

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

**THE SECOND YEAR**

Sponsored by the North American Division  
of Seventh-day Adventists

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The Institute of Church Ministry has previously reported on the first year 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). This project is being sponsored by the North American Division. The present paper reports the findings of the second year of the study.

In the first place **ADVENTIST YOUTH SURVEY 2** was considerably shorter than its predecessor; it contained only 17 questions on two pages. We believed that after asking the youth to complete the complex and time-consuming survey of the first year, we needed to come back with something easy that would encourage them to stay with the study. The period between the first and second years is a particularly crucial one because first-year respondents have not yet made an on-going commitment to the research. If we could entice them to

participate a second time, they might begin to experience a relationship with us that would encourage them to respond in subsequent years.

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.

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 1523 young people (see Kangas for sample description), and after two follow-up mailings we secured 1263 usable instruments--an 83% response rate. At the time of the data collection these adolescents were all 16 or 17 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 one year ago?" Here are the answers:

Stronger today	32%
About the same	45%

Weaker today 21%  
 Have no relationship 2%

We can find encouragement in the fact that growth is greater than decline and that more than three-fourths have either held their own or gained in their spiritual experience. But we also should be disturbed that nearly a fourth are either slipping in their religious lives or have given up the battle altogether.

Obviously, religious experience is sustained by the devotional life. So we asked how often these teenagers engaged in three faith-building practices. They could rate themselves from 1 to 4 with 1 being "seldom or never" and 4 being "daily."

	1	2	3	4
Pray privately	11%	22%	25%	42%
Study the Bible (other than school assignments)	36%	35%	20%	9%
Participate in family worship	42%	20%	21%	17%

While only a minority are praying privately on a daily basis, personal prayer still outranks any other devotional practice, and nearly 90% pray at least occasionally. Bible study fares poorly with less than a tenth reading the Scriptures devotionally every day and more than a third never spending personal time with the Word. Family worship also shows up to be non-existent or only sporadic with the great majority. It seems that the church must seek ways to make

personal Bible study meaningful and satisfying to adolescents and to encourage family worship in the homes. Without a change here, much more slippage in spiritual vitality may be expected in the coming years.

### The Family Context

From the first-year data we have already discovered the significant influence of family variables on the religious life of the teenager. So we asked about some possible crisis events over the last 12 months. "Have any of the following happened in your family during the last year?"

	Yes	No
Your parents separated or divorced	6%	94%
One or both parents died	1%	99%
One or both parents left the church	8%	92%

Only small percentages experienced any of these tragedies. Still, in just one year, 79 of our teenagers saw their homes broken up by marital discord, 17 lost parents through death, and 105 felt what must have been a faith-wrenching experience when one or both of their parents left the church. Crises like these have to be discouraging to one's Christian walk.

And, indeed, they do make a difference. For example, on the question as to how their present relationship with Jesus Christ compared with that of a year ago, 25% of those whose parents had divorced said "stronger," and 38% said "weaker."

For those whose homes had not been split, the figures were 32% and 20%. The 18% differential on the weakening of the spiritual life is especially disturbing.

When the question concerned relationship with the church over the past year, 33% of the group whose parents had divorced said it was weaker compared to 23% of the group who had not experienced this disruption. And 8% of the former group no longer relate to the church compared with 4% of the latter--double the tragedy.

Youth from those homes that did not break up in the preceding year are much better church attenders too--66% go every week, and only 8% never attend. But of those suffering the trauma of divorce only half go weekly, and 17% never attend. Divorce not only brings personal pain to the family members, but it also seems to affect the spiritual experience of the children adversely.

Apparently, divorce not only separates husbands and wives but also parents and children. Of those teenagers whose parents recently divorced, 32% say they are farther apart from their fathers and 28% say they are farther apart from their mothers today. For the other group the figures are only 12% and 12%. And in 46% of the homes that experienced divorce, one or both parents left the church during the last year--indicating how closely spiritual values can be intertwined with family values. In contrast, a parent left the church in only 6% of the homes where divorce did not occur.

From this relationship we might infer that having parents drop out of the church would have a negative influence on the spiritual life of the teenagers--and we would be correct. In homes where a parent recently apostatized, 32% of the youth say their relationship with Jesus Christ is weaker than a year ago, and 48% report their relationship with the Adventist church is weaker. For homes that did not suffer this spiritual disruption the comparable figures are 20% and 21%.

Where parents did not disaffiliate in the last year, 68% of the youth attend church at least weekly. But where one or both parents dropped membership, only 35% do so. And 36% of those whose parents did not leave the fold hold an office or other service position in the church in contrast to 22% of the teenagers whose parents dropped out.

Finally, of the adolescents whose parents left the church, 27% have a more distant relationship with their mothers and 28% a more distant relationship with their fathers than they did a year previously. For those whose parents remained in the church, the comparable figures are 11% and 12%. If we could only get parents to be faithful, both to the church and to each other, many of the spiritual problems with our youth might never occur.

Throughout this study we have continually stressed the importance of relationships. Given the keystone position of parent-child interaction, we asked: "How does the closeness

of your relationship with your mother compare with that of a year ago?" Our sample answered as followed:

Farther apart today	13%
About the same	46%
Closer today	40%
Not applicable	1%

Since adolescence is a turbulent time, usually filled with stress and conflict between young people trying to assert their independence and parents trying to preserve their authority, to find 40% of these mid-teenagers growing closer to their mothers is a real sign of hope. The same question for fathers yielded these results:

Farther apart today	13%
About the same	49%
Closer today	30%
Not applicable	8%

While the same percentages are farther apart from both mother and father than they were a year previously, not as many have grown closer to the father as have to the mother during that time. However, the major share of the discrepancy can be attributed to the "not applicable" category. This probably suggests absent fathers (through divorce or death) to which the youth cannot relate at all--either positively or negatively.



### Connection to the Church

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the retention in or dropping out from the church. So we asked several questions about attitudes toward the church and participation in its life. Perhaps most important was: "How does your present relationship with the Seventh-day Adventist Church compare with that of one year ago?" Here is what we found:

Stronger today	23%
About the same	50%
Weaker today	23%
No longer relate to the church	4%

So half of the sample hasn't changed over the past year; of the remainder, those who have grown closer and those who have become more distant are about equally divided; and a small percentage have already given up on the church.

In the first-year data attitudes toward Adventist standards or rules were the leading predictors of whether or not the teenagers intended to remain in the church when they were on their own. So we came back to that theme: "How do you feel about the lifestyle standards of the Adventist Church (music, sex, recreation, health, dress, etc.)?"

Mostly agree	37%
Mixed feelings	54%
Mostly disagree	9%

Less than 10% are totally out of harmony with Adventist lifestyle. But over half have mixed feelings. Given the results from the first year, we interpret these mixed feelings not as general ambivalence toward the standards but as meaning that the youth agree with some and disagree with others. This would be in line with what we reported in the first-year study and would indicate that things have not changed much.

How often do these young people attend church (if they are not forced to)? About two-thirds are regular attenders, and less than 10% do not go at all. The breakdown looks like this:

Rarely or never	9%
Once every month or two	6%
Two or three times a month	20%
At least once a week	65%

Is their religious activity confined to merely putting in an appearance though? How active in the life of the church are they after they get there? About 35% said they hold an office or other service position in their local congregations; the other 65% do not. We need to find ways to tie teenagers more closely into the structure of the organizational church.

We also asked how active they had been during the last year in outreach or witnessing activities. This is what they told us:

Rarely or never	57%
At least six times a year	22%

At least once a month 15%

At least once a week 6%

It appears that about a fifth are quite regular in outreach activities. One of the greatest challenges to denominational youth leaders today is to find ways to involve the majority who are not active in the church, although many of them attend regularly.

### **Pouring Out the Heart**

While most of our questions were forced-choice, we gave one opportunity for the respondents to pour out their hearts: "Is there anything else you would like to say about your relationship with the Adventist Church?" Over half (54%) chose not to respond. The others wrote in opinions which we have tried to classify into logical groupings. We have identified 703 comments, with some youth providing items for more than one classification. Numbers in parentheses are head counts.

The largest category (225) addressed the church directly. Of these, one group (58) talked about their happiness with the church and what it meant to them. A nearly equal-sized group lamented that the church does not relate to teens or meet their needs. Others (41) believed that the church was too legalistic with its nitpicking rules. Some (20), however, worried that the church was becoming too liberal and needed to raise its standards. Then there were those (33) who felt

that the church was lifeless, cold, and boring and needed more excitement. A few (6) even implored the church to do everything possible to save its youth--the future of the church.

The youth in the second largest main category (197) wrote about their spiritual lives. Many (52) expressed the desire to come closer to Christ--to grow spiritually. Others (31) gave a glowing report of their Christian progress--their spiritual experience has been growing stronger, and religion is becoming more real to them. About equal numbers spoke positively (45) of their love for their faith and their happiness with their religion and negatively (47) about their discouragement with their Christian walk.

A third main category of responses (88) concerned the leaders and members of the church. Much of this was negative (73), citing problems in the church like gossiping, hypocrisy, unfriendliness, holier-than-thou attitudes, and politics. But a few (6) talked about a special leader that they liked and trusted. Some (6) even complained about the frequent transfers of pastors and getting "left-over ministers."

Another group (65) spoke to the social life of the church. Most of these (43) cried out for more youth activities or complained of no youth their own age in the congregation (7). A few (4) wrote about the difficulty of peer pressure or relationships with parents (4). But several (5) took time to praise parents for the support they are providing the youth.

Some youth (30) wrote about the educational system. These divided into those who were hostile toward Adventist schools (8) and didn't want to attend them and those who extolled the benefits of Adventist academies (22).

Among the other miscellaneous comments, seven criticized Sabbath sermons, three praised them, five were negative about Ellen White, and eight requested personal prayer for themselves. Believe it or not--twelve even expressed appreciation for the survey.

#### Plans for the Future

As our teenagers filled out this survey in the summer of 1988 (a small percentage of returns came in through the autumn months), what were their plans for the future? Where did they see themselves attending during the 1988-89 school year? Here is what they told us:

Adventist academy	47%
Public high school	35%
Home study courses	2%
College	9%
Not in school	2%
Other plan	5%

The results of the first-year survey had shown that about half (51%) of the teenagers were in Adventist academies, and this pattern probably has changed little if we can assume that the 9% going to college is also divided roughly equally

between Adventist and non-Adventist institutions. In the next few years, we will be analyzing the college scene as our sample passes out of the secondary-school period.

For now, we continue to watch and to listen. We continue to note the positive trends that cheer our hearts and the disturbing signs that trouble our serenity. We continue to call for the church to make use of this material to discern the dangers and intervene to meet them. We would not be simply recorders of the process by which our youth march out of the church in droves. We would be change agents. We pray that because of this on-going study, and its frequent reports, the history of Adventist youth will turn out differently than if this research had never been conducted. But to change these foreshadowings will take all of us--working together under the direction of the divine Youth Ministry Professional.