) Very weak. Just hanging on.
8.0%	(2) Somewhat lukewarm
36.0%	(3) Average
36.0%	(4) Strong. Participate regularly in most activities.
10.0%	(5) Very active. On fire for God.

12. Your age: (Circle one only)

(1) 15 or younger	0.0%	(4) 26-35	19.2%	(7) 56-65	17.3%
(2) 16-20	6.7%	(5) 36-45	23.1%	(8) 66-70	7.7%
(3) 21-25	5.8%	(6) 46-55	8.7%	(9) 71 or above	11.5%

13. Your sex:

37.6%	(1) Male
62.4%	(2) Female

14. Your marital status: (Circle one)

(1) Single	15.5%	(4) Separated	1.9%
(2) Married	65.0%	(5) Widowed	9.3%
(3) Divorced	7.8%		

15. Your ethnic background: (circle one only)

1.0%	(1) Aboriginal
0.0%	(2) African Black
91.1%	(3) Anglo-Saxon
1.0%	(4) Asian
4.9%	(5) Continental European (other than Hispanic)
1.0%	(6) Hispanic (European or Latin American)
0.0%	(7) Indian
0.0%	(8) Melanesian
1.0%	(9) New Zealand Maori
0.0%	(10) Polynesian
0.0%	(11) Other (please name): _____

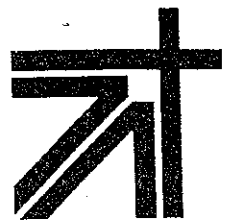
16. Your approximate yearly family income:

- 25.0% (1) Under \$6,000
- 16.7% (2) 6,000 - 9,999
- 21.4% (3) 10,000 - 14,999
- 16.7% (4) 15,000 - 24,999
- 20.2% (5) 25,000 - 50,000
- 0.0% (6) Over \$50,000

17. What is the highest level of formal education that you have completed?

18. What is your occupation?

19. Please use the space below to tell in a few words what about the Adventist Church means the most to you.



Seventh-day Adventist Church
North New South Wales Conference
112 Lake Road
(PO Box 7)
Wallsend, NSW 2287
Telephone: (049) 51 8088
Facsimile: (049) 50 1102

Dear Friend

This is to introduce Dr Alwyn Salom, Director of the Institute of Church Ministry and Evangelism, who has been commissioned by the Conference to perform research on new members who have joined the church in the last five years.

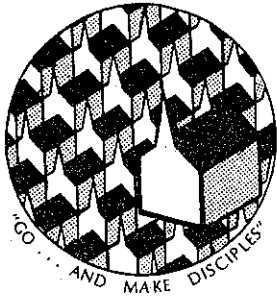
Dr Salom, who is an ordained Minister, has prepared a research instrument which will help our Conference Leaders in planning for the future evangelistic work of the church. I urge you to co-operate in this important project and fill in and return the survey.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Yours in the Master's Service

Pr R V Moe
President

The Institute of Church Ministry and Evangelism



'Fulfilling the Great Commission'

Dear Adventist Friend,

As a person who has been baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the last five years, we are seeking your help to discover how we can better fulfill the Lord's commission to our church.

You have information from your experience which can assist the Conference in its development of strategies to share God's love and the soon coming of Jesus with the people who live in your community. Your Conference President has written to you endorsing this research which is being carried out on behalf of the Conference.

I hasten to assure you that there is no way your name can be associated with the survey form you will return. And the specific contents of individual survey forms will be strictly confidential. Only the accumulated results of all the returns will be made known to the Conference.

I would like to urge you to fill in the survey today and mail it in the reply-paid envelope tomorrow. Where more than one person in a family is concerned, a survey form has been sent to each family member, and we would like each to fill out the survey and return it.

Thank you for your urgent consideration of this request.

Yours as we work together to fulfil the Great Commission,

APSalom

Dr Alwyn P. Salom
Director.

*cp