

The Institute of Church Ministry and Evangelism

NEW MEMBER RESEARCH:

HOW AND WHY PEOPLE JOIN THE CHURCH

STUDY OF NEW MEMBERS IN THREE CONFERENCES

OF THE TRANS-TASMAN UNION CONFERENCE

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Introduction

How do new members join the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia and New Zealand? What are the routes by which they come into the church? What are the primary influences that lead them to make such important decisions? In the past we have not concerned ourselves with finding factual answers to such basic questions. But at this time, when there are no easy solutions in the mission of the church, it is imperative that we discover the facts. For it is on the basis of such facts that evangelistic success will come in the future.

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--good admonition as the church looks ahead toward the year 2000.

New Member Research

In harmony with the above counsel, three Conferences in the Trans-Tasman Union Conference--Greater Sydney, North New Zealand, and North New South Wales--commissioned the Institute of Church Ministry and Evangelism in 1990 to study their new members. The purpose of these studies was to discover how and why new members in the current five-year period joined the church and what could be learned about the various evangelistic methods which are currently being used.

The findings were reported to the three conferences in March, June and September 1990 respectively.

It is the purpose of this paper to look at the combined results from the three studies and draw general conclusions which may be of wider interest than to the conferences concerned.

Organization of the Research

The concern of these studies 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 three conferences. Thus, attention was focussed on adults from the community joining the church. This is the way the command to "go into all the world" (Mark 16:15) will be fulfilled.

From conference records the names and addresses of all adults baptised or joining by profession of faith during a five-year period were obtained. For the purpose of these studies "adults" were taken to be those listed as such on the baptismal certificate stubs returned to the conference office by pastors.

The time frame for the studies 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 problem caused by out-of-date address records held by the conferences. This latter problem was not completely avoided.

In late 1989 and early 1990 material was sent to each adult baptised during 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. The package was completed with the four-page questionnaire (19 questions) and a stamped, addressed envelope for the return of the questionnaire.

Included in the study for the three conferences were 1,810 persons. Of this number, 641 (35.4%) were accounted for by returns. This represents a reasonable return rate for a mailed-out, one contact survey.

Demographic Profile of the New Adventist in the Three Conferences

Of adults joining the church in the three conferences during this five-year period, the largest age bracket was 26-35 (25 percent). This confirms studies done in many denominations, as well as in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, that have concluded that this is the most common age for joining a church.

The reason for this is that this age bracket represents the time during which young adults are in the lifestyle-changing mode. They are making decisions 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 a 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 evangelistic strategies.

Other large age brackets in the study were the following: 36-45 (22 percent); 56-65 (14 percent); and 46-55 (13 percent).

The male:female ratio among the new members was 42:58. This is significant because it is more heavily weighted in the male direction

than a recent study among Adventists in the North American Division (38:62).

Those married represented 67 percent of the group; 15 percent were single; 10 percent were either divorced or separated, and 8 percent were widowed.

The largest proportion of new members was represented by those of Anglo-Saxon background (63 percent). A further 16 percent were Polynesian; 8 percent were continental European (other than Hispanic); and another 8 percent were New Zealand Maori. The Polynesian and Maori members were primarily located in the North New Zealand Conference.

Socio-economic Profile

Among the new members, 26 percent had an annual family (head of family plus spouse) income of \$25,000-\$50,000; a further 7 percent earned above \$50,000. In this same end of the wage structure, 24 percent earned between \$15,000 and \$25,000.

Of those who joined the church during this period, 26 percent earned less than \$10,000 (with 15 percent under \$6,000).

Thus, the two largest groups were found at opposite ends of the economic scale. This may suggest that in the Trans-Tasman Union Conference there is success in reaching all levels of the social structure. However, a study of the New Member Reports to the three conferences shows that this is not the case in the individual conferences.

The educational background of the new members shows that 71 percent had received a partial or full secondary education and that a further 13 percent had received a tertiary education. To balance this, 11 percent had received no more than a primary education.

Occupations reflected the educational backgrounds of the new members. More than one-quarter (26 percent) identified themselves as housewives; 15 percent were retired/pensioners; a further 15 percent were involved in some type of commercial activity; 14 percent were engaged in a trade or were farmers; 11 percent were professionals or para-professionals; 9 percent were unskilled labourers; 7 percent were students; and 2 percent were unemployed.

The general conclusion may be drawn that the church appears to be focussing its attention (probably unconsciously) on low to middle bracket people. This means that a considerable part of the population is not being targetted with the Gospel. Ministries that serve the rest of the population need to be initiated by local churches. Such ministries need to be "incarnational"; that is, they need to meet the various strata of society at the point of their specific needs. The responsibility lies particularly with the Department of Church

Ministries to resource, equip, and train the members of local churches to take up the challenge of ministering in ways and places which, unconsciously, have been missed in the past.

Religious Background of New Members

Of the new converts in this study, 68 percent came from other denominations (53 percent Protestant and 15 percent Catholic). Add to this a further 16 percent who were raised in Adventist homes but left the church at an early age, and the result is a high 84 percent. Only 16 percent came from a non-church background. In New South Wales and New Zealand from which this study was drawn, the percentage of population identifying itself as unchurched is much higher than this.

This means that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not making a significant advance into the unchurched community where the bulk of the secular world lives. The Church in this area is evidently not having notable success with current evangelistic methods in reaching people who have no Christian background. More attention should be given to reaching such people at the point of their needs.

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 spiritual matters. 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.

Pre-evangelism should consist of bridges being built to these people so that God's love ("that he gave his only son") 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 (in addition to the Holy Spirit) that led people to join the Adventist Church during this five-year period. Far and away the most dominant factor cited was the influence of Adventist church members who were friends, relatives, neighbours or acquaintances of the new convert. In three separate areas of the study this fact surfaced consistently.

When asked to identify the various factors that influenced them to join the church, 72 percent of the respondents identified the influence of

their Adventist "network" of friends, neighbours, relatives and acquaintances as being primary in leading them to become members of the church.

This result harmonizes with the research of the Hewitt Research Foundation which discovered that 83 percent of new members in the North American Division 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 (67 percent of the respondents), 64 percent attended at the invitation of a friend, neighbour, acquaintance or relative who was a member of the Adventist Church. 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 individual joining the church. Only 18 percent of those attending evangelistic meetings received advertising in the mail or at their door and 5 percent saw newspaper advertising.

Various types of Bible study situations (Home Bible Fellowships, personal Bible studies with pastors or church members, Pastor's Bible classes, public Bible teaching) all played important roles as people found their way to 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 their 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 (see the Holmes-Rahe Stress Scale) have a time of receptivity to spiritual things which may last for a period of up to three years. During the twelve months just before they became Adventists, 60 percent of the respondents had experienced such disruptions in their lives. These included (in descending order of percentage): a personal or family emotional crisis; death or serious illness of close friend or relative; personal illness or injury; moved to another area; divorce or marital problem; severe financial difficulties; marriage; changed to a different line of work; legal problems; birth or adoption of a child; loss of job; son or daughter leaving home; or retirement.

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.

Assimilation of New Members

Among the new converts in the study 47 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 33 percent indicated that their relationship to the church was "average." But 10 percent said "somewhat lukewarm" and a further 10 percent said "very weak; just hanging on." Thus, one-fifth of those baptised in the five-year period were in need of urgent pastoral care.

While 75 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," 19 percent had found it difficult to develop close relationships in the church. And 6 percent had found the church to be definitely "cold and exclusive; I don't feel at home."

By far the three most helpful resources in strengthening the spiritual life as perceived by the new members were: Church worship service (80 percent), Sabbath School (78 percent), and personal Bible study (76 percent). The Ellen White writings rated 61 percent, prayer meeting 55 percent, the Record 48 percent, and the Signs 25 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 this study, 77 percent of respondents indicated that they have been sharing their personal witness of what God has done for them with relatives, friends, acquaintances and neighbours.

Inviting a non-member to public meetings or to church was a method of witnessing by 60 percent of the new members and 59 percent were engaged in sharing Christian literature. Of the new members, 41 percent were engaged in video evangelism or Revelation seminars; 34 percent were teaching a Sabbath School class; 30 percent were working in community services; and 21 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 local churches and pastors to ensure that these new members do not lose contact with their non-member networks.

Conclusion

The study of new members in the three designated conferences in the Trans-Tasman Union Conference 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 Mission Consultation (February 1990) has made clear, we encourage "congregationalism in mission." This means that the local church is challenged to fulfil its role as an evangelistic centre and to plan and operate a continuous smorgasbord of outreach ministries which are designed to meet the specific needs of the people groups in its community. The primary responsibility for the fulfilment of the Great Commission rests on the local church. This philosophy of mission needs to receive increasing attention at all levels of the church.

A greater awareness of the "network" principle of evangelism, together with training of church members in this ministry, is likely to produce greater results in growth. (See the ICME training for churches: "The Master's Plan for Making Disciples"). Of those who expressed themselves in the open-ended comment section of the questionnaire sent to new members, more than half wrote in terms of the relational importance of the "family of God" concept, of personal relationships, of fellowship, and of friends they had made since becoming church members. 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 Bible study yet, and who are not likely to come to public evangelistic meetings or Revelation seminars at this time. The influence of sharing God's love on a personal level, as long term relationships are created, may be the only effective way to break through the secular barrier in this non-book culture in which we live.

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."