



*Survey Report*

# **Discover Bible Course Evaluation and Input from Students, Staff, Volunteers and Pastors**

By Monte Sahlin  
July 2010



## Goals of the Study

- Evaluate various aspects of the Discover Bible Study Guides
- Provide information to make decisions about the revision and updating of the Discover course
- Find ideas for reaching new target groups

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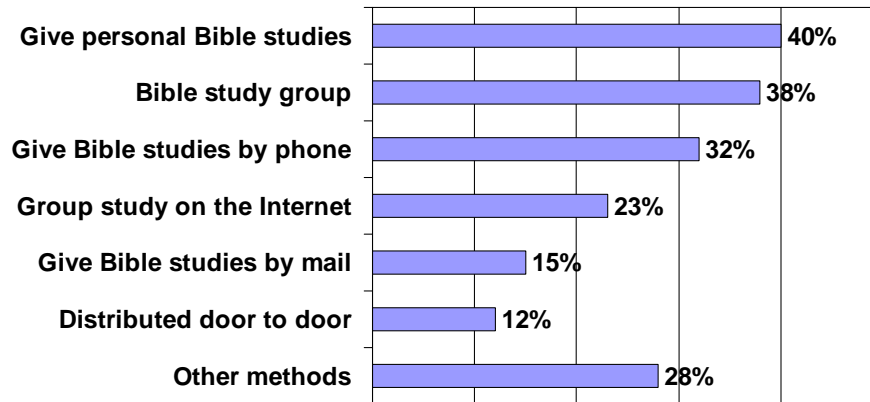
## Source of the Data

- A total of 131 interviews were completed with pastors, local Bible school lay leaders, individuals who currently serve or have served in various roles related to the Bible School and individuals who have completed the Discover course through the Bible School and through local churches. Most interviews were randomly selected from larger, complete lists.

There is a degree of overlap among these categories. There are pastors who also serve as coordinators of local Bible schools. There are lay leaders and pastors who took the Discover course or earlier Voice of Prophecy Bible School courses and as a result became baptized members of the Adventist Church. There are retired Bible School workers who are currently functioning as volunteer leaders of local Bible schools or using the Discover lessons to give Bible studies to people they have met in their community. A high percentage of those for whom the Discover lessons and earlier Bible School courses have been significant in their spiritual journey become users or advocates of these materials in reaching nonbelievers.

The methods used in this survey meet the current standards of the survey research profession. An allowance for sampling error must be made in all survey research. For this survey that error factor is 10 percentage points (plus or minus) at the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of reliability.

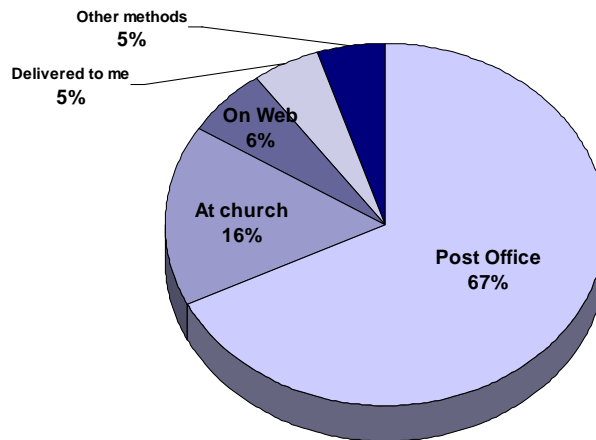
## How the Discover Lessons are Used in the Field



The Discover Bible Study Guides are being used in many different ways in congregations and local communities across North America. It is not a single-purpose evangelistic tool. Pastors and Bible School workers and volunteers are more likely to report that they have used the Discover lessons in giving personal Bible studies and leading Bible study groups. Pastors are more likely to say they have used the Discover lessons in giving Bible studies over the phone and in group studies on the Internet, while Bible School workers and volunteers are more likely to have given Bible studies through the mail and distributed Discover lessons door to door. Respondents 65 years of age and older are more likely to have used the Discover lessons in a Bible study group.

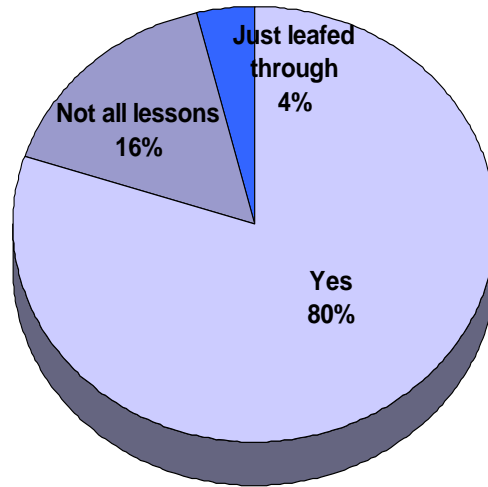
Other methods include a pastor who uses them as handouts at his evangelistic meetings and a Discover student who distributes the enrollment cards at her doctor's office. "I have recommended them to quite a few people," says a 77-year-old woman. "I have sent in cards for my friends. I may start using the Discover lessons to teach a class. I shared the lessons with a non-SDA pastor and he is using information from the lessons in his church," stated a 66-year-old Discover graduate.

## I Have Used the Discover Lessons to Study the Bible for Myself



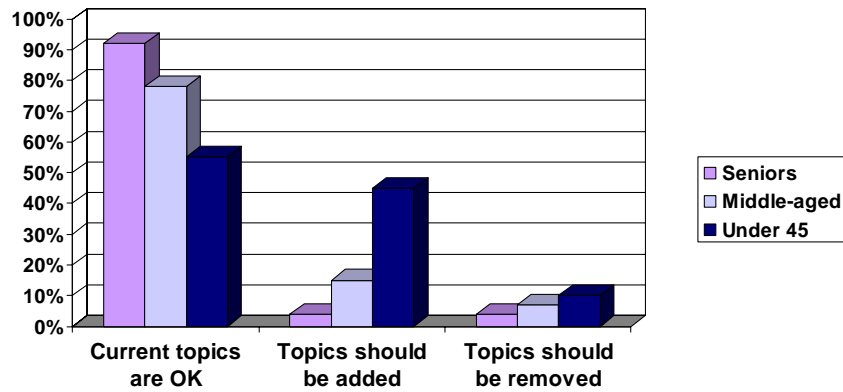
Fully sixty percent of the respondents have gone through the Discover lessons to study the Bible for themselves. This includes the Discover course graduates from the last two years who took the course through the Voice of Prophecy Bible School at the media center as well as lay volunteers in local Bible schools and even pastors who evidently came into the Adventist Church, in part, through the Discover lessons. This pie charts shows the breakdown of this 60 percent in terms of how they accessed the Discover lessons in their own experience. Those with only a secondary diploma or less education are more likely to have taken the course through the post office. It seems likely that those church members and pastors who experienced the Discover lessons in their conversion experience are also much more enthusiastic about using them in personal ministries and promoting them in the church and in the community.

## Have You Personally Read the Discover Study Guides?



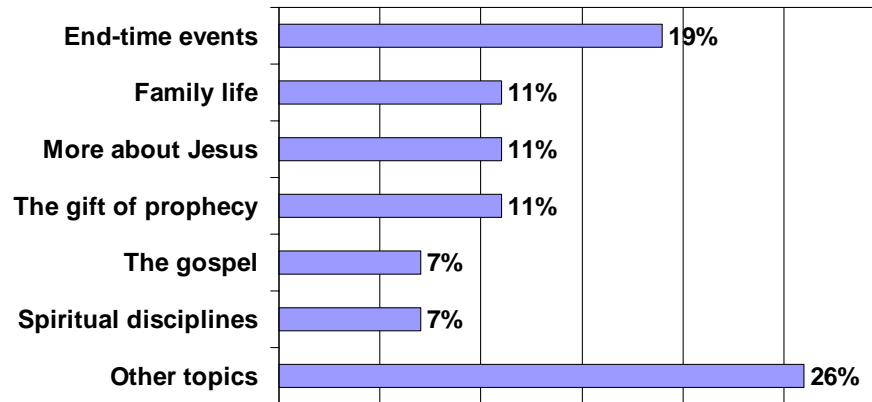
Almost all of the respondents in this survey have read all or most of the Discover lessons and therefore are well informed to give detailed input. Only four percent indicated that they had just leafed through a set of lessons for a cursory view. These were all media center or denominational administrators and departmental personnel. Younger respondents (those under 45 years of age) were more likely to say that had read some of the lessons, but not all of them. It appears that, for a variety of reasons, younger adults tend to lose interest and quit reading the Discover lessons before the complete the entire series.

## Are Changes Needed in the Topics Included in the Discover Lessons?



Overall more than four out of five respondents (83 percent) are happy with the topics covered in the Discover lessons. About one in ten suggest one or more additional topics that should be included and only five percent say that there are topics in the lessons that should be removed. But when the responses are sorted by age categories, it becomes clear that younger adults are more likely to feel that the Discover lessons do not touch on topics that are important to them. This is equally true for pastors and laity. Pastors are more likely to feel that there are too many topics in the Discover lessons and that some should be combined or dropped out.

## What Topics Should be Added?



This graph shows only the responses of those who indicated on the previous page that they feel there are additional topics that should be included in the Discover course. The suggestions from the younger respondents who are more likely to want additional topics are all over the map, so the suggestion that appeared most often is largely the wish of people over 45 years of age. One in five respondents said that Discover should focus more on prophecy and end-time events, but almost all of these are people over 45 years of age. Younger adults are more likely to suggest that Discover include more about Christ and a lesson on spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, Bible study, etc.). Ethnic minorities are more likely to want a lesson on family life. Pastors are more likely to suggest that the Discover lessons focus more on the gospel, while the Bible School workers and volunteers are more likely to suggest that a study on the gift of prophecy needs to be included in the Discover course.

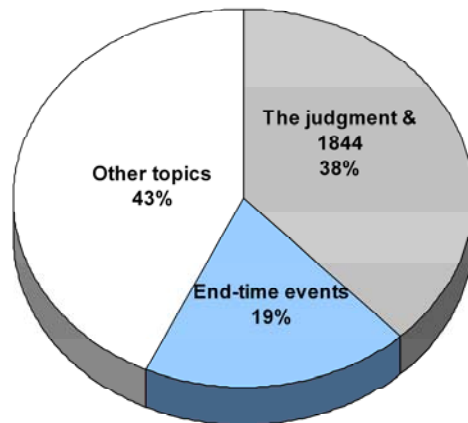
A number of other suggestions that do not easily fit into large clusters of respondents are included on the next page. Some of these are well worth consideration despite the fact that they were mentioned by only one or two respondents.

## What topics do you believe need to be added? Why?

*The verbatim transcript of the responses to this question are displayed below. Ellipsis (...) appear between each individual's comments. They are presented here in no particular order and without any clustering. Some people made more than one suggestion and where this occurs, the various suggestions are numbered.*

"More on how to keeping the Sabbath ... (1) Worship; most Adventists know which day is right, but not the essence and experience of worship. (2) Gift of prophecy; I'm a firm believer in it, and people should be exposed to the biblical affirmation of it before getting baptized. ... I think "Who is Israel?" would be an important addition. ... Specific spiritual practices or disciplines ... (1) We need a lesson on the topic of tithe. Where your money goes is where your heart is. Emphasize the measurable, tangible blessings. (2) We need one on church attendance; I hope it would emphasize personal and consistent involvement and on winning a soul; Bible studies, literature, etc. (3) We also need one on mission work. "Go ye into all the world" is for everyone, not just preachers and teachers. Many now are doing it but more are needed. (4) We need one on "Compassion," bearing one another's burdens, use of the telephone, get-well cards, visiting the sick, the widowed, the old and young, the forgotten. (5) We need one on nurturing the newly baptized, inviting them into the church, building friendships, building bridges, showing warmth, caring friendships. (6) We need one on getting acquainted with the Bible and how to interpret it. ... (1) Why the Lord allows suffering. (2) The gift of prophecy. ... Need to be deeper into the Word: (1) The first incest; (2) Lazarus' death; (3) Second chance after death. ... 10 commandments, giving ideas on what it means to keep each one in practical everyday terms ... Lessons on the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), providing information for a new Christian, easier to understand and giving more of the message of the cross. (Man 45 years of age with a college education) ... Fruit of the Spirit; after finishing the lesson it would be good to know how to put it into practice ... More emphasis needs to be put on Daniel and Revelation. We are at the end of time and people are making money their god instead of God. They need to know where we stand. (Man 53 years of age with a secondary education) ... More current events related to prophecy and the second coming so people can see these things are in the Bible ... How to use the Bible for beginners. Some people are not familiar with the Bible. (Woman 66 years of age with a college education) ... Prophecy and health ... (1) John the Baptist; (2) More about the time when Jesus was on Earth and the women who were at His side; (3) Women of the Old Testament ... The mark of the beast, last-day events ... Churches today are losing members because they are not the true church; this should be explained. ... More about the second coming ... A study of Christ's parables."

## Does Any Topic Trouble You?



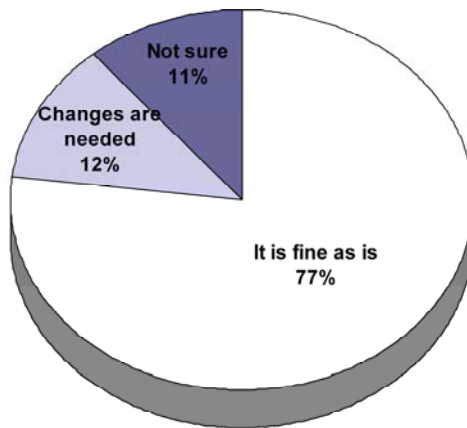
A total of 20 respondents (about 15 percent of the total) stated that there were topics in the Discover lessons that trouble them or they think ought to be take out of the course. This graph displays only the responses of those 20 individuals. Most of their concerns relate to how the Discover course deals with the sanctuary doctrine, the judgment and 1844, prophetic interpretation and end-time events. Pastors and younger adults are more likely to express concern about how the sanctuary doctrine is handled, while recent students of the Discover lessons are more likely to express confusion about end-time events. One person believes there are problems with the introductory lesson that make it weak. A number of other suggestions were made and are included verbatim on the next page.

## Does any particular topic trouble you? Why?

*The verbatim transcript of the responses to this question are displayed below. Ellipsis (...) appear between each individual's comments. They are presented here in no particular order and without any clustering.*

"The first lesson is hard to get through; [it] needs something informs someone who already believes in God. ... I think we have a better understanding of judgment today. ... When Bible texts are used to suggest that the church is the building, paid staff and lots of programs. ... Lessons 12, 13 and 21. Starting with 'you're wrong' is not the best way to present the Sabbath. We undermine the gospel in these lessons. There is too little about God's love. We need to talk about the joy of the Sabbath without saying that everybody else is wrong. ... Lessons 13, 18 and 22 troubled me from the beginning. I helped edit all the other lessons, but these three did not fit my theological viewpoints so I stepped aside and made no editorial suggestions regarding them. ... Seventh day Sabbath [and] death as a sleep (Man 78 years of age with a graduate degree) ... Mark of the beast ... The Sanctuary—it was overwhelming, hard to understand at first (Woman 63 years of age with a secondary education) ... Daniel and Revelation are too difficult to understand. It would be good for people to see how the Old Testament and the New Testament are connected. (Woman 66 years of age with a college education) ... Tithing."

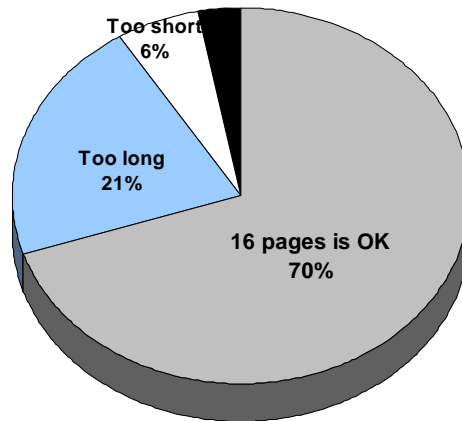
## The Order in Which Topics are Presented



More than three out of four respondents (77 percent) feel that the order in which the topics are presented in the Discover course is fine as it is. About one in eight indicate that they think some changes are needed while almost an equal share are not sure how to respond to this question. Middle-aged adults are more likely to see a need for change, while those who were enrolled as students in the Bible School over the last two years and those with little education are more likely to think it is fine as it is.

***Specific suggestions from respondents:*** “Lessons 21 through 24 need to come higher on the list; move 11 and 12 lower ... Prayer should be closer to Lesson 3, emphasizing relationship with Jesus ... I would put Church much closer to the beginning of the series so people could start assimilating with an Adventist church as soon as possible. ... Put Lesson 17 closer to the top. Put Lesson 11 closer to the Father and Christ. ... Start with the plan of salvation ... Move the health lesson two or three lessons down.”

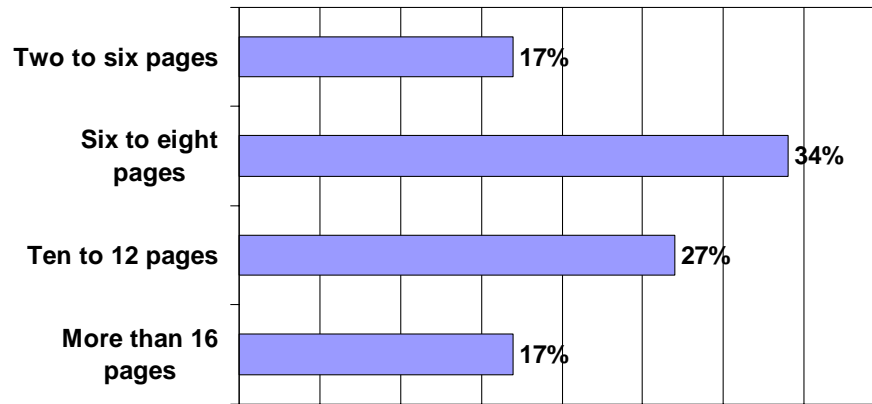
## The 16-page Format



Seven in ten respondents feel that the current, 16-page size of each lesson in the Discover course is about right. Pastors are more likely to think it is too long and suggest fewer pages, while recent graduates of the course are more likely to approve of the 16-page length. Surprisingly, those with the least education are most likely to suggest that the number of pages should be increased.

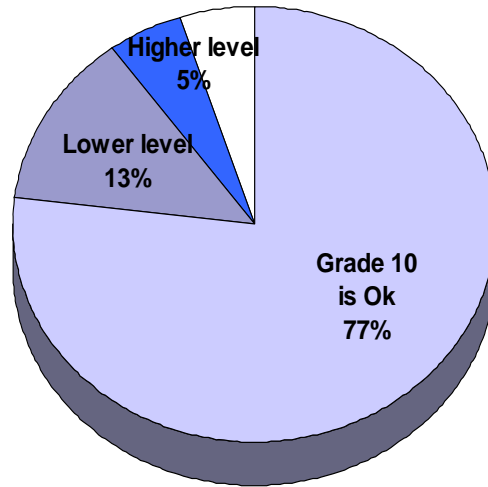
**Respondents said:** “Unfortunately, for many people today they are too long. Attention spans have shortened! ... The number of pages is less important than how full of text each page is.”

## Recommended Number of Pages



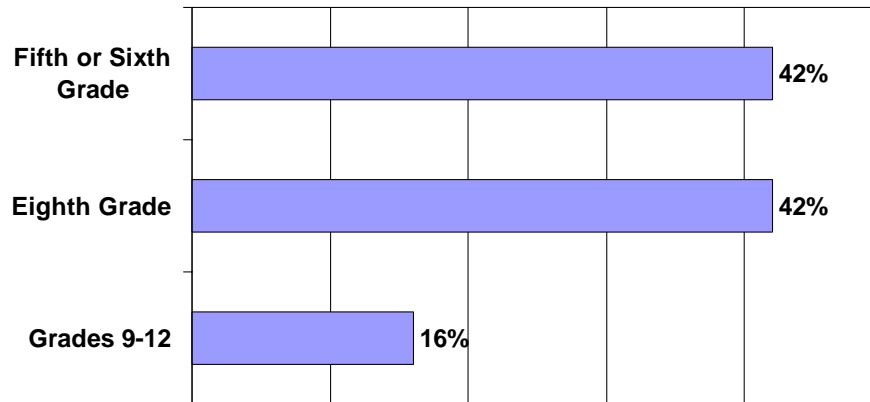
This graph is based only on the 29 respondents who suggested a different number of pages for each Discover lesson than the current 16 pages. The largest number prefer something about half the size of the current booklets. Pastors and ethnic minorities are more likely to suggest six to eight pages, while recent graduates of the course, people over 65 years of age and those with less than a college education are more likely to say that the size of the lessons should be expanded beyond 16 pages.

## Reading Level for the Discover Lessons



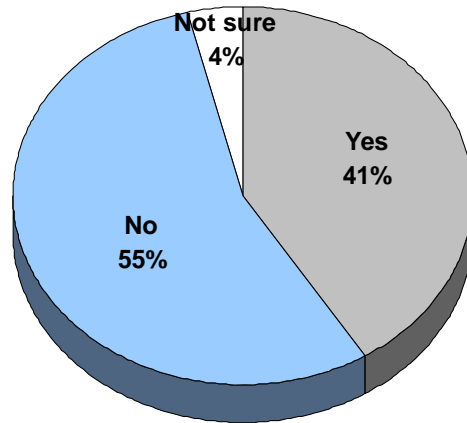
More than three out of four respondents say that they think the current Grade 10 reading level of the Discover lessons is fine. Less than one in four expressed some need for change. About two-thirds of these felt it should move to a lower grade level and a third wanted to move it up. Pastors and Bible School workers and volunteers are more likely to favor a lower reading level.

## Recommended Reading Level



This graph is based only on the respondents who suggested that the Discover lessons be rewritten to a different reading level than the current Grade 10. In fact, a few of these appear to be thinking of Grade 10. Most are divided between stepping it down to Grade 8 or down as far as Grades Five or Six.

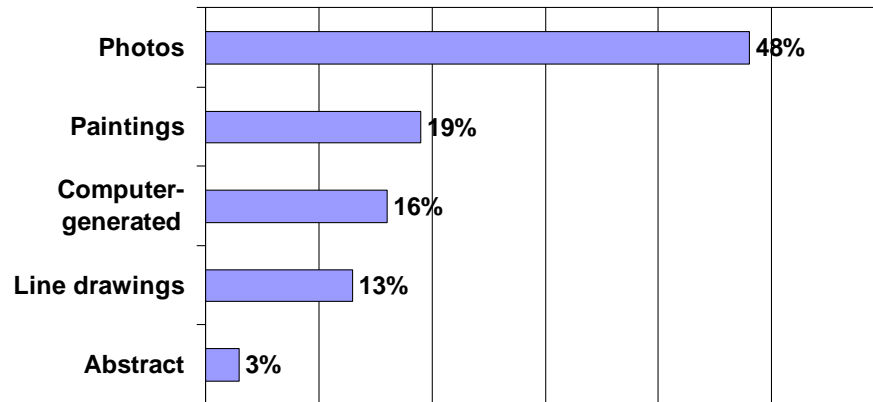
## Should the Artwork and Graphics be Updated?



The majority of the respondents do not see a need for even a refreshing of the art and graphics in the Discover course. Pastors and Bible School workers and volunteers are much more likely to see a need for this; 60 percent of pastors are in favor of it and 78 percent of Bible School workers and volunteers. It is the recent graduates of the Discover course that do not see a need for this. Fully 85 percent said no!

Young adults are much more likely to want a new look for the Discover lessons. All respondents under 30 years of age said yes, while two-thirds of senior citizens said no.

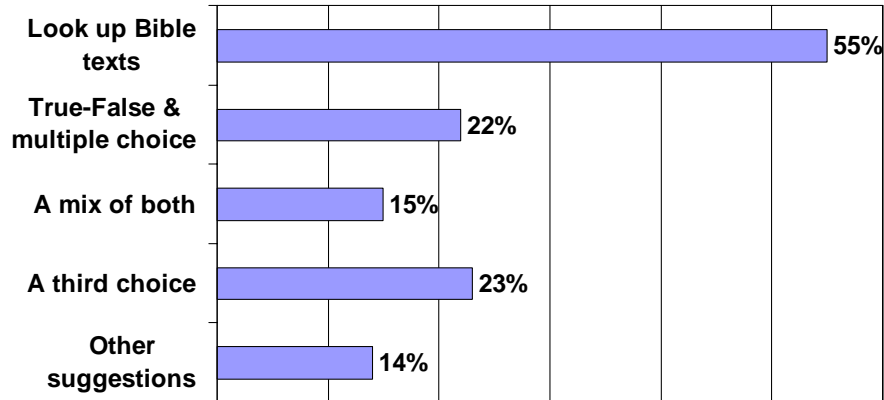
## What Kind of Art?



Some people who said they did not see a need for new graphics for the Discover lessons answered this question anyhow, which indicates they are not hostile to the idea. Most of the respondents here are those who said the lessons need a facelift.

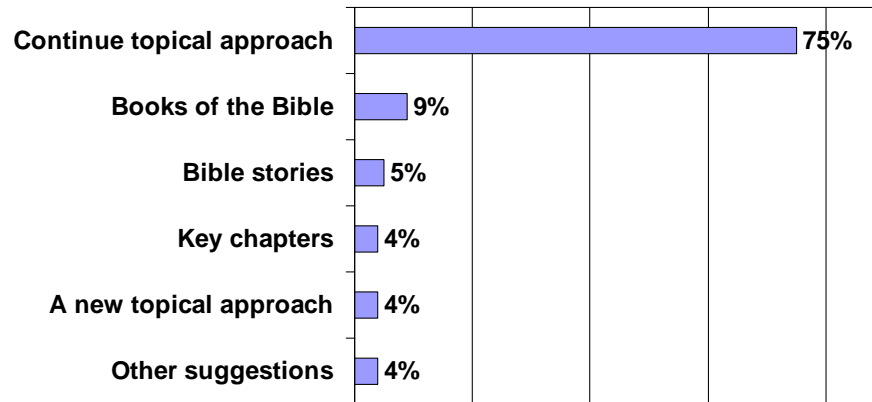
If the Discover lessons are to be given new art, clearly it must be photography. The support for other types of graphics is simply too scattered to be worth considering. There are no clear correlations with demographic factors on this item.

## Type of Answer Sheet



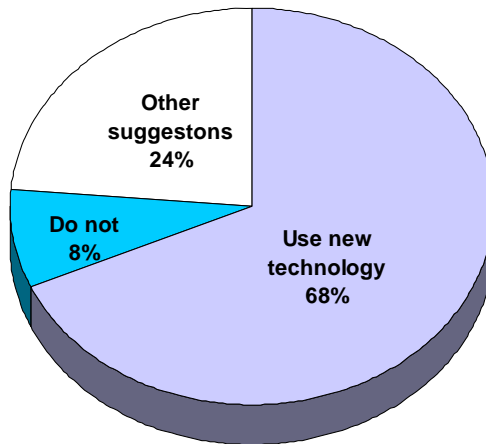
The majority of respondents prefer the type of answer sheet that requires the student to look up texts in the Bible and write a short answer. Younger adults under 45 years of age are even more likely to want this. Pastors are more likely to want a different approach and have suggested the need for reflection questions, essay questions, and other types.

## Topical vs Other Approaches



Three out of four respondents prefer that a revised edition of the Discover course continue to use the same topical approach. One in four suggest other approaches to organizing the material in the course. Recent graduates of the course are twice as likely to want a series on Books of the Bible, otherwise there is no significant demographic segmentation on this questions.

## Suggestions



When the respondents were asked an open-ended questions about suggestions for the future of the Discover course, more than two-thirds said that the Bible School should expand its initiatives on the Web, especially moving into the new social networking sites such as Facebook and new technology such as Twitter. Many of these respondents had very specific suggestions about how to do this. Only a handful expressed a negative response to this idea.

One in four respondents had specific recommendations related to the print version of the Discover lessons. These suggestions are all unique and may be helpful to an editor making revisions, but cannot be clustered around any specific themes. A transcript of these specific responses appears on the next two pages.

## **What suggestions do you have for the Voice of Prophecy Bible School as it considers revising and up-dating these lessons?**

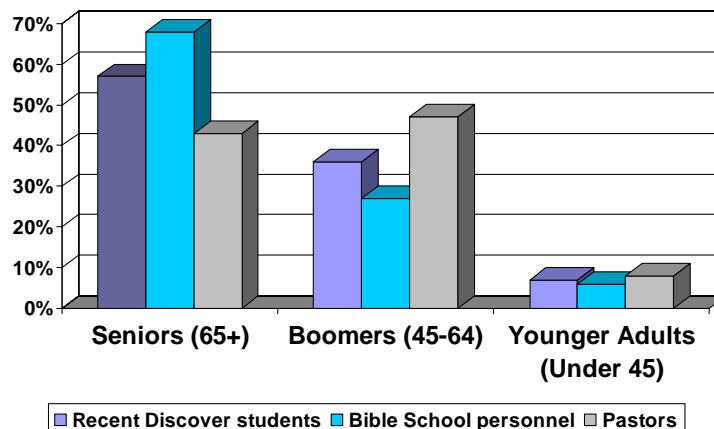
The verbatim transcript of the responses to this question are displayed below. Ellipsis (...) appear between each individual's comments.

***More than two thirds of those who responded to this question (68 percent) indicated that they believe the Bible School should expand its outreach on the Web, especially using the new social networking sites and related new technology:*** Six respondents said precisely the same thing, "Make greater use of the new technology." Two respondents said this, "Discover Bible studies should be on social networking Web sites." Other responses clustered in this category, in no particular order: "Internet lessons should have a link to articles written by our church for someone who wants to get more depth. ... The content is fine, but for Internet, Facebook, etc., it needs a non-serif font, e.g. Verdana, which is more readable on a monitor. ... Twitter has great potential to attract the younger, curious mind. Facebook has a large number of middle-aged members also. ... Lessons organized around books of the Bible (instead of topics) would be valuable. We need to scatter these lessons in every way possible. My friend advertised on Facebook and got 265 hits for his evangelistic series. ... We need interactive online Bible studies! We need Discover Bible lessons for the younger generation, using the language of today's young people besides having lessons for adults. ... The graphics should keep you focused on the lesson. Offer Discover on the Internet and keep the paper kind too. ... Provide the Discover lessons on line and have a chat room Bible study. It would be nice to have a way for Adventists to keep in touch like Facebook. (Woman 56 years of age with a secondary education) ... Would like to see a Discover group on Facebook (Man 45 years of age with a college education) ... Put it on Facebook or something like that. This generation doesn't read; they look at their computers. (Woman 74 years of age with a college education) ... The lessons should be available on line. (Man 50 years of age with a college education) ... Facebook would be good—very helpful. I think ads on the Internet would be good too. ... Provide Bible studies on Twitter and Facebook. (Man 78 years of age with a college education) ... Use an Ipad application for Discover lessons ... Link the online lessons with a discussion feature ... Advertize the Discover lessons on Facebook ... Provide answers to questions on line ... Make the Bible School more available on line ... Update the book list to include only currently available books ... Email answers to questions and provide a print capability ... By all means use any avenue available to share the Discover lessons with people." (Woman 62 years of age with a college education)

***Just eight percent of the respondents to this questioned oppose the use of the Internet by the Bible School:*** "I would not want any changes. I don't use the computer or new stuff. I'm 72 years old. (Woman with a secondary education) ... None. I am older and don't get along with the new technology. (Man 72 years of age with a secondary education) ... Don't go on the Internet! It is big downfall to people. I do not allow it in my home." (Man 53 years of age with a secondary education)

***About one in four respondents to this question (24 percent) had other suggestions, most of them related to the print version of the Discover lessons or more general, strategic matters:*** Four respondents said precisely the same thing, “You need to target the young adults.” The other comments are unique from each individual: “Continue to do surveys and get input. Get out into the churches more. Promote the Bible lessons more. Reach a broader audience. (Woman 53 years of age with a graduate degree.) ... In this day you need more than one series. This applies to the question about topics; they need to be centered around stories; Bible stories, current stories. Let the story set context and provide central teaching. ... I wish you would consider more of a magazine format with side bars for personal stories and illustrations. I would keep the modern approach but also introduce a postmodern approach as a new series of lessons. Clearly they should be made available on mobile devices, social networking sites, etc. ... Simple Church quit using Discover and started using KidZone for two reasons: (1) Discover lessons are too complicated for the secular person. (2) Discover does not require the student to dig into and learn the Bible. KidZone is great for adults too. ... I like less texts where they are clustered in groups. They need more Bible stories and less proof-texting. Many people cannot read dense material or the KJV. Put Bible passages in context. Proof texts at 140 characters or less? That’s scary, seriously out of context. Facebook would be a better medium. ... There are too many true-and-false questions; needs more written answers. ... Use more up-to-date language ... Keep it simple.” (Woman 80 years of age with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education)

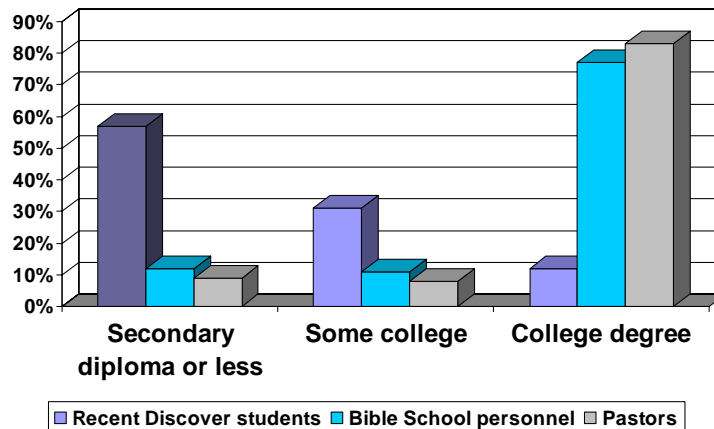
## Age of Respondents by Generation



Like most Seventh-day Adventist congregations and ministries in North America, the Discover course and related activities are dominated by older people and have very little participation by younger adults under 45 years of age; Generation X and the Millennial generation. The majority of Bible School workers and volunteers and the majority of people who have completed the Discover course in the last two years are seniors 65 years of age and older. The pastors who responded in this survey are more likely to be Baby Boomers, but tilt older than do similar samplings in other surveys conducted in the last year or so, indicating that older pastors are more likely to get involved in using the Discover lessons than are younger pastors.

This fact raises significant questions about the future viability of the Discover course. It is also true that there is evidence to indicate that if an evangelistic tool does better in connecting with younger people it is more likely to have a higher percentage of converts. Teens and young adults are more likely to convert to a new religion than are older adults.

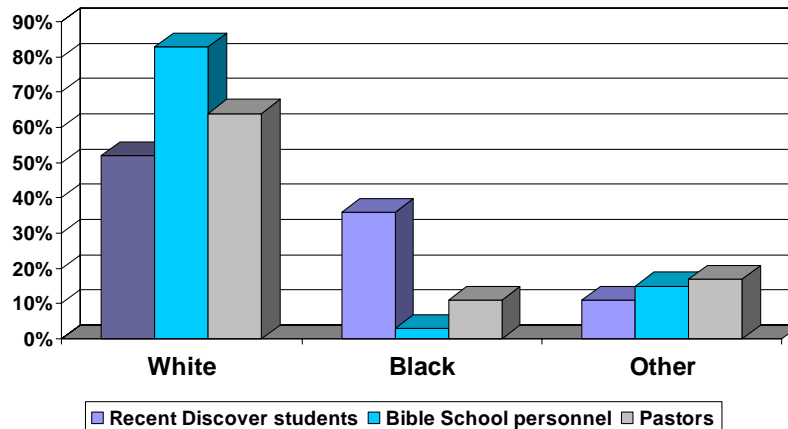
## Education of Respondents



The vast majority of pastors and Bible School workers and volunteers have a college degree, in fact the majority have a graduate degree. The majority of people who have completed the Discover course in the last two years have only a secondary diploma or less. In fact, one in five have not completed high school.

This disparity would be expected to result in a certain amount of misunderstanding and communication difficulty. No specific evidence of such problems surfaced in this survey, but that may be due to the fact that the questions were not designed to explore this topic. This reality about education does indicate that consideration should be given as to whether or not the Discover lessons should target a general audience or more specifically an audience among the poor and uneducated.

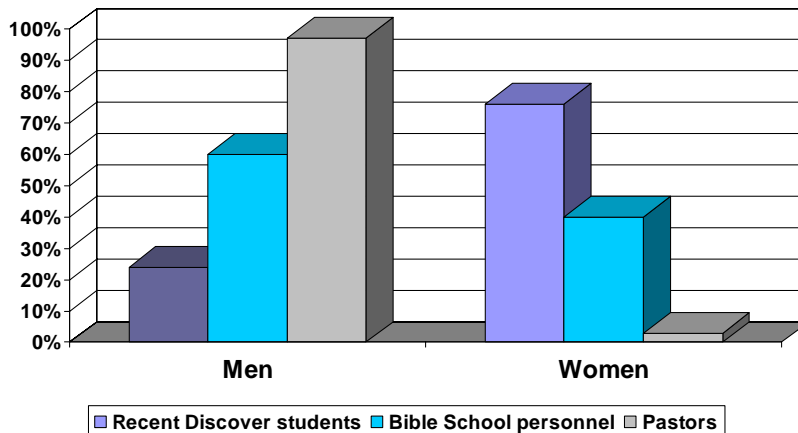
## Ethnicity of Respondents



About half of the people who have completed the Discover course in the last two years report their ethnicity as White, while more than a third say they are Black. Nearly half are ethnic minorities of one kind or another. At the same time the Bible School workers and volunteers are overwhelmingly White. The ethnic profile of the pastors is very close to the ethnicity known to be present among Adventist pastors in North America.

The Voice of Prophecy Bible School, both at the media center and in the local churches, is staffed and supported largely by Whites. That is increasingly in contrast with the reality of the people studying the Discover lessons. This indicates that targeted initiatives need to be made to involve more ethnic minorities in the Bible School network.

## Gender of Respondents



Three out of four of the people who completed the Discover course in the last two years are women, as are the majority of the Bible School workers and volunteers. Almost all Adventist pastors in North America are men.

These data suggest that perhaps the Voice of Prophecy Bible School should consider developing a course specifically targeting men. Clearly the Bible lessons have no problem connecting with women. Men tend to be much more difficult to get involved in religious activities of any kind.

## Recommendations

1. The most important change that needs to be made in the Discover lessons is to build in elements that encourage students to get others involved with the course. This is already happening and needs to be supported and used as an intentional outreach strategy.
2. In view of the significant percentage of respondents who are using the Discover lessons in small group Bible studies, study should be given to developing a version of the materials designed specifically for this purpose. Relational Bible study handouts and a leader's guide could be developed without touching the existing materials.
3. Most of the people who have completed the Discover course are poorly educated women with a high proportion of ethnic minorities. If the lessons are edited or rewritten, this fact needs to be kept in mind. The illustrations, story line and graphics need to be focused on this target group to enhance effectiveness.
4. It may be a better use of resources to **not** invest in reworking the Discover lessons at this time, but invest instead in one or more experiments with new vehicles, using new technology and new Bible study methods, aimed at the target groups that Discover does not reach—younger adults, men and the highly educated.
5. The Bible School needs to extend its ministry into the social networking arena on the Web. A group on Facebook, for example, could be started with a handful of volunteers and maybe a part-time contractor or employee. There are some best practices documented by commercial and nonprofit organizations that may help.
6. The Discover lessons do not appear to touch the vast secular segment of the population—the fastest growing segment of the religious profile in North America. If the Bible School feels its mission includes reaching beyond Evangelical America, this is another area that needs experimental initiatives.