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

THE THIRD YEAR

The Institute of Church Ministry has previously reported on the first two years of a ten-year study of Adventist teenagers and their relationships to the church (See Janet Leigh Kangas, "A Study of the Religious Attitudes and Behaviors of SDA Adolescents in North America Related to Their Family, Educational, and Church Backgrounds," Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1988, for the first year report). This project is being sponsored by the North American Division, particularly the Church Ministries and Education departments.

The present paper reports the findings of the third year of the study. ADVENTIST YOUTH SURVEY 3 was shorter than the first-year questionnaire but longer than the second one; it contained 43 questions on four pages. We wished to update material on personal religion and church connections. We also wished to gather new material on church standards, assess interest in youth mission-type activities, check on attitudes toward some
current issues, and look at future plans. In addition, we wished to gather some demographic material that we had not previously collected. Most important of all, of course, was to maintain contact with the youth before they could slip out of the range of the study. In a project of this kind the researchers must develop a long-term relationship with the subjects.

Part of encouraging this relationship is to keep track of any residential changes. People today are highly mobile, and after a year the postal system will no longer forward mail. So the very first question we asked was: "Is the address on the envelope in which we mailed this questionnaire still your correct one?" Those answering "no" were instructed to fill in the correct address in the blank space provided.

Keeping track of these address changes is a major job for our staff. Scores of our letters were returned undelivered because the addresses were no longer correct. We then must attempt to find current addresses by contacting church clerks, searching church directories, or advertising in union conference papers. Even after all this, we were unable to deliver 22 surveys.

We had expected that some attrition would occur. Indeed, this was why we began with such a large sample; we wanted to be sure we would still have a sufficient group for appropriate analyses at the end of ten years. We mailed the survey to all 1523 young people in the original sample even though only 1263
had completed the second-year survey. We really didn't expect that the 260 who hadn't responded to the short second-year survey would rejoin the study, but we gave them the opportunity anyway, and 63 completed the third-year survey.

At the time of writing this report--after four mailings--1083 usable questionnaires had been received, and a few others continue to trickle in. If the response rate is calculated on the original 1523 subjects minus the 22 undeliverables, it is 72%. If, however, the sampling frame is reduced by the 197 who returned neither the second or the third survey and the 22 undeliverables to 1304, then the response rate is 83%. This is the same as for the second year. At the time that the data collection began, these adolescents were all 17 or 18 years of age. Here is what has been happening to them.

**Personal Religion**

We asked an especially pertinent question: "How does your present relationship with Jesus Christ compare with that of two years ago?" Here are the answers:

- Stronger today: 33%
- About the same: 36%
- Weaker today: 28%
- Have no relationship: 3%

Growth is slightly greater than decline. However, while the figure for
"stronger today" is about the same as a year ago, those 28% reporting "weaker
today" are up from 21% a year ago. It seems that significant slippage is
occurring.

We also asked several more specific questions about how things were
going in the spiritual life:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My present life is full of joy and satisfaction</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the time my life seems to be out of control</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

I am pretty well satisfied with my present religious life

Only a minority of 41% are finding present joy and satisfaction, and only a little over a fourth are satisfied with their present religious life. A fifth find their life out of control, and another fifth are not sure. Certainly, many youth are looking for something they haven't found.

In line with this, 42% felt that they would be saved if Jesus were to come right now, 52% believed they would not be saved, and 6% did not answer the question--presumably uncertain about the matter.

Connection to the Church
We asked about the young person's present relationship toward the
Adventist church with the following results:

- Enthusiastic member: 24%
- So-so member: 51%
- Officially a member but not in heart: 20%
- Have dropped out: 5%

Only about a fourth are enthusiastic members, with half still there but lukewarm. We have essentially lost the other fourth although most still have their names on the books. The 5% who have dropped out account for 53 young people. We have prepared a special two-page, 23-item questionnaire which we are sending to all those who indicate they have dropped out. In time this will provide a rich source of information on factors involved in the decision to leave the church, feelings about the church, intervention strategies employed by the church, and things that might have prevented the dropouts.

Being active in the church is, of course, one of the major factors in retention. We asked if the youth had ever participated in a short-term mission project (like Maranatha) and, if so, the effect it had on their experience. About three-fourths (76%) had never participated, but 17% replied that it deepened their spiritual experience, and 7% indicated that it had no real effect one way or the other. Only one youth said the experience was negative. This may suggest that the church should make these opportunities available for more of its young
In general, how active are our youth in church activities such as holding offices or witnessing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very active</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonably active</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only occasionally</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never do anything</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If involvement is a key to retention, we are in trouble. Nearly two-thirds are involved with the church only minimally or not at all. And the youth sense the connection. We asked: "How important do you think you are to your local Adventist church at the present time?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vital to their program</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat necessary</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They don't know I exist</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That only 10% believe they are vital to their local churches is a sad commentary on our youth ministry. That a third perceive themselves to be invisible in the congregation is tragic. Certainly this study points up a high priority need in this matter of youth involvement.

**Church Standards**

Previously, we have found attitudes toward church standards to be a leading predictor of who expects to remain with the church or who expects to
drop out. This time instead of asking about specific standards, we asked a set of
questions on the functions of the standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is no Biblical basis for many of the standards/rules</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards/rules are harsher than those my parents enforce</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards/rules make Adventism appear very legalistic</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards/rules help maintain proper Christian behavior</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards/rules treat me as if I were a child</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most youth accept church standards as Biblical and do not see them as
c childish. Nearly half find them helpful, even though a substantial minority
perceive them as harsher than parental codes. Probably the most worrisome
aspect is that nearly half views them in legalistic terms, and another three-tenths
are uncertain. Only a fifth sees no legalism in church rules and standards. If we
don't do a better job of interpreting our standards in terms of loving relationships,
we are in for some serious losses down the line.

We also wished to include a few questions on actual behaviors. Given the
sensitiveness of the material, we asked our teenagers to talk about their friends
rather than themselves. About 35% say that half or more of the young people in
their age group with whom they are acquainted use alcohol. About 9% say the same for illegal drugs. Of course, these friends may not all be Adventists, but it is very likely that many are. This finding points up the drug and alcohol problem uncovered in previous studies.

In an even more troublesome finding, two-thirds of our sample say that less than half of their friends are still virgins. Only a small fraction (18%) believe that most of their fellow youth are sexually inexperienced. Surrounded by the influence of the sexual revolution, our church is experiencing great difficulty in communicating its message of moral purity to the rising generation. This problem will require much creative thought.

**Adventures for Christ**

If generating involvement in church life is a key to retaining our youth, perhaps we need creative projects that will capture their imagination. We asked our young people if they would be interested in participating in any of the following experiences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>No way</th>
<th>Perhaps</th>
<th>Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-day, fun youth discipleship seminar</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term mission project</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community service project, e.g., soup kitchen, paint house</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Youth-to-youth seminar for drug-free youth
Pay to send INSIGHT/OUT to non-Adventist friend
Wilderness experience like Outward Bound

Given the current activity level of the youth, this interest is remarkable.

Between a third and a half are very interested in all but one of the experiences. Most of the others might be interested if the details looked challenging. If we add the "very" and the "perhaps" columns, we find that 80 to 90% have some interest in every activity listed. That should encourage the church to develop and promote more opportunities like these.

**Attitudes toward Current Issues**
While not vital to our study, the survey gave opportunity to insert two questions on current issues facing the church:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinions</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualified women should be ordained to the pastoral ministry</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts in the General Conference should be filled by more leaders from the third world</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If these youth are representative of the church of tomorrow and if they retain their present attitudes, women will eventually be ordained to the ministry.

Very little opposition exists. On the other hand, the question of third world
representation in leadership is one the youth have not yet given much consideration, and the future remains fluid.

On politics, our sample seems to reflect adult America. Nearly half (49%) would have voted for George Bush in the 1988 presidential election if they had been eligible. Only 20% would have voted for Michael Dukakis, and the remaining 31% either were undecided or would have chosen not to vote at all.

**Future Education**

We mailed our questionnaire in the summer of 1989 (subsequent mailings took place in the following autumn and winter). We asked where the young people had attended school during the preceding year. Here's how they answered:

- **Adventist academy** 50%
- **Public high school** 33%
- **College** 8%
- **Other** 7%
- **Not in school** 2%

By summer 39% had graduated from academy or high school, and the other 61% still had at least a year to go. What plans for the 1989-90 school year did the graduates have? They answered as followed:

- **Go to Adventist college** 15%
Go to non-Adventist college 15%
Go to work 4%
Other 5%

In reports of the first two years we have seen that about half of our sample was in Adventist academies. Now it becomes apparent that, of those going on to college, about half are choosing Adventist institutions. The other half present a great challenge to Adventist education and to the youth ministries of the church in general.

Some Personal Information
In the surveys for the first two years we had neglected to inquire about ethnic background. This time we remedied that oversight:

- Asian/Oriental 6%
- Black 17%
- Hispanic 11%
- White 62%
- Other 4%

This breakdown probably represents a slight under sampling of Blacks and a slight over sampling of Asians and Hispanics, but it is reasonably representative of the North American Division. Any skewing comes not in the drawing of the sample but in the response rates.

We did not ask for family income in dollar figures because we felt that
question might be too private and because the youth might not have access to
the information. We did, however, ask the subjects to classify their families in
three broad financial areas:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-to-do</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We found that 43% of the young people were part of a family that had
experienced a serious crisis--such as death of a loved one, loss of employment,
natural disaster, etc.--in the past few years.

About two-thirds of our sample have made a decision concerning their
future occupation, with the other third still undecided. Of course, it is likely that
many will alter that decision in face of life’s changing circumstances. On another
important decision, 92% were still single with no definite plans for marriage. But
6% were engaged, and 2% (25 young people) had already married. We will see
these proportions shift dramatically in the next few years.

Pouring Out the Heart
While most of our questions were forced-choice, we gave a final
opportunity for our young people to pour out their hearts: "Tell us anything else
you would like to say about your religion and your church." The response was amazing. While some did not choose to write, those who did produced comments ranging from a few sentences to four pages long. They reflected many opinions and the gamut of emotions from discouragement to confusion to hope.

We have classified the comments under the headings of (1) the church, (2) youth needs, (3) relationship with Christ, (4) Christian education, (5) parents, (6) the survey instrument, and (7) miscellaneous comments. Below are the major themes under each category with the number of times each theme was mentioned given in parentheses.

Attitudes toward the Church

A. I have left the church because:

1. There are too many hypocrites in the church. Usually they are the older, "more important" members of the church. (17 times)

2. People in the church are too cold, critical and judgmental (9 times); too much gossip (4 times).

3. I work on Sabbath (4 times).

4. My mother has left the church (1 time).

5. The church has become a show place for dresses and suits. It has become a social event. Everyone goes there to see and be seen (2 times).

6. There is no fellowship with other youth (3 times).
7. The church looks down on us; ignores us during my parents' divorce (3 times).

8. The church is prejudiced, treating the poor and rich differently (2 times).

9. The church is dull, boring. Church service seems too long (10 times).

10. The church is too legalistic; too many unnecessary man-made rules (14 times).

11. The church stresses too much on E. G. White (3 times).

12. The church has become as corrupt as Israel of old (2 times).

13. I am just trying to find myself (1 time).

14. I am attending a church of another denomination (5 times).

15. The church is full of old people (4 times).

B. The church is neglecting our own communities when we give so much to foreign places (1 time).

C. The church needs to wake up (2 times).

D. The church needs to have more enthusiasm and life (2 times).

E. The church is losing its principles and morals (2 times).

F. I believe in God, not religion. Religion just seems to get in the way (3 times).

G. I love my religion. I would never leave it. I thank God daily I was born in it (17 times).

H. SDA is the closest thing to the truth of God (2 times).

I. I would like to come back to the church and be saved (9 times).
J. The church is warm and caring (3 times).

K. Camp meeting is great and inspiring (2 times).

L. Church rules and standards are vitally important. They are set to make life better (1 time).

The Place of Youth

A. Hardly any youth my age are in church (17 times).

B. Youth programs and youth social activities are almost non-existent (19 times).

C. The church does not include the youth in programming and activities (11 times).

D. The church needs to pay more attention to the youth as they do other aspects of the church. It tends to take the youth for granted (16 times).

E. The church needs to listen to the youth of the church instead of just telling them what to believe (6 times).

F. The youth Sabbath School class has nothing of value at all. It is really a lot more like an earliteens meeting rather than a youth meeting (6 times).

F. We should have more outreach programs for the youth (4 times).

G. The church needs to help young people become more involved with Jesus. The root problem of youth is a lack of relationship with Christ, and the church has a lot to do with this problem (8 times).

H. The church is so busy enforcing rules that it turns many youth away. Too much emphasis is placed on the doctrines and practices rather than Christianity (6 times).

I. Peer pressure is killing me. Being a youth is tough (2 times).
J. Youth Programs:

1. The youth Week of Prayer has proven to be very effective (1 time).

2. Summer Camp has changed my life for the better (3 times).

3. The Youth-to Youth program is great (4 times):
   --it is the future of the Adventist church.
   --very valuable experience for one's Christian growth.
   --we should have more such activities.

K. My youth group is lots of fun. But we could do more (3 times).

L. I love God and I love the people of my age group (2 times).

M. The church has done a good job in getting the youth involved with church activities (1 time).

N. The youth need to wake up and realize that life is not cars, school, clothes and fun, but Jesus (1 time).

Relationship With Christ

A. I would like to come back to Christ. Now I am starting to get serious with Jesus again (8 times).

B. My spiritual life has deteriorated because of the influence of my boy/girl friend (5 times).

C. I love Jesus very much. I wish we could have more youth in our church who love the Lord more than I feel they do (2 times).

D. My relationship with Christ has improved or is improving (4 times).

E. I am straying from God, confused, doubting. The more I try to do what's right, the more I mess up (5 times).

F. I don't want to have anything to do with God (1 time).
G. I don't feel very close to God and don't feel the need (1 time).

H. I want a good relationship with God, but I find myself always "playing with fire" (2 times).

I. When things go wrong, I go to Jesus. When things are well, I forget about Him (1 time).

**Christian Education**

A. Christian education gave me a personal relationship with Jesus (1 time).

B. Public school is better (1 time).

C. One reason that I am attending a non-Adventist college is that I want to be able to think for myself, not be told what to think by someone else. Old members of the church tend to blindly follow picky rules, rather than studying principles.

D. Public school has ruined my Christian life (1 time).

E. Because I don't attend Adventist academy, I am treated like an outcast (1 time).

F. Our boarding school system is a failure (1 time).

G. I have grown farther apart from Jesus due to the fact that I haven't been in an Adventist school all my life, and I don't understand a lot of things (1 time).

**Parents**

A. Parents divorced twice (2 times).

B. Problems with parents. I'm trying to lead my own life. I don't wish to forget or reject my family. I just want control of my life (1 time).
Youth Survey Instrument

A. I’m concerned about the people my age, and I truly appreciate your work in listening to us through these surveys. It shows your interests in youth. You make us feel important. We need the adult support, not criticism (6 times).

B. This survey helps me analyze my life. It helps me draw closer to God (4 times).

C. Many of these questions are difficult to answer because they really do not have such cut and dry answers as those you list (1 time).

D. Too many questions on the church and religion. The important issue is my relationship with Christ (1 time).

E. We should start doing something now and not wait for the conclusion of this 10-year survey. By then it may be too late (1 time).

Miscellaneous

A. The new GC building is a shame. The millions spent on the building could have been put to much better use (1 time).

B. We should be more caring towards unwed mothers (1 time).

C. The conference is corrupt. The pastor is corrupt (2 times).

D. There is no scriptural basis for women’s ordination (1 time).

E. I’m sick of life and wish it would all end and we were in heaven (1 time).

Certainly the youth are not all agreed on any issue. But would you expect anything different from a group of thinking young adults. While the number of times various themes occur give us some sense of their weight and importance, all of the comments can be read with profit. For only as we understand the
thinking of this vital and vulnerable sector of our church will we be able to
minister effectively to them. And only then will we be able to stem the awesome
loss that appears to be looming on the horizon.