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

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Sponsored by the North American Division  
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Department of Education

Church Ministries Department

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## **THE SEVENTH YEAR**

The Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) has previously reported on the first six years of a ten-year study of over 1500 Adventist teenagers and their relationships with the church [see Roger L. Dudley and Janet Leigh Kangas, The World of the Adventist Teenager (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1990) for a complete report on the first two years. Reports on subsequent years have appeared in the Adventist Review, the Journal of Adventist Education, and Ministry]. 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 seventh year of the study.

**ADVENTIST YOUTH SURVEY 7** contained 55 questions on four pages. The 1993-94 study was a joint project with Phil Muthersbaugh, pastor and Bible teacher at Rio Lindo Academy in the Northern California Conference. Muthersbaugh wrote his Andrews University Doctor of Ministry project on the subject of youth bonding to the church employing the Youth Survey 7 as part of his data set. Under the supervision of ICM, Muthersbaugh selected the questions for Youth Survey 7--based on his extensive study of the bonding literature. ICM then collected the

information from the target group, using its regular collection procedures, computer-analyzed the data, and sent the computer printouts to Muthersbaugh for incorporation in his D.Min. project.

### **Tracking the Subjects**

One important reason for sending out a yearly survey is to attempt to maintain contact with the young adults before they 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. Also, name changes occur among women because of marriage. So the very first question asked was: "Is the name and address on the envelope in which we mailed this questionnaire still your correct one?" Over a fourth (26%) answered "no," indicating the high rate of change in just one year. Those answering "no" were instructed to fill in the correct name and/or address in the blank space provided.

Keeping track of these address changes is a major job for ICM staff. Scores of letters have been returned undelivered because the addresses were no longer correct and no forwarding addresses were given. When the first mailing of the seventh-year questionnaire was sent out in June 1992, these young people were 21 or 22 years of age (the study began with those 15 or 16 six years before). As the year passed by, a number turned 23. Many had left home. Some joined the military. Some married. In some cases even their parents did not know where they were at present. ICM then attempts to find current addresses by contacting church clerks, searching church directories, or advertising in union conference papers. Even with this effort, ICM has not been able to obtain current addresses for 162 members of the sample. While only

one regular questionnaire is prepared each year, construction, mailings, follow up, and processing of the survey is a year-long job for the ICM staff.

ICM had expected that some attrition would occur. Indeed, this was why such a large sample was selected in the beginning; to be sure that a sufficient group for appropriate analyses would remain at the end of ten years. In addition to those for whom no current addresses are available, another 59 have asked that their names be dropped from the study. In June 1993, the seventh-year survey was mailed to all those in the original sample for whom addresses were available or who had not asked to be dropped from the study even though only 834 had completed the sixth-year survey. All non-respondents were sent a second mailing in August and a third mailing in October. Only those who had completed the sixth-year questionnaire but who had still not responded to seventh-year mailings were sent a fourth appeal in December and a fifth appeal in February.

By May 1994, 755 usable questionnaires had been received, and a few others continue to trickle in. This number represents about 50% of the original sample (1523) that began in 1987. If, however, those for whom no valid addresses are known and those who have requested to be dropped from the sample are deleted from the pool, this would leave 1302 potential respondents and make the return rate about 58%.

Another way to view this is to calculate that the 755 respondents are 91% of the 834 who completed the sixth-year survey. The response rate for the second, third, and fourth years was about 83% of that of each previous year. In other words, the study suffered an attrition of about 17% each of these years, but for the fifth year the attrition was only 3%, for the sixth year it was 6%, and this year it is 9%. The most rapid drop off came in the first couple of years, the sample

was quite stable during the fifth and sixth years, and the attrition rate has increased somewhat during the seventh year for reasons not known.

Respondents for the seventh year were 39% male and 61% female--a one point shift in favor of the males from year six. Since the original sample was 43% male and 57% female, it is evident that the male response rate is somewhat less than the female rate with the exception of year seven. Ethnic backgrounds were as follows:

Asian/Oriental	8%
Black	13%
Hispanic	11%
White	64%
Other	4%

These young adults were asked their plans for 1993-94. Those who responded to the earlier mailings (June and August) were looking at the future, while those reporting in later mailings were describing their actual situation.

Attend an Adventist college	31%
Attend a non-Adventist college	33%
Work at a job	26%
Keep house	3%
Other	7%

This then is the group upon which this report is based. Even with the considerable attrition from 1987, 755 young adults told the church about themselves. That is still a large study. Here is what they said:

### **Bonding to the Church and to Christ**

In order to study the phenomenon of bonding it was necessary to construct some measure that would reveal the extent to which a particular individual was bonded to religion in general and to the local congregation in particular. Six items were selected that--taken together--would seem to indicate a fair measure of bonding. They were (1) commitment to Jesus Christ, (2) importance of religious faith in the life, (3) frequency of attendance at worship services, (4) level of attachment to the local congregation, (5) level of satisfaction with the Adventist denomination, and (6) level of attachment to the Adventist denomination. In this section the responses to each item will be described first, followed by information on the combined scale.

#### Which of the following best describes your commitment to Jesus Christ?

Not committed to Christ	5%
Not sure if committed to Christ	21%
Committed to Christ at a specific moment in life	10%
Commitment developed gradually over time	32%
Committed to Christ since a young child	32%

Three-fourths have made some type of commitment, corresponding to what has generally been labeled sudden, gradual, and unconscious conversion. The other one-fourth are either uncommitted or unsure of their position with Jesus Christ.

How important is religious faith in your life?

The most important influence in my life	25%
A very important influence in my life	36%
Important influence but other things are also	24%
Some influence in my life	11%
Not an important influence in my life	4%

Note that 96% agree that religious faith has at least some measure of importance in their lives, and only 4% would discount it entirely.

How often do you attend worship services at an Adventist church?

Never	13%
Less than once a month	15%
About once a month	15%
About once a week	47%
Several times a week	10%

In spite of the fact that three-fourths have made some kind of commitment to Christ and 19 out of 20 give some degree of importance to religious faith in their lives, 43% do not attend Sabbath worship services very consistently.

Rate what you feel is your current level of attachment/belonging to the Seventh-day Adventist church where you most frequently attend worship services.

None	14%
Minimal	31%
Moderate	34%
Complete/secure	21%

The respondents are quite evenly divided with close to half (45%) expressing minimal or no attachment to their local congregations.

How satisfied are you with the Adventist denomination at this time?

Very dissatisfied	6%
Dissatisfied	17%
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	34%
Satisfied	31%
Very satisfied	12%

While less than a fourth (23%) are dissatisfied, less than half (43%) are satisfied with over a third "sitting on the fence."

Rate what you feel is your current level of attachment/belonging to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

None	8%
Minimal	23%
Moderate	38%
Complete/secure	31%



The young adults in this sample feel more closely attached to the denomination (69% moderate or complete) than they do to their local congregations (55%). Perhaps this suggests that problems and conflicts take place at a local level resulting in estrangement, but the young adults believe in the doctrines of the church and thus feel more attached to the impersonal denomination.

The Bonding Scale was created by adding the numbers each respondent circled on each of the six items to create a "bonding score" for each individual. On five of the items, the higher the number selected, the closer the attachment or bonding. However, the second item on the importance of religious faith is the opposite with a low score indicating more commitment. Therefore, before totaling item scores to obtain the scale scores, the numbers on this item were reversed so that 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 4 = 2, and 5 = 1. This allows a higher score on the Bonding Scale to be interpreted as greater attachment or bonding. One problem does appear on the Commitment to Jesus Christ item. Certainly, movement toward attachment can be seen in choices 1 through 3. However, it may be argued that choices 3, 4, and 5 do not represent a linear progression. Since this is only part of one item out of six, it will not likely have a significant effect on the statistical analyses. If any thing, it will cause correlations to be underestimated.

To determine if the Bonding Scale represents a unified concept, the six component items were submitted to a reliability analysis. The resulting reliability coefficient for the Bonding Scale was a high .81. Tests revealed that this could not be improved by deleting any of the six items from the scale so all six were retained. The correlations of the individual items with the rest of the scale ranged from .45 to .72 (over .30 is usually considered acceptable).

The lowest possible score one could receive on the Bonding Scale was 6 (choosing 1 on each item) and the highest was 28 (choosing the highest number on each item--4 or 5 as the case may be). The actual range was 10 to 28 with an average of 20.5.

### **Experiences with the Local Congregation**

The purpose of this study, however, was not merely to determine the extent of bonding to the church but to explore factors that might be related to it or predict it. More specifically, could positive or negative experiences with the local congregation be related to bonding or the lack of it? Several sets of items will be examined in an attempt to answer this question.

Respondents were asked to think about religious education at their local churches. Religious education was defined as Sabbath school, Bible studies, youth groups, church campouts, choir, AY, MV, or other such programs. They were then asked to evaluate eight statements about this religious education by indicating that each was "not at all true," "slightly true," "somewhat true," "true," or "very true." They could also indicate that they were never involved and, therefore, were unable to evaluate. Those not involved at all ranged from 15% to 19% on the eight items. Of those that did rate, the percentages that chose either "true" or "very true" for each item are listed, and the items are arranged in descending order of affirmation:

I go to things at church because I want to	68%
Teachers or adult leaders are warm and friendly	60%
Congregational leaders and teachers care about me	51%
I can be myself when at church	50%
Congregational leaders and teachers know me well	40%
I look forward to going to things at church	37%

Programs at my church make me think 36%

Programs at my church are interesting 34%

Even at best, a third do not find these things to be true or very true of the religious education in their congregations, and at worst, about two-thirds do not. Keep in mind that these percentages have already excluded those who did not evaluate the items because they were never involved and could not make a judgment.

In a second set of questions respondents were asked: "In the last few years, how often have you experienced each of these things in the church you regularly attend?" In the following list "N" indicates those who replied "never" or "rarely," "S" indicates "sometimes," and "O" stands for often. The responses are ranked on "often" in descending order:

	<u>N</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>O</u>
Felt that older adults care about me	20%	42%	38%
Talked with best friends about God or faith	20%	44%	36%
Felt my peer group cares about me	26%	43%	31%
Participated in church social activities	42%	38%	20%
Led out in religious programs or worship	56%	27%	17%

Most young adults have not had these experiences often, and from one-fifth to over half have never had them.

A third set of congregational experiences inquired about conflict in various areas of church life. The following list displays the percentages who had experienced "moderate" or "high" conflict in five different areas:

With church standards	40%
With feeling you weren't needed	28%
With older church members	24%
With your church peer group	17%
With your pastor	13%

The three items that deal with people are the lowest although still significant enough to be of concern. As in earlier research, church standards prove to be a major problem. Over a fourth find it difficult to deal with the perception that they are not needed.

### **Remembering Childhood Perceptions**

Perhaps bonding to the church may be linked to some of childhood and adolescent experiences that these young adults still remember. They were asked: "As you remember your experiences with the Adventist church prior to your 18th birthday, how would you rate your interaction with prominent or influential adults in the church?" Eleven items were selected from the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) by Parker, Tupling, and Brown on the basis that these items might be applicable to church authority figures rather than just parents. Rating for each item was on a five-point scale from "never" to "always." The list below shows the combined percentages of those who chose "usually," "often," or "always." The items are arranged in descending order:

Spoke with me in a warm and friendly way	88%
Praised my participation or accomplishments	74%
Were affectionate toward me	71%
Liked me to make my own decisions	69%

Were willing to let me talk things over with them	65%
Provided those activities that I liked doing	52%
Appeared to understand my problems and worries	46%
Did not understand what I needed or wanted	46%
Tried to tell me what I could or couldn't do	43%
Made me feel I wasn't wanted or needed	18%
Seemed "cold" toward me	15%

While the majority recalled the influential adults in the congregations of their youth as outwardly warm and affectionate, nearly half felt that their problems, worries, needs, and wants were not understood and that they were overcontrolled. The adults seemed on the surface to express care but failed to convince the youth that they could communicate and understand them on a deeper level.

### **Predictors of Bonding**

Do these various experiences with the local church predict the degree of bonding or attachment that takes place? To determine this, the 29 items in the four sets of questions that have just been described were correlated with the Bonding Scale. All 29 correlation coefficients are shown below, arranged in the descending order of their strength:

Look forward to going to things at church	.65
Can be myself at church	.56
Participated in church social activities	.53
Go to things at church because I want to	.53
Programs at my church are interesting	.50

Led out in religious programs or worship at church	.45
Congregational leaders/teachers care about me	.44
Programs at my church make me think	.42
Felt older adults in my church cared about me	.42
Talked with best friends about God and faith	.41
Felt peer group in my church cared about me	.39
Congregational leaders/teachers know me very well	.38
Teachers and adult leaders are warm and friendly	.37
Conflict with church standards	-.34
Before 18, leaders understood my problems/worries	.29
Before 18, leaders praised my accomplishments	.29
Before 18, leaders liked me to make my own decisions	.29
Before 18, leaders provided activities I liked doing	.28
Before 18, leaders were affectionate towards me	.28
Before 18, leaders did not understand what I needed	-.28
Before 18, leaders let me talk things over with them	.28
Conflict with feeling I wasn't needed	-.25
Before 18, leaders made me feel I wasn't wanted/needed	-.24
Before 18, leaders told me what I could or couldn't do	-.22
Before 18, leaders spoke to me in a warm, friendly way	.17
Conflict with older church members	-.17
Conflict with pastor	-.16

Before 18, leaders seemed "cold" toward me	-.16
Conflict with church peer group	-.08

All of these items except the last one (-.08) are--from a statistical standpoint--significantly correlated with the Bonding Scale beyond the .001 level. That means that less than one chance in a thousand exists that these items are not related to bonding to the church in the larger population from which this sample has been drawn. The last item is significant at the .05 level (less than one chance in twenty).

This means that the more these young adults look forward to going to things at church, the more they feel they can be themselves, the more they are encouraged to think by programs at the church, the more they find leaders to be warm and friendly, the more they perceive that adults leaders care about them, etc., the closer they likely will be bonded or attached to the church and to religious faith. It also means that as they look back on experiences with the church before they were 18, positive memories of prominent or influential adults in the church are associated with the present strength of bonding.

It is just the opposite for those items with negative correlations. The more conflict in any of the five areas, the weaker the attachment to the church. Remembrances of those years prior to their eighteenth birthday in which influential adults in the church appeared cold towards them, did not seem to understand what they needed or wanted, made them feel they weren't wanted or needed, or tried to tell them what they could or couldn't do are predictors of present weak attachment or bonding.

Of course the strength of the relationship varies with the different items, and the list has been ordered to show this. In general, coefficients above .40 are considered quite strong, those

in the .20s and .30s are moderate, and those below .20 depict rather weak relationships. All in all, the total picture reveals the amazing connection between congregational climate and the quality of interaction with congregational leaders, on the one hand, and the sense of attachment or bondedness to the church and religious faith on the other.

### **Reasons for Dropout**

One set of questions directly explored reasons why young adults might leave the church or, at least, become inactive. Respondents were asked: "If you have stopped attending Sabbath church services, do any of these reasons apply?" The reasons are arranged in descending order of "yes" responses:

I found other interests and activities which let me spend less and less time in church-related activities.	28%
I had specific problems with or objections to the church, its teachings, or its members.	21%
When I grew up and started making decisions on my own, I stopped going to church.	21%
The church was no longer a help to me in finding the meaning and purpose of my life.	20%
I moved to a different community and never got involved in a new church.	18%
Due to my work schedule.	18%
I felt my lifestyle was no longer compatible with participation in a church.	17%
Due to school activities.	11%
For physical health reasons.	2%



The most important factor was the distracting influence of other interests and activities. It is important to note that the 28% who stopped attending church for this reason are 28% of the whole group--not just 28% of those who stopped attending. Thus this is a very significant factor in youth retention. The percentages selecting the next six reasons are very close together, but problems with the church are helping to discourage a fifth. Only physical health problems appear to be relatively unimportant as a reason for non-attendance (not too surprising for this age group).

### **Sources of Support**

Finally, the sample members were asked to rate the level of essential support they would expect to receive if they were facing a personal crisis. Possible responses were: none, little, some, considerable, and full. The percentages listed represent the combination of those who chose "considerable" and "full":

Immediate family	90%
Pastor	39%
Church peer group	31%
Older church members	22%

Most of these young adults feel that they could turn to their families for support in a crisis. Sadly, only minorities believe they could count on the church. Indeed, about a fourth said they would expect no support whatever from pastor, peers, or older church members. No wonder that attachment to the church is fragile or nonexistent.

Thus the seventh year of the Youth Retention Study adds a number of pieces of valuable information to our understanding of this group of young adults that we have been following since their middle adolescence. The survey for the eighth year is about to begin. Three more years

of research remain. When the data for all ten years are combined and analyzed, the church will have the most complete picture ever assembled of why young people choose to remain in or depart from the church of their childhood.